Mortal Coil

by Scribe32oz

Summary

When Lois Lane decides to help poor Valerie Beaudry, she has no idea she's exposing Clark Kent and his secret to a dangerous enemy or what terrible consequences would result from it.
She was hungry.

It was not the kind of hunger that tugged when one missed a lunch or the kind a misguided dieter felt when giving up that one meal to fit into the dress two sizes two small. This was real hunger. The kind that gnawed at your insides, that made you think you could feel the digestive fluids inside your stomach eat away at your flesh, devouring you instead of the food it craved. She could feel it through her bones, with each laboured breath she took.

Crouched in the corner of the freight car, she pulled her knees closer to her chin and tried not to think about hunger or cold. Even worse than that, she tried not to think about what awaited her in Metropolis once she arrived there. She had not given any thought to it when she scrambled through the open doors of the freight car. Taking refuge in the darkness, she had prayed the journey would begin before her pursuers thought to look for her there. All she could think of was escape. When the iron wheels of the train finally heaved into motion, with the great engine chugging away in her ears, only then did she know she was safe.

For the moment.

Of course, the respite allowed her to come off the adrenalin high she had used to carry her far and with that descent, she felt all the fears that held at bay during the last three days of her flight. Doubt began to set in with exhaustion. Furthermore, the reason to assess her situation and what tomorrow would yield when she reached Metropolis; made her wonder if she had not acted too hastily. At the time, all that mattered was her escape and with all her energy dedicated to that end, there had not been time to consider much else.

She knew of course that Hank would be worried when he heard she was gone and when she
found him again, he might be angry with her for leaving. The girl shuddered at the thought of his fury but also at the consequences to him when they had discovered what she had done. Hank had given her everything. He had taken care of her and he had loved her. All that he had asked for in return was her cooperation.

She had not thought it would be so bad, to submit to a few tests. At first, they were hardly an inconvenience. She provided them with blood for a sample, the occasional physical and later an MRI. These were but tiny indignities she could endure because Hank loved her. However, with each passing day, there seemed to yet another test and the intensity of their scrutiny seemed to escalate until she could bear it no more and begged Hank to make it stop.

Yet it was beyond his power and he asked her to endure just a little longer if she loved him. Of course, she could not refuse. All her life all she ever dreamed of was someone to love her for what she was.

As a child, she was hidden away by parents who never quite able to love her enough to keep the revulsion from their eyes whenever they looked upon her. They sequestered her away in her room and allowed her to see no one for fear of the reaction. She spent the first eighteen years of life in seclusion, condemned to seeing the world through books and television, never being able to feel the sun against her face, not even once. She accepted this as consequences of her reflection in the mirror but it did not make it any easier to bear. There was so much loneliness and sorrow in knowing that as the years tumbled by, the reality of this isolated existence was all that life had in store for her.

Then she met Hank and everything changed.

Through her computer, she discovered the fragile friendships formed through an internet connection. Through cyberspace, there was no need to divulge her secret, no need for them to see her as anything but a girl, looking for a friend. However, Hank recognised her pain from the first and tapped into that part of herself that wanted more than just this outcast existence. Soon, he became her entire universe. She lived and breathed for his messages and each word he wrote to her, further unlocked her heart from the cage in which she was trapped for so long.

When he asked her to come to him, she did not even think twice.

She broke out of prison into a world she had only ever seen by glimpses through the window or on a television screen. Hank had been outside her house waiting for her, in a stretched limousine with a bouquet of roses and open arms. Her fears that he would hate her like everyone else on first sight was fruitless, he drew her into his arms and told her that he had been waiting for her all of his life. They left Seattle that night, flying across the country in a private jet. She did not know until much later that they had travelled to Gotham City.

He took her maidenhead before they landed.

Upon arriving in Gotham, Hank told her she would be beautiful and no one would ever look at her with disgust ever again. She believed him and with new operation, with each procedure, another piece of her was discarded for an even more perfect version of herself. When they were done with her, she had looked into the mirror, wondering how she could have been anything else. She was happy to be the woman that Hank deserved although he said often enough that how she looked meant nothing to him. He adored her just the same.

Of course, the operations had come at a price.

Hank was powerless to stop his benefactors from demanding the tests in exchange for the new persona she was given. He promised her that once they were satisfied with the results, she and
Hank would go away together. Some place warm like Tahiti. She believed him and endured the poking and prodding, even when they grew more and more invasive and uncomfortable. When she begged for it to stop, they kept Hank from seeing her, saying that he was been sent to Metropolis.

It was the last straw. She broke free of her prison, shocked by the power that allowed her to do so but confident that if she found Hank, the two of them would be free forever. All she had to do was to get to Metropolis.

Once Valerie Beaudry found Hank, everything would be all right.
"Stop fidgeting." Lois Lane scolded as she adjusted Clark Kent's tie when she noticed that it slightly crooked against the white of his shirt.

"Its fine," Clark grumbled as his dug his hands deeper into his pockets and proceeded towards the stretch of verdant green grass between the sidewalk and the chapel. Choosing deliberately to fix the fence on the far end of the farm for fear of escaping cow when he should have been getting ready for the wedding, Clark knew he was provoking Lois' already tenuous temper to boiling point. However, on this particular day he was willing to take his life into his hands. No way was he arriving to this circus on time so he could look awkward when everyone whispered things he was perfectly capable of hearing.

"No its not," Lois retorted and continued to adjust it before she brushed a strand of hair from her face, making sure she looked appropriate herself. "Look, we'll just sit through the service and leave straight after alright. We won't even have to stay for the reception."

"Good," Clark replied, slightly appeased though no happier by the situation.

Even though he was walking through the doors of the chapel with Lois, Clark knew that his presence was going to cause a stir no matter how long they stayed or how late they arrived. The instant he showed his face, most of the wedding guests were going to look over their shoulders and whisper among themselves that Clark Kent, the bride's ex-boyfriend was present.

If given the choice, Clark would have happily stayed away but Lana Lang had made an impassioned plea to Lois for Clark's presence today. Unfortunately as he had learned from years of experience surrounded by the opposite sex, when women got together with their friends to decide things, men's fate were sealed. Lois had more or less told him he was going even though he had stated absolutely that he was not. However, on the day, he still found himself in his truck, driving to the chapel with Mad Dog Lane in the passenger seat, so pissed at him that he was grateful he was from Krypton.

Lois rolled her eyes as they arrived at the front steps of the chapel and noted that they weren't the only late arrivals. Guests were still arriving, trying to make their way through the barrage of paparazzi that had hidden Smallville in recent days, leading to the blessed event. The town had gained a notorious kind of celebrity as the guest list and A-listers to the reception burgeoned out of control. Clark supposed that he should be grateful for that. With Angelina and Brad showing up with their entourage, not to mention several politicians and other celebrities, no one was really going to pay much attention to Lana Lang's former love.

Despite the guest list however, the wedding service itself was supposedly a simple affair according to Chloe. Clark spied Lana's aunt Nel paying court to the other arriving guests, seemingly basking in the adulation of being the 'mother' of the bride so to speak.

"You sure you don't want to change your mind?" Clark whispered in Lois' ear as they finally arrived at the red carpet spilling out of the chapel floor into the sidewalk, flanked on either side by security people and velvet ropes to keep the press and gawkers away.

"No," Lois said tautly, her eyes drinking the sight of the paparazzi snapping way at any one who came into their crosshairs. "Let's just go get this over with."

Clark turned to Lois, noticing her mood. In fact now that he thought of it, she hadn't been her usual self the last day or so. At first he had attributed it to his behaviour regarding their attendance
at this wedding but there seemed to be more to it now and suddenly, Lois Lane's boyfriend felt somewhat guilty that he had been so full of his own crap that he didn't realise his girl might be having a problem. "Lois, is everything okay?"

She turned to him, caught off guard by the question. "Of course not, why do you ask?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "You seem a little tense. I'm sorry if I've been a pain about this. I forgot that this can't be any less awkward for you, new girlfriend of the ex-boyfriend and all" he replied, sliding an arm over her shoulder.

Lois offered him a conciliatory smile. "Yeah Smallville," she brushed her hair against his cheek. "Pretty awkward that's for sure. Hey look, it Chloe." she gestured ahead as she saw Chloe emerge onto the side walk, wearing her bridesmaid dress, trying not to look impatient but to those who knew her it was a futile effort. Nervous she did look even though for once, the tradition of the horrible bride's maid gown was not some singleton nightmare. The colour of it was ashes of rose which by Clark's reckoning was some kind of pale lavender. Scooped neck with bare shoulders, Chloe looked a picture of porcelain beauty and elegance all at once as her golden hair was swept off her neck into French twist.

Her arrival immediately caused another burst of flashing bulbs in her direction as the photographers identifying her importance in the proceedings began turning their high powered lenses at her. Chloe seemed to be anxious although Clark couldn't imagine why she would be stepping out of the church to be subject to the glaring media scrutiny. Lois and Clark stepped through the phalanx barring interlopers from intruding the ceremony, offering their invitation as proof of their legitimate status as guests.

"Chloe," Lois called out as she neared her cousin. "Aren't you supposed to be inside?"

Chloe showed her visible relief at seeing familiar faces among the glare of the spotlights around her. "Thank God you guys are here," she declared as she tugged them behind the barriers, still in sight of the sidewalk. "It's insane! Trust Lex to turn his wedding into a five star circus."

"How's Lana handling all of this?" Clark inquired.

"Oh she's thinking of whether or not eloping is such a bad thing." Chloe chuckled. "I don't blame her; I'd like to run out on this myself." She glanced anxiously at the photographers surrounding them on either side.

"You should be inside," Lois pointed out. "You're a bridesmaid, that's a hot ticket item to these vultures."

"Woah! Pretty harsh," Chloe stared at her cousin. "You're of the tabloid set, remember?" She pointed out, teasing Lois.

"It's true though," Lois recovered barely skipping a beat. "You should be inside away from these guys, holding the bride's hand and all."

"Actually the bride's wishing she wasn't pregnant so she could have a drink." Chloe quipped. "We've got ten minutes yet before the ceremonies slated to start and with all the stars showing up to this thing," she rolled her eyes, "starting early is not an option."
Suddenly, a car rolled up to the kerb, black and sleek and Clark noticed Chloe's gaze shifting to it from them, her expression becoming one of anticipation. It was a sentiment shared by the press as Clark noticed the cameras turned in the direction of the new arrival. No doubt another celebrity, Clark thought. However, when the door swung open and the occupant stepped out of the vehicle, the paparazzi seemed to hush with surprise and then go mad with excitement.

Casting her eyes upon him, the storm of hidden emotions broke across Chloe's features and her smile was like the sunshine through dark clouds when she saw Bruce Wayne step out of the car, amidst a phalanx of flashing cameras.

"I thought Bruce wasn't coming?" Lois exclaimed as she saw the impeccably dressed billionaire leave his car to the ministrations of the valets before looking their way. Lois was aware that Lana had invited Bruce but since he and Chloe had been keeping their romance out of the public spotlight, she assumed he would not be making an appearance.

Glad to see a friendly face, at least one that would not be requiring handkerchiefs by the time the ceremony was done, Clark threw Bruce a grin as the man approach them. Of all the would be boyfriends that had graced Chloe's life in the past few years, Bruce was the only one that Clark felt was deserving of his close confidante's affection. Furthermore, the manner in which Chloe seemed to light up when she saw Bruce also went a long way to convincing Clark that she had met someone who would make her happy.

"Well you know Bruce, always full of surprises," Chloe said beaming happily as she left them to go meet her boyfriend of almost six weeks.

Even though Chloe had her initial reservations about sustaining any relationship with a man who lived in another city and was always seen with a bevy of beautiful women, Bruce had surprised her by his ability to keep his public persona separate from his private life. While the world saw him as the billionaire playboy, Chloe saw him as the boyfriend who made calling her every night a ritual and ensuring that on weekends one of them made the journey to Metropolis or Gotham to spend those days together. For all that time, they had managed to keep their relationship away from the press, not needing the complication. However, as Bruce told her last night, he was tired of the facade and it was time to do something about it.

"Bruce," Chloe replied as she reached him, her face showing nine kinds of happiness at seeing him. "You made it."

"That was the plan," he answered with a smile, ignoring the calls from the reporters who hadn't expected to see him here today, demanding an explanation for his presence. Bruce Wayne was not known to be a friend of Lex Luthor's. "You ready for this?" He asked her seriously.

Chloe nodded and Bruce extended his hand towards her. Aware that she would be stepping into the public eye after this, Chloe took it and allowed him to draw her close. Over the last week, they had been talking about their relationship and Bruce confessing his distaste for maintaining his playboy persona, particularly the one involving the supermodels he was expected to date. Chloe had been happy to play the anonymous girlfriend, having seen what Lana endured as Lex Luthor's bride to be. However, it was becoming tedious for both to continue pretending that nothing was going on between them, in their private and public lives.

Without any words to each other because everything that could be said had been spoken before this moment, Bruce Wayne kissed Chloe Sullivan on the steps of the Smallville chapel. The kiss was chaste, delicate almost but the intimacy in it was undeniable. If anyone had any doubt as to the nature of their relationship, the display answered all questions. The paparazzi seemed to go wild with the revelation and camera bulbs flashed around them like sniper fire as the gossip mongers went into overdrive.
"Wow," Clark exclaimed as he and Lois watched with as much astonishment as the rest of the guests. "Guess the secrets out."

"Terrific," Lois let out a visible groan.

Clark rolled his eyes in exasperation at her reaction. "Lois, what the hell is wrong with you? I know its not 28 days since you thought me and everything in the world sucked so what is it?"

"Oh that's just like you," she swatted him on the shoulder and wondered what use it was. The man was invulnerable. "It all comes down to that."

"I was kidding," he declared, noticing a slightly darker slant to their usual bantering. Ignoring Bruce and Chloe, for that matter, the wedding, he took Lois by the hand and led her around the chapel to the old cemetery behind it. As there were neither celebrities nor wedding guests there, Clark could be assured of privacy for a few minutes at least.

Lois followed him with unusual obedience, perfectly aware her attempt to keep this all bottled inside was not doing her any good. In fact, it was rather making things worse. She was angry, frustrated and no mood to be at the wedding that was the cause of all her problems. She thought she could manage to keep her composure but seeing Bruce and Chloe outing themselves to the world, only drove home her situation with acuteness that nearly drew blood.

"Alright," Clark said, scanning the immediate area to ensure they weren't interrupted. "What is it?"

"Its nothing," she shrugged, trying hard to keep it together.

"Lois..." he lifted her chin gently, forcing her to look up at him. "Tell me."

Lois blinked and Clark was rather stunned to see her eyes misting over. "I got fired."

"What?" He exclaimed. "From the Inquisitor?"

"Yeah," Lois nodded. "My editor fired me yesterday."

"You've known you've been fired since yesterday and you didn't tell me?" Clark didn't know whether he should be sympathetic or angry. However, the stricken expression on her face helped Clark choose sensibly. "Lois, this is the kind of stuff we're meant to share you know, like my problem with meteor rocks and other related issues."

"I didn't want to share it because I don't want to think about it!" Lois retorted. "It hurts badly enough that this has happened! I mean for God sake, you know why he fired me?"

Clark almost didn't want to ask. Since Lois had worked at the Inquisitor, her stories were sensationalized to the degree that it made the National Inquirer appear respectable. Lois had struggled to maintain her integrity as a reporter, to get the stories, even if they were obviously too good for the Inquisitor. He couldn't imagine why her editor would fire the one reporter in his stable who tried to bring in legitimate stories.

Lois took Clark's silence to answer. "Because I refused to take a camera into the wedding ceremony. The asshole wanted me to film Lana's wedding and reception! Their private wedding reception!"

Ouch, Clark winced inwardly. The Daily Planet had never made such demands of Chloe, largely because the Planet had its own gossip columnists and that newspaper had a reputation for ethics. Something the Inquisitor was sadly lacking.
"Lois," Clark looked at her. "You did the right thing."

"I know," she grimaced. "I know I did the right thing but the fact is, I am now unemployed. With your mom in Washington, she doesn't need me on her staff and I don't have a job. I can't go back to…” she couldn't even bring herself to say it; remembering how it stung the first time Lex had said it, "Muffin peddling."

Even Clark winced at that and he wasn't aware of the phrase's origins. Recouping quickly because his girl was hurting, he said to her. "Lois, you're a great reporter, you'll get another job in no time."

"No I won't Clark," Lois retorted, pushing him away. "I'm barely a journalist in the eyes of most people. The Inquisitor isn't exactly a shining example of the Fourth Estate."

He couldn't argue with her there but Clark refused to believe that Lois wasn't a good reporter. He had seen her pursue stories with an fiery dedication he rarely saw Chloe display even at her inquisitive best, although it was going to take God himself to get him to admit it to either woman. "Lois, something will come up."

"The thing is," she swallowed, her voice filling with emotion. "I really liked being a reporter. I mean all these years of trying to figure out what to do with my life. This was it. This was the thing and now I feel like a part of me is missing. I know it's a stupid job at a stupid rag but I was doing what I loved, well sort of, and doing it well."

"Lois," Clark said firmly. "Okay, you got fired but that doesn't mean you have to stop writing or trying to be a reporter. If there's one thing I've learnt from Chloe all these years is that it takes time and determination. Are you telling me that you, Lois Lane can't do any of this? Because if you are, then I'm just gonna check the weather to see if hell has really frozen over."

His words made her feel a little better but not much. She was still angry and frustrated not to mentioned worried about where her next paycheque was coming from. That was part she just couldn't tell Clark. There was only so much humiliation Lois would dare to admit to anyone. Even him. "I suppose there's some consolation to be had in all this."

"There you go," he said trying to be supportive as he reached for her hand, caressing her knuckles tenderly. "What?" He asked.

Lois looked at him with a glum expression. "At least my editor can't bitch me out for not giving him the scoop about Chloe and Bruce."

Despite Lois' upset regarding her current state of employment, Clark could at least be grateful for the fact that he was too worried about her to feel anything but mixed emotions at having to sit through the wedding of Lana Lang to Lex Luthor. Bruce had joined him and Lois in one of the middle pews while Chloe took up her position as bridesmaid near the altar. Lex's best man was his father, probably because no one else volunteered for it Clark thought snidely to himself. Lana looked radiant, even more so with child and she made a beautiful bride.

For once, Henry Small, Lana's biological father had opted to come out of the woodwork long enough to take his daughter down the aisle. The least he could do for her, Clark thought, considering how absent Small had been from her life during the past three years now. After being raised by Jonathan and Martha Kent, knowing what his father had endured for him, Clark couldn't imagine any father giving up his parental rights to make his life less complicated.

Nevertheless, Henry played his part well. The ceremony was elegant with the right amount of glamour to suit someone who was leaving the small town life that Smallville offered and was
moving up the social ladder to the stratospheric heights inhabited by the Luthors. Clark watched the happiness in Lana's face as she exchanged wedding vows with Lex and although he once wished that this was the inevitable outcome of their relationship, it only took a glance at Lois to know that he had made a better choice.

Feeling him squeeze her hand tight when Lana said 'I do', Lois turned to Clark and smiled. Even if she was hurting the loss of a job, knowing that he was there, that he was unafraid of her foul temper and was able to give her comfort when she needed it most, lessened the sting of it considerably.

He was right. This wasn't the end of her journalism career. She was meant to be a writer. Everything inside of her knew it. Somehow, she had to make sure everyone else knew too.

When the ceremony had ended and rice was thrown at the departing couple, Clark was personally thrilled when he threw a handful that hit Lex right in the face; the paparazzi had opted to follow the wedding procession to the reception at the Luthor mansion. Watching the limousine take off along with many of the guests, Clark and Lois lingered behind for the moment to talk to Chloe and Bruce who had opted to wait inside the chapel until the press was gone.

"Way to show up the bride Chloe," Lois teased when everyone else had left the chapel heading for the reception.

"Give me a break Lois," Chloe grumbled. "It wasn't my idea to announce our relationship to the world, it was Bruce's." Her eyes touched his as he curled an arm around her waist.

"Interesting show you two put on," Clark gave Bruce a look. "I thought you liked to keep your private life 'private'."

Bruce Wayne chuckled, accepting the ribbing with a good-natured smile. "It was either confess to the press or I'd have to bring another supermodel to this thing and that's just so tedious. So I settled for Chloe."

"Nice," she gave him a look and nudged him in the ribs. "You okay Clark?" Chloe asked and Clark knew instantly to what she referred. Chloe had been present for the full gamut of Clark Kent's feelings for Lana Lang. While she was thrilled that he had moved on with her cousin, not to mention a little sorry as well since she knew Lois all too well, Chloe knew that on this particular day Clark was bound to be feeling a lot residual emotions regarding Lana.

"Yeah," Clark answered without hesitation. "I just hope Lana's doing the right thing."

"Girl's a grown up Clark," Bruce retorted, digging one of his hands into the pocket of his expensive Armani suit. "She's made her choice, better or for worse."

"Gosh you guys are such romantics," Lois said sarcastically. "I suppose we better going to the reception." She wasn't looking forward to it either but Lana's sake she was willing to endure it. Besides, she wasn't abandoning Chloe either.

"Can't we just skip it?" Clark asked hopefully.

"No we can't," Lois declared hotly. "Look, it's Lana's special day so we're going to go and eat cake and put a smile on our faces, like she's married Prince freaking Charming instead of Darth Vader."

"Darth Vader?" Clark stared back at her. "That's a bit harsh although…." He couldn't fault her comparison though.
"Well they both don't have a lot of *hair,*" she explained the analogy.

"Jesus," Bruce laughed. "Should we get the preacher back in here? You two sound like you're already married. I'm sure he wouldn't mind a two for one deal today."

Lois and Clark, standing at the threshold of the chapel, looked at each other then simultaneously shot Bruce a dark look.

"That's *not* funny." Lois snorted.

"It's a little funny," Chloe laughed, noticing both Lois and Clark turning the same shade of pale.

"Chloe!" Lois protested and stepped out from under the threshold. *Just to be safe.* People got awfully weird at weddings. Following her cousin down the steps towards the sidewalk, she left Clark with Bruce.

Clark hissed in Bruce's ear once Lois was out of earshot. "So *not* the day to be making wedding jokes Bruce."

Bruce's only answer was a satisfied smirk.
You can do this.

If you want it, you're going to have to do it.

Lois Lane chanted these words to herself like a personal mantra, hoping that if she said them long enough, she might actually believe it. Courage was not something that Lois lacked with any degree. It was an aspect of her personality that allowed her push her way through her life; seldom thinking on the consequences until after she had plunged in, neck deep. Indeed, her courage was the driving force through which Lois achieved her goals, the impetus that allowed her to go the distance to accomplish all the demands of her existence. Thanks to her father, the General, Lois had adopted his marital philosophy to life. She refused let fear to slow her down or dictate her limitations. On some level, she knew her balls to the wall attitude to things bordered on reckless but she didn't care.

Fear had no place here other than to hold her back and she would not let it rule her.

Unfortunately, fear like Lois Lane, did whatever the hell it wanted anyway.

Staring at herself in the mirror over a sink in the ladies room, Lois tried to dispel the gnawing she felt in her gut as she prepared to go face Pauline Kahn, the hard edged Editor in Chief of the Daily Planet. Chloe had managed to get her an appointment with Kahn but could provide her no more assistance than that. That Chloe had been able to manage that much was something of a boon. Chloe was still living down the stigma of having been given a column at the Planet while still in high school, thanks to a deal with Lionel Luthor to spy on Clark. Unfortunately, when Chloe had turned her back on that agreement, she had found the column rescinded and had also gained the animosity of a number of veteran reporters on staff. These were reporters who had waited years for such an opportunity only to see it given to the inexperienced editor of a high school paper who had obviously been bought by Lionel Luthor.

While Lois was thrilled at the chance to face Pauline Kahn, whose reputation as a newswoman was absolutely first rate and everything Lois aspired to, she was also sceptical at whether or not Kahn would take her seriously with her background at the Inquisitor. However, Chloe was convinced that while Kahn was tough, she was also fair. She was interested in talent, not history. If merit alone impressed the woman, then Lois had some reason to hope that she might rate a fair hearing.

Washing her face for the second time in the last few minutes, Lois knew she was drawing attention of others in the washroom, who were no doubt wondering who she was and why she was hiding in here like a scared teenager. Taking a deep breath, Lois steadied herself inwardly and fixed her look in the mirror. Ignoring the puzzled looks thrown stealthily her way, Lois glanced at her watch and noted that it was a good twenty minutes before her appointment with Pauline Kahn. Deciding to take the high road, since it never hurt to be early, Lois finished making herself look appropriate. Dressed in a dark suit and crisp white shirt, she looked every bit the part of professional reporter and not a tabloid hack. When she stepped into the lobby, she was ready as she could ever be.

Entering the wide doorway leading into the room beyond, Lois wasn't certain what she was expecting. However, the minute she crossed the threshold and saw the newsroom of the Daily Planet, Lois Lane had an epiphany.
With a clarity of mind that she had only ever experienced when she realised irrevocably that she
loved Clark Kent, Lois knew that this was where she belonged.

Chloe called this the bullpen, Lois thought as she swept past the desks, trying not to gawk at the
site of real reporters working stories that weren't about sensationalism but about finding the truth.
This wasn't the tired, fabricated, chintzy world of the Inquisitor. It felt charged with a different
kind of energy, the kind she experienced whenever she was on a cusp of great story that wasn't
about the sensation but rather the facts. She saw the reporters talking on telephones, chasing down
leads, scribbling down information on note pads and staring at computer terminals as they
conducted their research through the Oracle of Google. They were writing stories that added to the
world, not exploited it.

This was the world Lois wanted to be apart of, not just by the stories she wrote but writing them
for the Daily Planet.

"Job interview?" a voice asked her as she fixated on the way to Pauline Kahn's office.

Lois stopped short in mid step and turned to the older man seated behind a desk asking her the
question. With thinning gold hair that would in time become grey, he regarded with eyes
twinkling with bemusement and immediately drew her irritation at being caught looking so
obviously supplicant. Lois guessed he must have been studying her, the instant she stepped onto
the newsroom floor.

"Could be," Lois recovered her composure and erected a façade with equal confidence. "What's it
to you?" She volleyed back with a question of her own.

"Just interested," he returned with a smirk. "Good luck."

Refusing to show that she was nervous, even though she knew she must have been if this guy had
pegged her for wanting a job, Lois opted for another cocky response. "Luck is what you need if
you don't have talent."

"Really?" He laughed, a dry sardonic laugh that Lois immediately liked because it reminded her
so much of her own. "Well then, I hope you got talent."

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so much of her own. "Well then, I hope you got talent."

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," Lois said confidently, deciding that if she could pull off this
bravado act for this guy then maybe, just maybe she might project the same confidence to the
Chief Editor.

"Good attitude," he complimented, seeing through the young woman's attempt with ease but then
a newsman with his experience wouldn't be worth his salt if he couldn't. Fortunately, for her, the
veteran's ability to see a diamond in the rough was also as sharp as ability to judge character and
the girl, despite her insecurity, impressed him. "You got any samples with you?"

Lois wondered for a moment if she ought to be wasting her time with this man but the truth was,
she had no idea how her work held up to the standard of the Daily Planet. Chloe said she was
good but then again, Chloe was her cousin and wouldn't hurt her feelings if she could avoid it and
Clark, well the instant they exchanged bodily fluids, his bias was pretty much a given. An
impartial opinion would be useful since she had no desire to be humiliated before the Chief Editor
if she could avoid it.

Going against her more suspicious, Lois decided to take a leap of faith because something in the
man's manner made he trust him and for Lois, such feelings to another person, especially a
stranger was rare. Besides, Lois could use all the help she could get to land a job at the Daily
Planet.
"You any good?" Lois retorted, unable to acquiesce without one last attempt at sass. Still, even as the words left her mouth, Lois was already rifling to the leather case she was carrying to produce one of the few articles she had brought with her, stored in plastic sleeves to hand them over. It was the piece on Project Ares, the super soldier program which Lois couldn't attribute to Lex Luthor without the Inquisitor being sued, because of proof. Instead, the article became one of the sensationalist pieces that the newspaper was infamous for, like the two-headed cow and the woman who saw Elvis taken into space.

Blue eyes twinkled with amusement as he took them, "depends on who you ask. Now button up while I read."

Lois was going to retort with something smart but when his eyes fixed on the pages and started reading, her desire to speak vanished. Instead, she tried to look nonchalant as she waited for him, trying hard to dispel the impatience or the discomfiture she felt, standing before him. Just to break the silence, she added quickly, "Just try to ignore the fact that the story is written for the Inquisitor."

"Never be ashamed of a story because of where it's printed," he answered automatically without lifting his eyes from the article he was perusing. "People will read the back of a chewing gum wrapper if it's interesting."

There and then, Lois Lane knew she'd adore him.

He read the article given from top to bottom, taking at least five minutes to do it and offering no comment in between the lines. Lois stood there, trying not to fidget, growing more impatient but holding her ground because she suspected he might know his stuff. She searched his desk while he read, trying to see a name plate on his desk. Unfortunately, it was obscured by the stack of folders on his desk, the top one labelled 'G.G', hand written scraps of paper, post-it notes, travel vouchers and other elements of his job.

"Not bad," he startled her out of her snooping.

Momentarily distracted, she looked up at him. "What?"

"I said, not bad. This piece could have been better but it looks like you held back a little. I can see where you're heading towards a big finish but couldn't quite make it there. Your style isn't bad either. It has kick. Start focusing your research skills on more than just circumstantial evidence and be prepared to go the distance, and then you might make a decent reporter."

What Lois was prepared to do was defend her article and her skills, except that he was right on the money about holding back. Her editor at the Inquisitor had ordered to remove all Luthor references and that had gutted the story from something provocative into a paper tiger. "I am a good reporter," she said defensively.

"Not yet Rookie," he gave her a wink. "But give it time and you might be. Now get going or you going to be late."

Lois opened her mouth to respond when she realised he was right. Throwing him a scowl, she snatched her article out of his hands and hurried to make her appointment with Pauline Kahn.

Grinning, Perry White watched her go.
It wasn't an unrealistic possibility, Lois thought as she sat across the desk from Pauline Kahn, a woman who looked as if she chewed up and spat out rookie reporters at her leisure. Lois who boasted drinking generals under the table, thought Pauline would have no trouble fitting into that crowd since she appeared as intimidating as her father. Mention of the woman's name still sent shudders through Chloe and now that Lois was seated in the woman's presence, she could well understand why.

It wasn't as if Pauline looked like some battle-axe with stern features and an eternal scowl. Dressed elegantly in a suit, auburn cut short but stylishly, she wore her age as sign of improving vintage not diminishing quality. Dark eyes studied Lois closely, her fingers holding a cigarette but her nails were short and functional, a tell tale sign that she did her own writing.

"Lois Lane," Pauline spoke finally, having taken the last few minutes to study the young woman who had earned this audience because not all her headlines on the Inquisitor had been tabloid garbage. "I granted you this meeting because Chloe Sullivan begged me and because I had a cancellation in my appointment calendar. So start talking so I know I'm not wasting my time."

Despite her acerbic statement, Pauline was curious to see how the young woman would react. Like all editors of note, she paid attention to the other publications, keeping an eye on what stories they were writing, the reporters they had on the payroll and ensuring that the Planet always had its finger on the pulse of the community. However, the gleaning of the rabble to find reporters of note was of especial importance. The charge of every Chief Editor was to populate the newsroom of the Daily Planet with the best reporters in the country and Pauline was no exception to this rule.

Deep breath, Lois decided to go for broke. "If I wasn't worth your time, I wouldn't be here right now. You don't strike me as someone who just sees anyone of the street, no matter who asks. You're an investigator. You would know everything about me before I got here."

Pauline did not show reaction to this but the answer gained Lois Lane another five minutes. "I thought you were working for the National Inquisitor?" Pauline answered instead.

Okay, she wasn't being thrown out of the office. Lois took this as a good sign. However, there was still too much pride in her to admit that she was fired from the Inquisitor. Thus, Lois chose a more politic response, "I'm looking to expand my options."

"Really?" Pauline retorted, perfectly aware that Lois Lane had been fired from the Inquisitor. The girl was right, she was an investigator and shortly after the appointment was made to see Lois, Pauline telephone the Inquisitor to learn all she could about Miss Lane. "I was under the impression you were fired."

Lois maintained her poise despite her bluff was well and truly called. "I'd call it a disagreement of minds," Lois replied, after a moment.

"What sort of disagreement?" Pauline pressed on, having heard the whole story from Ed Guerin, Lois Lane's former boss at the National Inquisitor.

Lois struggled with how to answer. She wanted to work at the Daily Planet more than anything. When she had embarked upon this meeting this morning, she had thought about nothing more than being a real reporter. However, somewhere between then and walking onto the newsroom floor, something had changed. She just didn't want to be a reporter at any paper, she wanted to be one at this paper.

Unfortunately, compromise left a bitter aftertaste in Lois' mouth and as she faced down Pauline,
trying to decide whether or not to tell all, she knew she couldn't be the reporter she wished to be if she gave up her principles. "Let's say I wouldn't compromise my integrity and leave it at that." Lois answered finally.

"Were you under the impression I was giving you a choice in whether or not you could answer that question?" Pauline shot back.

Lois braced herself. "I will not discuss my private conversations with my former editor. If you want to find out why I was fired, I suggest you talk to him."

Pauline's unreadable expression was infamous for reducing reporters under her rule to quivering wrecks and on Lois, the effect was no less damaging, except that Lois kept her panic hidden beneath an equally impassive mask. For what seemed like an eternity, both women eyed each other with Lois forcing herself not to blink first.

This was a test, she told herself. It had to be. God...It had better be.

What broke the stalemate was not either of them giving in but the door suddenly swimming open behind them with a frustrated secretary apologizing profusely for the interruption by the man who had barged in right past her. Lois looked over her shoulder and saw the newsman who had given her the critique of her Project Ares story. He stepped in and leaned against the glass wall through which he had been obviously watching the proceedings.

"Perry, what the hell are you doing in here?" Pauline demanded, giving him a look of annoyance since this wasn't the first time she had put up with this behaviour from him.

"Well I was watching the Mexican standoff from my desk and I was wondering which of you were going to draw first." He smirked mischievously.

Lois winced while Pauline threw him a resigned glare. "Lois Lane," Pauline sighed aloud as she eased back into her chair, waiving her secretary off with a dismissive hand, "meet Perry White, the Daily Planet's star reporter and the biggest pain in my ass."

"She loves me," Perry answered with a straight face, "she really does."

"Not that I don't relish these moments Perry," Pauline continued glaring at her star reporter who had dissolved the hard-edged atmosphere she had been playing for Lois' benefit. "But what do you want?"

"Well," Perry said, throwing a quick glance at Lois before looking at Pauline again. "I've read some of Lane's stuff here and there's potential. She's got as much as balls as anyone here on the floor and could be considered a work in progress, given the right training. I mean I'm willing to work with her."

"You?" Pauline eyed him with nothing less than astonishment. "Perry you never want to work with anyone. In fact didn't you tell me never to come at you with...how did you put it...those snot nosed kids who wouldn't know a good story if it bit them on the ass? That was you wasn't it?"

"Hey...right here?" Lois spoke up, wondering if either of them remember she was in the room.

"Pipe down Rookie," Perry ordered. "Let the grownups talk."

Astonishingly enough, Lois actually obeyed him.

Pauline noted the girl's response and knew that Perry didn't take any interest without good reason. Pauline and Perry had history. They had started out as junior reporters at the same time and to this
day, Pauline swore she had never encountered a better investigative journalist than Perry White. Perry had been a trail blazer, winning several Pulitzers before attempting to write an expose on Lionel Luthor’s past. Not the sanitized version produced by his public relations people that Lionel would have the world believe but the real truth of his history. It was a past, Lionel had been so determined to conceal, one that began in Suicide Slum and included the mysterious deaths of his parents in a fire.

Unfortunately, Perry had underestimated just how much power Lionel Luthor wielded and it wasn’t long before the award-winning journalist found himself a pariah, forced to eke out a living writing stories for a tabloid show called XStlyes. It wasn’t until Pauline was appointed Chief Editor of the Daily Planet that she was able to offer him a job and return him to the realm of respectable journalism. With the opportunity that she had given him, Perry returned to the top of the food chain writing stories that made the Daily Planet the most successful paper in the world.

If Perry believed there was potential in Lois Lane, Pauline was not about to ignore that endorsement, especially when it was given so infrequently.

"I’m not saying you should give the kid a job," Perry continued speaking. "However, if she does brings you a good story, it’s worth a look isn’t it?"

Pauline ruminated on the possibility. She didn't have any full time openings for a staff reporter anyway but the Planet did employ numerous freelance journalists. "Alright Lane, can you bring me a story? Not the usual garbage that the Inquisitor had you writing but a real story. If you can do that, I might just print it."

"You mean like a freelancer?" Lois stared. She wanted a job at the Planet, willing to work at the basement even. However, this wasn't even that. "I was hoping for a job…"

"You earn a job, Lane," Pauline responded before Perry could. "This is the Daily Planet. We're the greatest metropolitan newspaper in the world. Every reporter here starts by paying their dues. You want to show me that you're better than the tabloid crap you've been writing, bring me a story that will convince me. Until then you're just another wannabe. Perry here seems to think you're worth the time. Is he right? Do you have the chops to go the distance or would you be happier trying to chase down Brittany Spears next underwear spread?"

Lois stared her down fearlessly. "You want a story? I'll bring you a front page story, no problem."

Perry and Pauline exchanged a glance before the editor turned an amused eye on Lois. "So get to it Lane. That story's not going to get written while you wait around for my office."

Lois burst into a smile, unsure she had a victory or not. However, since she was a glass was half-full kind of girl, she'd go for the positive. "It sure won't."

Turning on her heels, she swept out of the office with her head held high, offering a grateful smile to the man who had come out of nowhere to help her realise her dreams. She wouldn't let him down and she wouldn't be too proud to seek his help. Lois was determined to prove that she could pay her dues, that she could get the stories to earn her a full time job in this place.

The day she became a reporter working full time for the Daily Planet, would be the happiest day of her life.

"You sure about this?" Pauline asked once the girl had left the office behind her. They watched
her progress through the newsroom doors, her stride forceful and determined like one about to go kick the crap out of the world until she got exactly what she wanted.

"Yeah," Perry nodded after she had gone from their sight, watching her disappear down the corridor. "She's got chutzpah."

"I know," Pauline smirked easing into her chair. "I was going to offer her the same deal. Any reporter who'd risk their job for the sake of integrity is the kind of reporter we want at the Planet. Although my gut says, she's going to be a pain in the ass. Almost as bad as you," Pauline added sweetly.

"Not my problem," Perry retorted with a smirk, starting to make tracks out of her office himself. "I'm not the Editor in Chief."
Saying that she was going to get a headline grabbing storyline worthy of the Daily Planet and actually doing it, Lois Lane soon learned, was harder than it looked.

Following her meeting with acerbic Pauline Kahn and equally perplexing Perry White who had come out of nowhere, to make her chance at the Planet possible, Lois was determined to prove his faith in her was justified. Self-doubt was another one of those troublesome emotions that Lois had no time for but since her firing from the Inquisitor, she felt it a lot. It didn't help that the cause of her return to the unemployed state was sprawled across every newspaper and tabloid magazine in the city.

The fairy tale wedding of Lex Luthor to Lana Lang made for good copy and the media devoured stories about the couple like ravenous monsters. Everywhere, Lois was treated to images of Lex and Lana's wedding, then came their honey moon and the pictures that came with that. Each snapshot reminded Lois how close she had been to the story only to walk away from it. To add insult to injury, Chloe's new romance with Bruce Wayne was also as newsworthy. So if it wasn't Lana's face she was seeing everywhere, it was Chloe's.

Despite her chagrin, Lois was starting to learn a great deal about herself and the kind of journalist she wanted to be. She didn't want to be a tabloid reporter and the stories she wanted to write would not be about what celebrity was doing what. She wanted to write stories of substance, stories that would help change the world, hopefully for the better. It surprised her to discover the existence of this idealistic crusader hidden adroitly beneath the surface of her cynical exterior.

Clark was rubbing off on her.

"So how's the story coming?" Chloe asked of Lois as they sat across a table in her lunching spot around the corner from the Planet.

"I'm working on leads," Lois said evasively, stirring her coffee for the hundredth time, offering revelation to anyone who knew her that she was exaggerating.

"Oh really?" Chloe stared at her with that look of familiarity cultivated over the course of their entire relationship. Scepticism exuded from every word.

"Oh really?" Chloe stared at her with that look of familiarity cultivated over the course of their entire relationship. Scepticism exuded from every word.

Lois raised her eyes to her cousin and knew that Chloe was seeing right through her. "Okay so I've got nothing so far but I know there's a story out there? That's what you always said, right? I've just gotta find it."

"Absolutely," the demure blond nodded with encouragement before her attention was caught by someone standing at the window of the café called the Tivoli. A telephoto lens was aimed in her direction before she saw the flash that could only be her picture taken. Chloe sighed and looked away, so exhausted with trying to avoid the paparazzi that she had resigned her self to their presence.

"God I wish they'd blow." Chloe complained, eyeing the patterns on the table instead.

Lois chuckled, sympathizing with her cousin nevertheless. "Just ignore them," Lois replied, reversing their roles as being the one to offer support now. "They'll vanish the minute they discover that you and Bruce are so incredibly average that there's absolutely nothing to feed the gossip page. That or until Britney has another freak out which lately, could be any day now." The older cousin smirked.
"Thanks," Chloe nodded, admitting that the prospect was inviting, of being deemed average and left alone that is. The jury was still out on the Britney freak out. "So how did it go with your dad?"

Lois flinched, returning to her present circumstances with a thud so loud, she surprised that no one heard it. "Oh, the General is on manoeuvres at the moment so he won't be contactable for another two weeks."

"Oh," Chloe's expression became downcast. "Lois can you wait that long? I mean I've got some money saved up, I could give you a loan…"

"No that's okay," Lois said hastily. She wasn't desperate enough to take Chloe's money yet. It was bad enough that she had try to get in touch with her dad to get a loan from him but taking it from Chloe was more than her pride could tolerate at this point. "I've got some rainy day money, I'll be fine for a few more days."

"Okay," Chloe said dubiously, perfectly aware that Lois' ability to be frugal was like her own ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound. "You know," the blond eyed her cousin slyly, "maybe you should tell Clark that you're broke."

"No!" Lois exclaimed exasperated. "You know how Clark is! He'll want to come charging to the rescue and it's not like running the Kent farm is rolling in the dough. Besides, I'm too embarrassed for that…"

"Lois!" Chloe declared exasperated, "This is Clark we're talking about. He's your boyfriend right? The only guy whose name I've seen you write surrounded by little hearts. To say nothing of the fact that he trusts you with the truth about being from…" She almost said Krypton but stopped short before that sin could be committed since they were in a crowded restaurant and she was on the paparazzi hit list. "From uh…Fresno."

"Fresno?" Lois stared blankly and realising Chloe's choice of locale was for the benefit of anyone listening in on their conversation. "Well being from…Fresno is a big thing, not something he could hide for long. I mean look what happened with Lana because he didn't ell her that he's from …out of state? This is my problem Chloe and not something Clark can fix with his uh…hobbies," Lois declared, her gaze shifting away from her cousin, "I can take care of myself."

Chloe was not about to let it go, not just yet. She knew where this was coming from. The same place it had come from in the past, from Lois' stubborn belief she didn't need anyone to look out for her. Too often the people she needed let her down or expected her to be tougher than anyone should expect another to be and Lois had learnt through experience that it was better to be tough than pitied. "Lois, no one doubts that you can't look after yourself but there's nothing wrong with asking for help."

Lois knew that Chloe was right and to a degree even believed her. She wasn't afraid to ask Perry White for help to write her story and in moments of emotional crises she wouldn't be afraid to turn to Clark for help. However, Lois couldn't admit to him or anyone just yet that she felt pathetic and stupid to be caught in this situation in the first place. She should have had savings, she should have finished college, she should have done a dozen things differently so she wouldn't be in this situation. However, now that she was here, she wasn't going to bemoan her fate. She would pick herself up like she always did, without help from anyone.

"Look I can't keep talking about this," Lois said draining her coffee cup quickly before standing up. "I've got to go chase down some leads on the other side of town."

"Oh alright," Chloe sighed resignedly, aware that Lois wasn't going to budge on this point nor did it require her cousin to swear her to secrecy. Years of being the keeper of everyone's secrets, it
was a foregone conclusion that Chloe would tell Clark nothing of Lois' dilemma. "He's your boyfriend, I'm sure you know how to handle him." She threw up her hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Damn straight," Lois perked up, injecting her voice with more cheeriness than she felt. "Besides," she threw a sidelong glance at the outside of the restaurant where a cameraman could be sighed. "You've got problems of your own. Who knows it won't be long before they'll be calling you the next Brangelina, nah...something catchier...Bhloe maybe."

"Bhloe!" Chloe almost choked on her latte. "Oh that just sound dirty!"

"Okay, okay," Lois retorted, not about to give up yet. "Chruce, then."

"Just get going already!" Chloe threw a napkin at her, laughing at Lois' absurdity. Really… Chruce.

Lois smirked, deflecting enough to make good her escape. In truth, she didn't want Chloe to question her too deeply on where she was going. Chloe was the only person that Lois couldn't fool at all and there were just some things that Lois Lane liked to keep to herself.

"See ya," she said grabbing her handbag and walking briskly out of the café.

Valerie was exhausted.

It was days since her escape and her arrival in Metropolis had not been the answer to her problems as she believed. In fact, being lost in a large, unforgiving city where no one knew you or for that matter, cared; was almost as bad as being locked up in a gilded cage. With only a few dollars left to her name, enough for a sandwich perhaps, Valerie struggled with what to do. The place where Hank had said he'd be didn't exist and she worried that they might have spirited him away to parts unknown because he wouldn't let him hurt her and just gave her a fake address to pacify her into submitting to their tests.

In retrospect, Valerie knew that she had been so focussed on escape and reaching Hank, she should have given some thought as to what she would do when she arrived upon arriving at her destination. Her whole plan had been flawed to the start and now she was lost, one of the millions of forgotten faces on the streets of Metropolis, with no place to go. Her feet hurt from walking along the pavement and her stomach growled. With hunger gnawing at her and the prospect of sleeping in another shelter not at all welcoming, Valerie considered her options.

In desperation, she did the one thing she had been resisting for days, hoping that finding Hank might save her from the action. Looking up the street, she saw the phone booth and hastened her pace to reach it. Glancing furtively over her shoulder every so often, Valerie still couldn't shake the feeling of someone following her, Hank's employers might be trying to retrieve her and that made every new face a possible threat. Reaching the booth, she stepped inside and fished out all the change she had in the pocket of her jeans, putting it on little shelf where the phone book was perched.

Lifting the ear set off the hook, Valerie fed the coins into the slot, One by one. When she heard the dial tone, she began to push the numbers and waited for a voice to response. An operator came on the line and immediately put her collect call through to Seattle. Valerie's breath held, uncertain of what she would say when the call connected. The cold sensation of shame rushed through her as she heard the ring tone and her breath held. She had behaved so badly. Why would they help
"Hello," Valerie heard her mother's voice.

Swallowing, she spoke. "Momma," she said after a pause. "It's me."

The reaction was immediate. "Oh my God Valerie! Steven! It's Valerie!" She heard her mother calling for her father. Even in shame, Valerie was stunned by how good it was just to hear their jubilation at her call.

"Baby, where are you? We've been so worried!"

"Momma, I need help," she squeaked, "I'm in Metropolis."

"Metropolis?" Her mother exclaimed. "What are you doing there?"

Valerie didn't have a chance to answer because she heard the scuffle of sound through the receiver as the phone was handed over.

"Valentine," her father spoke firmly and Valerie blinked, feeling warm tears run down her cheek at how good to hear him using his favourite nickname for her. "Where are you? We'll come get you right away."

"I'm in Metropolis," she said quickly, suddenly wanting very much to go home, to be with them as they took care of her.

"Where in Metropolis?" He declared. "We'll be on the first plane. Just tell us where you are Valentine."

Valerie looked through the glass and saw the street signs in her immediate location. "I'm at a phone booth at the Eisner and Kane cross streets." She answered and that saw a diner across the street. "In a diner called the Slice."

"Then you go in there and wait for us baby," Valerie heard her mother say next to her father. "We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Thank you," Valerie whispered, crying a little harder now because guilt and shame stabbed at her for hurting these people with her selfish departure in the night. "Please come soon."

"We love you Valentine," her father assured her, "we'll be there."

Closer than Seattle, someone listened to the conversation between Valerie Beaudry and her parents with interest.

"We got her," the man said coolly. "She called home like we thought."

"Good," Hank nodded approving.

"You're late," the unshaven man, with the beer gut hanging over his apron looked at Lois from over the counter when she arrived at the diner called the Slice twenty minutes after her lunch with Chloe.

Lois glanced around the establishment containing more than six tables and five booths along the walls with a raised brow since only three tables of those tables were occupied and she wasn’t the
only waitress in the place. "Sorry," she said trying to hide her sarcasm, "didn't mean to leave you hanging during the rush."

"Very funny," he snorted, a big bear of a man called Sal who was more bark than bite.

When Lois had interviewed for the job, all she had to do was tell him she had worked in a coffee shop for him to hire her. Lois supposed that this place with it's out of the way location wasn't exactly the highlight of the Metropolis Restaurant Guide and tips weren't plentiful. Lois didn't care, its anonymity was exactly what she needed. No one (especially Clark and Chloe) had to know that she had been reduced this to supplement her non-existent income. Besides the wages, though slight were steady, would do until she was able to write her story for the Planet.

"Don't mind him honey, he's just mad cause his daughter is pregnant again" Flora, the other waitress who's shift ended when Lois showed up, said with a warm smile. Flora spoke with a thick Southern accent like the stereotypical belle but with more mettle than John Wayne. The mother of two, she had gained Lois' respect by raising two boys on her own, working this job and still managing to be there for their Sunday dinner. In an age where children were raised by televisions sets and internet access, Lois was impressed.

"Good for nothing bum she's married can't support her…” Sal grumbled and continued his ministrations over the fryer.

Lois and Flora exchanged bemused expressions as they passed each other on the way to the back room. Entering the small musty room, Lois sighed as she put on the waitress uniform that Sal insisted they wear. At least it didn't have her name monogrammed on it. Each time Lois felt the lurch in her stomach telling her that she was better than this job, she reminded herself that this place was a means to an end and like all good reporters, she had to pay her dues. This was one of those dues.

Stepping out, Lois brushed down the skirt of her salmon coloured uniform and surveyed the patrons as Flora bade them goodbye and hurried off, heading off to pick up her youngest. The two people that caught her eyes first were just like most of the patrons she saw in this place, regulars who discovered that Sal made a pretty good steak and they didn't have to fight for a table when they came in. A trucker, Lois sized up and old man named Harry who came here every day at the same time for lemon meringue pie.

The third was sequestered in the back booth, trying to look inconspicuous. A woman a little younger than her. She stood out because despite her somewhat bedraggled looked at present, had luminous features of shiny gold hair and blue eyes. Her eyes revealed a lot on her mind. Unlike the other two who were eating their food with enthusiasm, the girl seemed content to stare at the cup of coffee above her empty plate. Picking up the coffee pot, Lois walked over to her.

"Can I fill that up for you?" She asked, remembering the lingo from the Talon.

The girl looked up, startled, reminding Lois for a minute of a deer caught in the headlights.

"Oh sorry," she said with wide-eyed anxiety. "Yes, sorry, I didn't hear you…"

"Hey its okay," Lois reassured her. "I just wanted to know if you wanted some coffee."

She considered the request for a moment, "I don't have any more money…"

Boy, Lois thought to herself, did she knew what that felt like. "Its okay, refills are free."

The girl seemed relieved, "oh, yes please."
Lois smiled and poured her a cup. "Are you alright?" The crusader in Lois had to ask. The girl seemed like she was at her wit's end as Lois poured coffee into the cup, noticing her shaking hands at the same time.

"I'm waiting for someone," she admitted. "I told them that this was where to find me. I have to wait here."

This didn't sound good and really none of her business but damn it, Clark Kent had rubbed off on her to much to ignore that seemingly ominous statement. "Well then here you'll wait," Lois smiled, hoping to disarm her. "Whose coming to get you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"My parents," the girl answered readily enough. "They're coming from Seattle."

"Seattle?" Lois raised a brow. "When do you expect them?"

"I rang them an hour ago," Valerie answered, unaware that the years of isolation had caused her to become desperate for contact and incapable of judging who she could trust with personal details. "They're coming."

From Seattle? Lois almost balked but could see the girl was frightened enough and had no wish to worsen her anxiety. "They could be a few hours," Lois finally commented. "Can you wait for them anywhere else?"

"No," the girl shook her head. "I have to wait here. I don't know anyone else in Metropolis."

Undecided what she would do, Lois was almost grateful when she heard the truck driver catch her attention for a refill of coffee. Lois hurried off to serve him, trying to decide if this was any of her business and unlike Clark, she didn't have a knack for getting people to trust her the way he did. Must be that farm boy demeanour, she told herself.

A family, comprising of two parents and a noisy brood of unruly children entered the diner at that moment and Lois forgot all about the girl and the long wait, as she was inundated with orders and kids trying to put ice cream in the pocket of her apron.

It was more than an hour when the diner was quiet again and Lois, who didn't remember the Talon being this much work, took a moment to catch her breath. The trucker had also departed at this point, more than happy to leave the place and escape the little terrors that were perfect illustrations of why children should not be given candy for any reason. Lois sat down at the counter, helping herself to a drink since the place was empty except for the girl who had not moved from her booth.

"Hey, what's her story?" Sal inquired, his gruff voice held at low whisper.

"I think she's a runaway or something," Lois hissed back. "She's waiting for her folks to come get her. I don't think she had any money for anything else."

"This ain't no charity," he grumbled and eyed the girl again, finding it disconcerting that she was no older than his own daughter. "But we can spare some coffee and pie while she waits. We'll give her folks the tab when they arrive."

Lois threw Sal a smirk, "why you're just nice guy under all stubble aren't you."

Sal mumbled something unintelligible and returned to cleaning the grill, leaving Lois chuckling as she stood up and walked towards the booth, prepared to offer the girl a cup of coffee and some meringue pie.
However, the girl stood up abruptly.

Her face was etched in concern as she stared through the window. Lois followed her gaze and saw that a trio of black SUVs that had come to a screeching at the sidewalk, one after the other next to the pavement. With chrome gleaming under the afternoon sun, Lois pegged them immediately for government vehicles. Whatever they were, the girl was not happy to see them and the look in her eyes, the fear in them, immediately drew Lois' concern.

"Hey is everything okay?" She shifted her gaze between the girl and the cars.

Men were exiting the vehicle and as they approached the diner, Lois understood the girl's alarm. For starters, they were armed and dressed in black camouflage gear, their faces concealed beneath ski masks. The guns they were carrying were military grade. Lois had been on enough army bases in her time to recognise that these were the weapons of choice for mercenaries.

"I have to go," the girl exclaimed. "They're coming for me!"

Lois had guessed that much. She didn't think that the electric bill she had due warranted this kind of response yet. Those guys were ruthless. "Who are they?" Lois demanded. "What do they want with you?"

"They want to take me back!" She cried out frantically, bringing Sal to the counter window separating the kitchen from the rest of the diner.

"What's going on?" He demanded.

"I don't know," Lois explained quickly, thinking that she needed her phone to get Clark here.

Unfortunately, the men were in the diner before she could finish the thought and even though they were armed, they approached cautiously, Lois noted.

"Valerie," one of them spoke through the ski mask. "You need to come back with us. You shouldn't be out here alone."

"Little tip pal," Lois stepped in front of the girl, Valerie, "you might try that approach without the ski mask."

"Stay out of this," he shot at her. "This doesn't concern you."

"The hell it doesn't," Lois said fearlessly, "she doesn't look like she wants to go anywhere with you so why don't you get the hell out of here before we call the cops."

"Valerie," the man spoke to his quarry, ignoring Lois' threats. "You don't want these people to get hurt, come with us now."

"The girl ain't going nowhere," Sal appeared from behind the counter, wielding a baseball bat. "Get the hell out of may place."

Suddenly, Lois heard the sound of something like a champagne bottle popping from behind her boss. In what felt like slow motion, she saw Sal tumbling forward, the baseball bat falling from his fingers before clattering against the linoleum floor. His eyes went blank, seeing nothing as he landed hard on his face. Lois uttered a gasp of fright as she saw the blood pooling around his head, like a crimson crown. Standing behind Sal was his killer, the silencer clutched in his hand and smoking from use.

"Oh my God!" Lois exclaimed horrified as she saw the assassins close in.
"You didn't have to do that," Valerie started to weep, seeing them coming to take her. "You didn't have to hurt him!" She screamed and just when Lois thought that things couldn't get any worse, everything went to complete hell.
Secrets

It was strange how you could size a situation up for one thing and then end up with something totally different.

Five seconds after Sal had been shot dead and Lois was gripped with the fear that she might be summarily executed in much the same fashion, everything she expected to happen was turned on its head in a manner no one could have predicted. Only after the fact, was Lois able to piece together what had taken place in any coherent fashion because at the time, the sequence of events didn't feel linear but rather a jumbled chaos of insanity. Lois remembered seeing Sal fall, his blood soaking into the linoleum. She remembered her horror and her retreat from the men approaching, who even behind ski masks managed to exude menace.

Next to her, the girl was sobbing, begging them to stay away, which of course they would not. Men like these were not to be swayed by any form of entreaty. The fact that they had killed Sal in cold blood was a testament to how determined they were to get what they wanted. The girl shrank away and Lois was momentarily frozen with the thought that she was going to die and poor Clark would never even known why it had happened.

Then the girl screamed and suddenly, all bets were off.

Her scream wasn't any high pitch cry of female desperation. It started almost like a whistle and then became a banshee's wail. Lois who was standing next to her was thrown backwards, halted by the counter. The wannabe reporter for the Daily Planet felt the back of her head slam against the plastic and for a moment, she felt the room spin fast enough for her not to realise what was happening. When Lois was able to focus, she saw everything in front of the girl was gone.

The walls were ripped apart, mortar and wood whittled down in seconds to debris. Lois was reminded of those 1950s films depicting the effect of an atomic bomb explosion on buildings. It looked like a great gust of wind had blasted it into oblivion, the walls, the windows and the roof were torn away into the streets. She saw cars flipping onto their sides like they had been swept aside by an angry child. The SVUs parked by the sidewalk rolled along the bitumen like tumbleweeds, becoming more and more pulverized which each turn. Of the men that had been approaching them, Lois saw some clinging to lamp posts that were still rooted to the ground, others had been flung away like dust.

Lois herself was holding on for dear life to the railing on the foot of the counter, convinced that if the girl had been screaming in any other direction, she would be sharing the same fate as those men. Even so, the pull of the whirlwind created by the girl's sonic scream was tremendous and she felt like Helen Hunt in Twister, lifted off the ground and swept towards the path of that powerful sound current. Struggling to hold on, she saw the girl continuing to scream and soon found herself shouting at her to stop. The men who had tried to take her were for now, despatched but it was innocents who were bearing the worst of it.

"Hey!" Lois tried to make herself heard. What was her name again? Valerie? "VALERIE! STOP! EASE OFF!"

As Valerie saw what she was doing to the street beyond the Slice, her mind was caught somewhere between horror and astonishment. She knew that she had been capable of this but had held back when Hank first showed her she had this ability. Afraid of how much damage she could do, Valerie had resisted the urge to unleash it into its fullest but seeing the murder of the man who had tried to help her had provoked her despair and her outrage. Through the maelstrom of fury however, she heard the voice of the other person who had tried to help her and returned to some
semblance of self.

Abruptly, she stopped screaming.

However, the cessation of the screaming did not ease one whit the amount of devastation. The whole front of the Slice was gone. It lay strewn across the main road and the sidewalk as far as the eyes could see. The cars, swept away, by the blast had piled up against the buildings on the opposite end of the street. Lampposts were bent in the middle, trees were uprooted and every glass window in a mile radius was shattered. Car horns were blaring; a hydrant had been ripped from its housing and spraying water across the road. Injured people were struggling to climb out of wrecked cars, cut from flying glass and other such mishaps.

Lois landed on the linoleum and winced at the pain from her sudden stop. Wincing, she sat up to survey the destructive scene before her and then shifted her gaze to the girl who was sobbing over what she had done. Valerie seemed almost as distraught as the victims did out there, over what had happened.

"I didn't mean to do this…" she wailed. "I didn't mean to hurt everyone!"

"It's okay," Lois returned, limping to her side. "You couldn't help it," she patted the girl gently on the back. "It was just inside you and you were provoked." Half her believed that and half of her thought that Valerie was a powder keg waiting to happen. Looking outside, she saw the wreckage of SUVs and wondered if those men would send reinforcements after this. As the possibility entered her head, Lois heard the distant whine of sirens.

"Valerie," Lois said quickly. "We have to get out of here. The police are coming and whomever those guys were that came you will be back even sooner. You can't explain this to the cops and I don't recommend you try."

"But I can't leave!" Valerie stuttered. "How will my parents find me?" She stared at Lois, frightened enough to take her lead.

"We'll find them Valerie," Lois assured her, "but you can't stay here. If the police find you, that's going to raise all kinds of hell. We need to get some place safe, away from all this to figure things out."

Valerie wasn't sure what to do but her unexpected rescuer did and that Valerie had to concede that she was right; she couldn't be found by the police and if she remained here, she would. She would call her parents from some place safe. "Alright," she nodded, deciding to take a chance. This woman had seen what she could do and was willing to help her. She had tried to help her even before that. Valerie had to trust someone and this feisty brunette seemed trustworthy so far.

"Alright," she nodded after a moment of hesitation that ended when the siren sounds reached her ears too. "I'll go with you."

"Good," Lois sighed with relief. "My car's parked out back," she explained as she caught hold of Valerie's arm to lead her through the back door of the ruined diner. Lois was never grateful as she was then right now for parking her small car in the three-spaced lot behind the diner. It seemed to have been left relatively unscathed from Valerie's devastating cry. "We'll get some place safe to figure things out," she continued to speak as they hurried to the car. The wail of sirens from police cars and ambulances seemed to intensify and Lois knew they had to get out of here while they could.

"I'm Lois by the way," Lois introduced herself upon opening the car door. "Did I hear that guy say your name was Valerie?"
"Yes," Valerie nodded meekly before getting into the front passenger seat as Lois slid the keys into the ignition and brought the engine to life. "My name is Valerie Beaudry."

"Nice to meet you Valerie," Lois tossed her a smile. "Don't worry okay?" She added after seeing the anxiety in the girl's manner. "We'll get you to your parents."

Clark Kent had waited until he was absolutely certain that he was going to be alone before he sat down to the task that presently waited for him on the kitchen table. Lois was out chasing leads, Chloe was at the Planet and with his mother moved more or less permanently to Washington these days, Clark had the entire house to himself. Oddly enough, it was being alone at the farm that had precipitated this decision and though he had visitors often enough, lately Clark had found that the hour it took for him to maintain the farm at any given time, was simply leaving too many gaps in his day.

Sitting down at the kitchen table after making himself a cup of coffee, Clark Kent faced the collection of papers he had gathered from Central Kansas University a few days ago. He hadn't told either Lois or Chloe of his plans, certain that he would hear no end of it if he told them that he planned going back to school. Particularly, after the duo heard what his intended major would be. Clark Kent was planning on getting a degree in communications and political science, in other words - journalism.

In the beginning, Clark's foray into journalism had begun when he wrote for the Torch with Chloe. While Chloe was the one with a real nose for a scoop, Clark found that he had some talent as a writer but unfortunately, at the time too busy lamenting his father refusal to let him play football to realise. Had he paid attention, he might have noticed he was good at it and more surprisingly, how much he enjoyed it. Principal Reynolds had encouraged him to follow that path but shamefully Clark had not heeded the advice. Once he was able to play football, he hadn't looked back until it was almost too late.

With Lana married and a baby on the way, Chloe and Lois actively pursuing their own career goals, Clark had come to realise that he couldn't stay in Smallville or on the farm forever. Whatever Jor-El's plan might be for his future, Clark knew that Jonathan Kent had wanted him to live his own life. More at peace with things than he had been in along time, Clark decided it was time to make some decisions about what he wanted to do, not what had been decided for him. His future included Lois, that much was certain but perhaps a career in journalism as well.

Picking up the pen next to the stack of forms before him, Clark lowered the nib to the paper when suddenly the phone rang, drawing a frown of annoyance on his face because he had worked himself into a good resolve to get this done. Rising from his chair, it took but two steps to reach the phone and answer it.

"Hello, Kent residence." Clark greeted.

"Hello Clark," the voice returned and for a moment, Clark had to think to recognise who was speaking. "It's General Lane, is Lois there?"

For some reason, Clark always stood straighter whenever he spoke to the man. Perhaps, it was because Sam Lane was a four star general and his girlfriend's father (who owned lots of guns), that Clark felt the need to be on his toes always. "General Lane, good to hear from your. I'm sorry Lois isn't here. Is everything okay?"

"I don't know," the man's brittle toned voice asked. "Is everything alright?"
Clark raised a brow, wondering whether he had missed a step in this conversation. "Everything is fine here, as far as I know." Clark returned somewhat puzzled.

"I see," the man responded and Clark could see his frown even without the aid of enhanced vision. "Lois called me urgently last week to wire her some money, I thought she might be in trouble again."

"Money?" Clark exclaimed. "Lois needs money?" Clark blurted out, genuinely surprised. This had to be a mistake. Why didn't she tell him?

"I assumed that's why she asked," the General returned, answering the young man with great patience and wishing this was anyone but his daughter's boyfriend. You only had to threaten one with a gun just once to know that did not win you any good parenting awards or impress your daughter very much.

Lois asked for money from her father? Clark thought to himself. Aware of his girlfriend's fiercely independent nature (how could you miss it), Clark knew that it was a special kind of desperation that would drive the erstwhile Miss Lane to call her father for assistance and worse yet, why didn't she want him to know? Lois confided in him about everything, even the stuff that he didn't want to know, like why women ate chocolate and watched 300, had nothing to do with the Persian War it seemed.

"I'm sorry," Clark returned somewhat stunned. "I can't help you. I'll have her call you when I see her next." He replied, offering the safest answer for now although Clark had a few questions of his own when he saw Lois next.

Lois didn't waste any time getting out of Metropolis once she and Valerie were on the road. Listening avidly to the news as they took the highway out of the city, the news was reporting the incident at the Slice as some kind of freak Midwestern twister, which in reality made a hell of a lot more sense than the truth. As it was Lois was trying to come to grips with what had happened, which was saying something after her experiences with Clark, while at the same time trying to discern if she had not given aid and comfort to a walking time bomb.

However, Lois' experiences with Clark had taught her that even people with great abilities needed help and Valerie was a frightened young woman who appeared as overwhelmed with her powers as the men who had tried to abduct her. In any case, Lois could not bring herself to abandon the girl when she so desperately needed help. Driving towards Smallville, which to Lois mind offered some form of safety from the chaos behind them, she did not press Valerie on her origins. There was plenty of time for that once they arrived at the Kent farm.

Furthermore, if the girl did lose control again, Lois would then be in the company of the one person on this planet equipped to deal with her.

Clark could hear the familiar rumble of Lois' car the instant she turned up the driveway and already his imagination was getting the best of him over why Lois had hidden the fact that she needed money from him. His fears had not been allayed one bit by calling Chloe, who had been cornered into telling him that he would have to get his answers from Lois because she wasn't getting in the middle of this. Knowing the existence of a 'this' to begin with, did not improve Clark's demeanour when Lois' hatchback rolled up to the house and he discovered she wasn't
alone.

Of course, it took him less than a fraction of second, without using his enhanced vision, to realise they had a situation when he finally saw Lois.

Not only was she dishevelled but there was also a gash on her forehead and signs that she was involved in an accident. Furthermore, she was wearing what appeared to be the uniform of a waitress. Coming out of the house to greet her, Clark forgot for the moment that she had been keeping secrets, although the salmon coloured uniform raised even more questions, he regarded her with worry.

"Lois, my God what happened to you?" He came towards her and was immediately met with a tight embrace.

"You wouldn't believe it," Lois declared. "Clark, I'd like you meet Valerie Beaudry. Valerie, this is my boyfriend Clark. Its okay you can trust him." She reassured the girl.

Clark regarded the almost elfin like beauty that came out of the car. Blonde and pretty, he was reminded of one of the girls that won the Miss Sweet Corn pageant every year. Lois’ endorsement about his trustworthiness was also not lost upon Clark and certainly, the girl would only look his way after she had heard it. Offering him a shy smile, Valerie's manner exuded anxiety and hesitation.

"Hi there," Clark greeted, smiling back in an effort to put her at ease before turning back to Lois in question.

"Not now, Clark," Lois said quietly and went towards Valerie, ushering her into the house.

Almost an hour later, Lois left Valerie resting in Clark's room, after a meal and a shower during which time Lois had filled Clark in on what had taken place at the diner. Once again, they had decided to wait until Valerie was a little more relaxed before plying her with questions about the men in pursuit and how it was she could level a block with just her voice.

In the meantime, Lois grabbed a shower herself before changing into the fresh clothes she left at the farm during the nights she slept over. Emerging down stairs, a little fresher than she was, Lois saw Clark on the porch through the window of the house. He had been pretty quiet since she and Valerie had showed up and Lois wondered what was on his mind. She knew the look when he had troubling thoughts and for a moment, she fleetingly entertained that he might be upset at her for just bringing a stranger to the farm. However, it was discarded almost as soon as it appeared in her head.

Clark Kent was incapable of turning anyone away who was in need.

"Valerie's resting," Lois announced herself as she stepped onto the porch and joined Clark where he was standing. His back was facing her as he stared into the green fields on the horizon, his brow furrowed in deep thought. "I think the poor thing has been on the run for quite some time. I think we'll get her to open up once she trusts us a little more. I think she's scared silly by what she did. Hell, I don't blame her, she scared me too." Lois confessed.

"Lois what's going on?" Clark whirled around, ignoring the subject of Valerie Beaudry for the moment because he wanted to speak about what had been on his mind since Lois arrived at the farm.
"Why did you need to borrow money from your dad?" He demanded, staring at her hard.

"That's none of your business!" Lois spat back, feeling the anger rise up in her chest. "I borrowed the money from my dad because I needed it to pay my bills!" She tried to keep her voice steady, but it was clear she was on the verge of tears.

"I know you didn't want to ask me, but I'm here to help you attraverso any means necessary. I can't let you do this to yourself, Lois. What's going on?" Clark said, his voice filled with concern.

"I've been working at a diner," Lois answered, her voice heavy with despair. "I've been working six days a week to make enough money to live on. But it's not enough. I can't pay the bills, I can't pay the rent at the Talon..." She trailed off, her voice breaking with emotion.

"Tell me what's going on, Lois. You can't keep this to yourself," Clark said, his voice gentle but firm.

"I...I...I know Lana could probably fix it if I called her but she's on her honeymoon! How can I call her and ask her to help me? It's not like I'm Lex's favourite person," she paused a moment, sniffing a bit more, "what with the number of times I've got into his business! I couldn't do that to Lana! And...and...dad probably called here because I couldn't pay the phone, the Daily Planet won't give me a job until I bring in a story and...and...I've been working at a diner!"

"Oh for crying out loud," Clark groaned, rolling his eyes in exasperation at this frustratingly independent woman he adored. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because...it's so pathetic!" She wailed, burying her face in his shoulder as she gave in to her despair for once.

"After everything we've been through," Clark whispered into her hair, "you think I would have cared?" He asked her gently.

"No but I do!" She exclaimed and Clark could feel more warm tears against her chest. "I feel like I've made such a total mess out of everything! Too dumb to stay in college, too dumb to write for anything but a tabloid or keep any rainy day money. I'm used to being on my own, calling the shots for my own life...everything that's happened since I got fired just seems like I have no control over anything, like I'm a total screw up!"

"Yeah but you're my screw up," Clark replied, teasing a little, wanting to see some of that fighting spirit because that's what Lois needed to feel right now.

"Smallville!" She burst out, swatting him and drying her eyes at the same time. "It's not funny!"

"No it's not funny," he had to agree, looking at her soberly. "In fact, I ought to kick your butt for not telling me, Lane." Clark said firmly. "I love you Lois and you can tell me anything. God knows I've told you everything there is to know about me and you not being able to pay your..."
phone bill is a lot less worse than me telling you I'm from…"

"Fresno?" Lois smiled faintly, listening to him make her feel better, thinking that it was so odd to
know that words from him, his arms around her could do so much for her wounded self esteem. Sometimes, even an indomitable will needed a little tender loving care. Why hadn't she just come clean and told him?

"Fresno?" He raised a brow.

"Nevermind," Lois replied resting her head back on his shoulder because it felt good.

"Whatever," he shook his head and continued, still holding her. It was best never to think too
much on Lois' thought processes. It was very female and usually on a realm of understanding
beyond mortal men. "The fact is you needed help and while I may not be Lex Luthor with my
trust fund but together we'd figure something out."

"Okay Smallville," Lois nodded, not admitting that just confessing and feeling him hold her was
doing a world of good. "Point taken. I am a dumb ass."

"No kidding," he smirked, thinking on her current situation, the solution to which seemed
perfectly logical, to him anyway. "Why don't you move in with me?"

Lois pulled back and stared at him. "What?"

"Move in with me, here on the farm." He repeated himself.

"Are you serious?" Lois exclaimed. "You really want me to move in here?"

The idea wasn't exactly unattractive to Lois as she instinctively swept her gaze across the Kent
homestead. She spent most of her time here anyway and she did consider the farm to be her home
already but this wasn't like before when she would crash here at the behest of the Kents while
annoying Clarkie by stealing his bedroom. This would be as Clark's girlfriend and if she stayed
here, his live-in girlfriend. No matter how simply he put it, this was a major step in their
relationship.

"This isn't because of Lana's wedding right?"

"No!" Clark exclaimed. "I want you to move in with me! We spend most of the time together
anyway, you should stay here. You wouldn't have to live under Lex's anything. Besides, this
place is too big without mom and dad anyway. I want you to and Shelby would like it." He
grinned.

"Shelby huh?" Lois stared at him. "And what about the sleeping arrangements Mr. Kent?" She
eyed him suspiciously.

"Lois," Clark gave her a look of pure innocence. "You know I'm perfect gentlemen."

"Yeah," she gave him a smirk. "We'll have to work on that."

Inside the Kent home, Valerie left her hosts to themselves as they spoke on the porch. She didn't
intrude upon their conversation but took the opportunity to ring her parents again. As anticipated,
they had already left their Seattle home to come to her in Metropolis. Fortunately, they had left
instructions for her to leave a message if Valerie could not make their meeting at the appointed
place. With relief, Valerie left them a brief message that she was staying with good people at the
Kent farm in Smallville and that she would wait for them to come get her.
Unfortunately, her parents were not the only ones listening.
The reflection of the full moon bounced off the dark finish of the black SUV upon halting on the shoulder of the quiet road. Giving the lead to the vehicle behind it to do the same, Jon Corben slid back the door and stepped out into the night air. Thick-soled army boots crunched gravel underfoot as he surveyed the terrain. Immediately assaulted by the faint scent of wheat chaff and fertilizer, he sniffled once, reminded once again why he disliked the country.

"Kill the lights," he ordered abruptly.

The lights of both SUV dimmed, one after the other, the second car following instructions without Jon needing to issue the order twice. They were professionals. Learning to anticipate problems was what made them good.

The only source of illumination he could see after they killed the lights came from the distance. Lifting the night vision binoculars to his eyes, he skimmed across the fields of corn and the farming equipment to focus on the house.

"Fuck," Corben snorted. "It's Norman Rockwell's farm house."

"The bird's there?" His second in command, Benton, a former SAS man inquired as he came up along side of Corben.

Corben did not answer immediately, searching through the windows for any sign of their quarry. The yellow country house came with numerous windows but unfortunately, curtains kept him from giving a decent visual. "I can't tell," he answered finally. "Infra-red says there are three of them there so we can assume that she's one of them."

"We should move in then," Benton declared, looking over his shoulder at the rest of the extraction team who had left the vehicles and getting prepared in silence.

"I want this done as quietly as possible," Jon retorted. "No repeats of that f**king circus in Metropolis. If those guys hadn't been killed in that mess, Mr. Canto would have done it himself."

Talk of their employer made Benton shudder. Mr. Canto was not a forgiving man. The stories Benton had heard since becoming a company employee, told him that he did not want to be on the receiving end of that wrath.

"We'll go in quiet," Benton nodded, drawing from his experience to know what kind of approach was necessary. "No attempt to engage until we have a visual and a clear shot."

"As soon as you put her down, we'll come in and retrieve you all." Corben concluded. "We'll keep her sedated until we can get her back on the jet, back to the facility. Hank will meet us there. He should be able to deal with her once they get back in a controlled environment.

"What about the others in there?" Benton indicated the bystanders who had been foolish enough to offer Valerie Beaudry shelter.

Corben turned just enough to catch Benton's eyes and said firmly, "we don't leave loose ends."

Valerie Beaudry was clearly traumatized by the circumstances had brought her to the diner this afternoon.
While Lois was burning with curiosity to ask Valerie about her origins, Clark stayed her journalistic zeal. He reminded Lois that behind Valerie's story was a person and the person needed to catch her breath after everything that had happened to her. Thus, Lois held back her questions begrudgingly and focused instead on trying to contact Valerie's parents. Meanwhile, Clark adopted the famous Kent trait of making all comers welcome in his home, just like his ma and pa had done.

He fixed dinner because he wasn't prepared to let Valerie to suffer the additional horror of Lois' cooking as well. After dinner and another attempt by Lois to contact Valerie's parents, Clark judged that Valerie was finally ready to talk.

"Still no luck?" Clark asked Lois as she came back to the dining table.

"No," Lois answered, hiding her concern from Valerie because the girl had enough issues but knew Clark would be able to see through her façade. It seemed she was incapable of hiding anything from him lately. Well for very long anyway, she thought with a slight shrug. "But Seattle is a long way and let's face it, if I were your folks and looking for you? Finding that diner all messed up like it was? If I know parents at all, they're probably at the police station trying to find out what happened and haven't had a chance to check their messages yet."

Her excuse was to allay Valerie's fears but the truth was Lois was feeling a growing apprehension at their silence. If it were her child missing, she'd be sitting on that phone like vulture over an open grave.

"I'm sure that's it," Valerie nodded, picking at her food. "Thank you for all your help," she added after a moment. "You didn't have to help me the way you have."

"Don't think twice about it Valerie," Clark said, patting her shoulder reassuringly. "You're welcome here as long as you need a place to figure things out."

Valerie's eyes misted over with emotion as she stared at the two new faces in her life that had just entered her life and offered her friendship so unexpectedly. "Thank you so much. I feel so stupid. I walked into this mess without thinking twice about what I was doing?"

"What exactly happened Valerie?" Lois asked, unable to keep herself from asking and almost kicked Clark under the table when she saw him roll his eyes slightly.

"I was so naive," Valerie shook her head, feeling embarrassed to tell the tale but recognizing that these people were risking their lives for her. They deserved the truth, most of it anyway.

Exhaling away her anxieties and drawing another deep breath to brace herself, Valerie raised her eyes to Lois and then Clark before speaking.

"I've been sick since the day I was born," she began thinking back to her life behind four walls. Locked away from the world and forgotten by anyone who remembered that she had been born even. Except for her parents, everyone had been content to forget that she existed. "My mother had been exposed to radiation, she never knew how, but when I was born, I wasn't …" Valerie couldn't bring herself to tell these two what she had been and immediately found an alternative to the truth, "I wasn't able to live outside. I had to live in a controlled environment. My parents were the only people I ever met."

"Christ that harsh," Lois winced, wondering how anyone could stand such isolation. It would have surely driven her mad.
Clark on the other hand, knew exactly what Valerie had experienced and immediately felt a sense of empathy with her. How many times had his parents faced such a dilemma when he had been growing up, without any ability to control his powers? "Go on," he said quietly.

"It was hard but my parents tried very hard to make sure I didn't feel alone," Valerie replied, feeling a deep sense of regret at how she had left them, especially when she thought of everything they had tried to do for her and her situation. It made her feel a little ashamed. "And at first it wasn't so bad. When you're little, your parents are all you ever want anyway. If I stayed a little girl, maybe it would have been so bad but when you grow up, you ask questions, you look out the window and wonder why you can't go to school like other kids. Why you can't make friends or do any of the things that are normal?"

"I know what you mean," Clark replied. "Even when you know there are good reasons for why things are that way, accepting them is another thing entirely."

"Yes," Valerie nodded, not questioning how he could appreciate her feelings but continued nonetheless. "I did make friends though, when I was older. I had pen pals and when I got my computer, I got to talk to people. That's how I met Hank."

Oh crap, Lois thought inwardly, I'll be this doesn't end well.

"Hank?" Lois asked, maintaining her expression of journalistic objectivity even though the mention of Hank and the manner in which Valerie said his name, bode not well for the rest of the story.

"Yes, Hank Cobb," she explained. "He lived in Gotham City and he understood me so well. He knew I was sick and he didn't care. You should have read some of his emails Lois," Valerie sighed in the typical rendition of lovesick girl, "it was so beautiful."

Clark wondered why he hadn't tried wooing Lana with poetry when he saw Valerie's reaction. He might have gotten a little further with his first love if he had managed to do something that corny. Of course, with Lois, a totally different approach was required. Lois had no use for poetry. Her idea of a love token was for him to not let her get killed every other week. Actually, Clark was sort of grateful for that. He really sucked at poetry.

"Oh some men sure know how to lay on the beautiful poetry," Lois retorted, trying not to sound sarcastic even though it was exuding from every word. "So what happened next?"

"Hank said he knew a cure of what was wrong with me," Valerie declared, her eyes all lit up with clear adoration for the mysterious Hank Cobb.

Even after everything she had been through, Lois could see that Valerie still loved Hank.

"He said, he'd take me to his company, they had a cure for my problem and we could get married and be together."

Lois shifted her gaze at Clark long enough for him to gauge what she thought of Hank in a single glance. Clark too, knew that Valerie had been used by someone who knew the right things to say to a young woman, desperate for an end to her loneliness.

"So you left home?" Lois asked, having heard the story all too many times. Only in those cases, the young women usually ended up on a slab in the county morgue. The world was unkind place to the innocent and while Valerie's experience did not seem pleasant, at least she was alive.

"Yes," Valerie nodded. "He came in a limousine and brought me to Gotham. His company made me better so I could go outside. Things were so good then. I was so happy and Hank said we
would get married but first I had to do a few tests. His company arranged it. At first, I didn't mind it, not at all. They had to monitor my progress so it made sense to let them examine me."

"But it didn't stop there," Clark replied. If he didn't know better, he would have thought that this sounded like something cooked up by Lex's Section 33.1.

"No," she shook her head, her expression became downcast, and "the procedures became more and more invasive, until there was pain. I didn't realise until a few days ago what they had done to me. I didn't know I could do some damage. Hank told me it had to do with the radiation that had made me sick. It made me sick but could also make me do those things."

Well that explained why Hank sought out Valerie. Chances were good that he had been waiting for the opportunity to grab her.

"So he made you go through those procedures?" Lois countered, unable to stop herself from asking. This guy was a sleaze, she thought.

"Oh no," Valerie protested. "It wasn't his fault. When he knew they were hurting me, they wouldn't let him see me and he was sent away to Metropolis. I thought I could find here but then they sent men with guns to come after me, you saw." She reminded Lois.

"These guys were serious," Lois pointed out meeting Clark's eyes.

"Right now," Valerie said exhaustedly, "I just want to go home. Maybe if I go back to Seattle, they'll stop looking for me."

Yeah right, Lois thought sardonically.

"Maybe…" Clark heard Lois say when something else caught his attention. The window shattered and in slow motion, he saw the tranquilizer dart moving through the kitchen, dragging glass behind it as it was propelled forward. It moved past him heading straight for Valerie. Clark's delayed reaction cost him only a few microseconds as he soon reached out and caught the dart in his hand before it could strike her.

"Oh my God!" Lois exclaimed as she stumbled back in her chair and Valerie let out a cry. "Clark they're here!"

"Get Valerie upstairs," Clark ordered, having no need for the girl to see him using his powers. Lois nodded and quickly ushered Valerie out of the chair. "Come on!"

"But…but…" Valerie protested, "he'll be hurt…"

"Trust me," Lois threw Clark a look, "he can take care of himself. Right?"

"Right." Clark said hastily. "Now Lois!" He snapped, "get upstairs!"

"Oh I love you when you get all caveman on me," Lois threw him wink before doing as she was told.

"What the hell was that?" Benton exclaimed with shock, having pulled the trigger of the tranquilizer rifle n what was a perfectly sweet shot only to have it thwarted by the young man next to the target. Not only had he kept Valerie from getting caught, the kid had caught it in his hand.

"Jon we got a problem!" Benton shouted into his headset.
There was a sudden rush of wind and Benton found him facing the young man who was now in front of him. Somehow, the boy had managed to get within a foot of him from the kitchen in less than a blink of an eye.

"I say you got more than one," Clark returned and tossed him through the air before Benton could utter another word.

Seeing their leader manhandled, the rest of the extraction team opened fire, riddling the farm boy from Kansas with enough lead to put down a tyrannosaurus rex. Clark saw his favourite blue t-shirt ripped to shreds and reacted by knocking down every man before they knew what had happened. Collecting all their guns at super speed, he tossed the ordinance aside.

Meanwhile Benton had regained enough of his senses after being tossed into the bushes like a rag doll to call for help.

"Jon, we need immediate extraction!"

Clark heard the call for help and immediately scanned the area for whomever Benton was talking to. It didn't take him long to find it, one of two SUVs were on the main road, a short distance from the turn off leading to the Kent homestead. The first was parked but the other was speeding across the cornfields, undoubtedly to retrieve their comrades. Wanting information and surmising the one giving the orders most likely had them, Clark ignored the SUV for the moment and raced towards the one that was still parked. If he had to, he wouldn't have any trouble catching up to it.

Corben had been monitoring the team's progress and could pin point the exact moment when the mission had gone south. It was they moment they discovered something at the Kent farm that was even more dangerous than Valerie Beaudry.

Ordering his team to immediately begin recording, Corben knew that this would interest Mr. Canto tremendously. However, to get back to make any kind of report, Jon Corben needed to hedge his bets for a clean get away. He watched the boy disarm his men after taking nearly fifty rounds at point blank range and only requiring a new change of clothing, since he suffered no other injury.

"Get ready," Jon ordered the other man in the van with him. "The kid looks fast."

Indeed, in a matter of seconds, he saw a cloud of dust leading up to the van and Jon wasted no time with any tired attempts at subterfuge. Throwing open the door to greet the young man when he arrived, Jon was the picture of confident calm. Breaking into applause, he was actually smiling when his quarry arrived.

"Bravo!" Corben exclaimed. "I've seen some meteor freaks in my time but you take the care. Super fast and invulnerable. What else you got?"

Clark came to a screeching halt, his boots creating enough friction against the gravel road to heat up somewhat. The man was dressed up like the rest of his friends, in heavy camo gear, like they were black ops guys or something. Were they government? The possibility that the government would be seizing people and doing experiments on them was enough to provoke every paranoid fear Clark had in the past.

"Who do you work for?" Clark wasted no time, grabbing the man and lifting off his feed.

"Strong too," Corben smirked. "What I'm going to get as a finder's fee for you will buy me a small frigging island."
"I won't ask again!" Clark demanded, feeling exposed by this man's attitude.

"You'll find out soon enough," Corben said confidently. "Now put me down."

"Put you down?" He stared at the man incredulously. "Why would I do that?"

"Because," Corben replied. "you've got better things to deal with than me, right now."

"What?" Clark stared at him when suddenly, he heard something that sounded like an explosion. Dropping Corben immediately, Clark sought out the source of the explosion and discovered it was not an eruption but the discharge of a rocket launcher. With his enhanced vision, it didn't take long for Clark to see where the rocket launched was heading.

Home.

"How fast can you run?" Corben asked smugly.

Clark could afford no more than an outraged glare of fury before he was running to catch the projectile that had now crossed the field between the road and the Kent house. He heard Corben calling after him.

"Until next time!"

Clark tore after the projectile, moving so fast that he was not only creating a whirlwind of dirt and vegetation behind him. The rocket was closing in on the Kent home and deciding he had no choice but to use his powers, Clark leapt into the air to intercept it. Catching the rocket seconds before it could impact against the house and take with it Lois and Valerie, Clark kept gaining altitude, leaving the farm beneath him.

He soared into the air, disappearing into the clouds and then above it to emerge into the night sky. Coming to a stop only when Smallville became indistinguishable from the rest of Kansas, Clark hurled the missile into stratosphere. He watched its progress, hurtling heaven bound until its collision with the atmospheric shield caused it to explode, lighting up the sky briefly with a brilliant flare. It could almost be considered beautiful like a shooting star if he did not remember what damage it could have done to the woman he loved.

Flying back to the farm, Clark returned to find Lois and Valerie safely hiding upstairs but Corben and his men were gone.

Several hours later, Jon Corben presented the footage he had acquired at the Kent farm to his employer, one Ian Canto at his new premises, somewhere in Metropolis. They had been based out of Gotham for the last few years but the competition in that town was too tough without a bloodbath. Canto, who preferred to maintain a low profile, decided to relocate to Metropolis.

Easing back into the plush leather chair, he studied the footage on the monitor in silence.

"I mean I've seen numerous variations of the meteor infected," Corben continued his enthusiastic commentary. "But nothing like this. We couldn't stay long, especially not after we launched the rocket so that Benton and the others could get away but he also flew. I mean if we could duplicate his powers…"

"You can't duplicate his powers," Canto said firmly, swiveling around in his chair to regard Corben.

"Why not?" Corben stared at him puzzled. "We've done so before."
"True," Canto nodded, "but you're not looking at someone who is meteor infected. Find out everything you can about who he is. We have to do this very carefully. I want him alive and completely neutralized."

"Well it'll take some figuring out," Corben remarked thinking about the subject as if he were on safari about to coral a particularly exotic specimen.

"Actually it won't," Canto remarked, stroking the goatee on his thirty something face. "However, our labs do have what you need. Ask them for everything under the codename 'Rao' and report back to me."

More curious than ever, Corben nodded. "Rao it is."
A few days after the attack on the farm and the aborted attempt to kidnap Valerie, Lois hung up the phone and stared across the kitchen of Kent home with a look of ashen horror. Clark, who had been reluctant to leave either woman after the failed abduction, caught the expression and knew immediately something terrible had happened.

Rising up from his chair at the kitchen table where he was trying once again (unsuccessfully) to fill in those college applications, Clark looked at Lois and asked, "what is it?"

Lois shifted her gaze to the window at the sight of Valerie returning from her walk around the farm with Shelby. The girl had never owned a pet before and had been delighted by the dog and Shelby was equally happy to be paid so much attention. She stared for a few seconds at Valerie before looking to Clark again.

"That was a friend of my dad's, whose now a cop at Seattle PD," she spoke, her voice strained, provoking Clark's anxiety even more. "They have two bodies in their morgue, a man and a woman who were murdered on their way to the airport. Their bodies were set on fire and dumped in an empty field outside of town. There was no ID on them so it took a few days for the cops to get a positive identification through dental records," Lois blinked, her eyes misting over. "It's Valerie's parents."

"Jesus," Clark whispered and crossed the floor to Lois, taking her in his arms for an embrace. Like her, he felt a deep sense of loss for these people he had never even met Yet he felt like he knew through their daughter's description of them as wonderful people whose only crime seemed to be caring too much for her welfare.

"They were shot first," Lois continued, grateful for his touch. "Execution style, one shot to back of the head. God, Clark, how are we going to tell her?"

"I don't know," he answered and that was the truth. Valerie would be devastated. She already blamed herself for letting these people into her life and now theirs. How was she going to stand the news that her parents were murdered because of this as well?

"But," he said pulling away from Lois so that she would look at him and know how adamant he was on this point, "you two need to get out of here,"

"No way!" Lois declared with characteristic vehemence. " Those guys saw what you can do Clark, you're as much of a target for them as Valerie! I'm not going anywhere without you."

"Lois, you know what these people are capable of. If they're willing to kill Valerie's parents, they're not going to have any trouble doing the same to you."

"Clark these people are professional hitters," Lois continued to protest, "They knew how to find us, where do you think that we could hide that we'd be safe for long? The safest place right now is here with you."

Clark wasn't so sure. The man who launched a goddamn rocket launcher at his house was hardly fazed by what Clark could do and had been well prepared to deal with him that night. Clark feared that the guy might get the upper hand again and this time he'd lose more than just the house but Lois and maybe his own life. They knew what he could do and were practically salivating at the thought of 'acquiring' him like they wanted Valerie. It stabbed at Clark's worst fears to be trapped like some lab specimen but he had to protect Lois and Valerie.
"No it isn't Lois," Clark declared. "I won't let what happened to Valerie's parents' happen to you! You said it yourself these guys are professionals, they won't quit and they know how to find us. I've got to get you both somewhere safe before anything else happens."

Lois opened her mouth to protest when she stopped short at the sight of Valerie standing at the door. They had been so busy arguing that they didn't notice her enter the house.

"What happened to my parents?" The girl asked, hand still on the door knob, her eyes round with dreaded expectation.

"I'm so sorry Valerie," Lois spoke softly, unable to lie and felt the girl's pain more closely than she would like. "They're dead."

Valerie uttered a short cry of anguish before turning on her heels, running out the way she came. Clark was about to go after her when Lois stopped him, "I'll go." She whispered before hurrying after the distraught girl.

Valerie didn't run far. She got only as far as the field beyond the barn. Dropping to her knees, the girl let out a furious, tortured wail. Of course, screams by Valerie were never that simple. Once again that thunderous roar filled Lois' ears, making her stumble backward, like a small bomb had gone off. The tractor parked in the field ahead of Valerie, was tossed through the air like it weighed nothing. Trees rustled their leaves violently and corn stalks bent at an angle in the face of the sonic blast.

Clark rushed out at the sound of her cry and saw his father's tractor in flight. "Woah." He said shocked, having not seen Valerie's ability until now. Racing across the field after the piece of equipment he frankly could not afford to replace, Clark left Lois to deal with Valerie who had not maintained her sonic assault beyond that one outburst.

Lois got to her feet and approached Valerie who had crumbled to the ground, sobbing in tormented anguish. She was crying hard when Lois found her, shuddering on her hands and knees. Lois felt a wave of helpless because there was nothing she could do to assuage the girl's pain.

"It's my fault," Valerie sobbed hysterically. "If I didn't run away from home, if I didn't call them, they'd be alive! Momma, daddy," she cried, "I'm so sorry! I'm sorry!" She buried her face in her hands, gasping in loud, heaving sobs.

Lois wrapped an arm around Valerie's shoulder, having come to care for this lonely young woman she met only a few days ago. "It's not your fault," Lois found that she was too was crying a little because the pain before her was so great, so deep. "Don't ever think that Valerie. Those bastard did this to them, not you. Nothing in the world would have stopped your parents from trying to find you, those animals knew that."

The words were strong and true but they were meaningless to Valerie who was already convinced that she had brought this menace down on herself and now her parents. Seeing Valerie's sorrow stabbed at the heart of Lois Lane and her own tears were not of anguish but of rage. Too many times since coming to Smallville had seen powerful men escape unscathed for their crimes. Their wealth and resources ensured they were unaccountable to anyone, free to destroy lives with their cheque books.

Lois swore to herself that the men who had destroyed Valerie's life, including Hank Cobb wherever he was, would pay for this. They wouldn't get away this, she wouldn't let them. Those rock spiders weren't going to go to ground so they could do this someone else. Of this Lois promised herself and Valerie, silently.
Clark had wanted to approach but held back because he had no idea what to say to Valerie. Leaving Lois to deal with the grief stricken young woman, Clark walked slowly back to the house, his mind a storm of thoughts. This was too much for him. He didn't know how to fight an enemy like this and he didn't have time to learn. Stumbling about like an amateur, as was painfully evident when they fired a scud at his home, he was going to stop neither Lois nor Valerie from getting killed.

Grabbing his cell phone off the coffee table, Clark flipped it open and sought out the number he needed before holding the phone to his ear. It only rang twice before the person on the other end picked up.

"Bruce," Clark announced himself as he stared at Lois continuing to hold Valerie in her arms as the girl sobbed into her shoulder, "I need your help."

The small jet landed in Smallville sometime before dark.

The private airstrip belonged to a local crop duster who had preferred keeping his plane, the source of his livelihood, where he could keep an eye on it. For the use of the airstrip for this evening, he would be able to take his wife on that cruise to the Caribbean that she had always wanted but could never afford. By the time the Lear landed at the Windgate property, Virgil and Audra were already on their way to Metropolis to rendezvous with the Princess Star for two weeks of tropical fun.

Jon Corbett had spent most of the flight re-reading the file that had been provided to him by his employer, still coming to grips with what he had learned. He had made peace with the fact that the world was nowhere as black and white as it appeared that amazing things happened. In his line of work, hunting down meteor freaks, the bizarre was more or less a given and yet, even he had been astonished by what the file had revealed.

Aliens walked among them.

They looked just like everyone else, lived mundane lives, had families and grew old. However, the façade didn't hide what they were, powerful beings who could destroy humanity if they felt like it. The beings from the planet Krypton were such menaces, capable of powers Corbett couldn't even begin to imagine. The boy that he had encountered at the farm was one such specimen. Corbett had seen him fly, had seen him move fast enough to catch a missile launched from a rocket launcher, strong enough to stop it in its tracks. He wasn't even a man yet.

What else might he be able to do?

Corbett had no idea how his employer Mr. Canto had acquired the information provided for the capture of the young man they now knew to be Clark Kent of a Smallville, an orphan adopted by Jonathan and Martha Kent, some eighteen years ago. However, wherever the information came from, it did tell Corbett how to deal with a youth who was invulnerable, capable of flight, stronger than a hundred men and moved faster than the speed of sound.

He was careful however, not to reveal the truth to his men about Mr. Kent's extra-terrestrial origins. There was no need for it and frankly, he wasn't certain how they were going to react. It was one thing to mine homegrown freaks but quite another to deal with an alien. Corbett wanted to get the job done without complications. As far his men were concerned, they were bringing in just another meteor freak.

There was no reason for them to think any differently.
"So we're taking both of them?" Benton asked, having sufficiently recovered from his encounter with Kent as they strode away from the plane after disembarking.

"Yeah," Corbett nodded; having received clear warnings from Hank Cobb, that 'f**king up the retrieval of that flaky bitch' would end in termination of his contract. Corbett understood this had nothing to do with receiving a pink slip. "Management wants them both although I get the impression that the boy is the higher priority."

"No shit," Benton snorted, remembering what it felt like to be tossed like a rag doll. Benton was almost six five and the kid had swatted him aside as if he weighed nothing. "How we going to do it?"

"We're not going to approach like before," Corbett replied as he reached the SUVs that were waiting for them. His men had started loading the equipment in the back of the dark vehicle. "He can hear us coming, probably how he managed to stop the tranq dart before it took out Beaudry."

Benton nodded, realising that too made sense. They had given a warning of their presence when he pulled the trigger that night and still the young man had heard him. "So we hit him at sniper range," he stated. "Although I don't know how much good that will do. We empty a full magazine into him that night and he didn't have a scratch on him."

Corbett smiled reassuringly, "don't worry, he can be hurt. You just need to know what kind of bullets to use."

Reaching into the folds of his dark jacket, he produced what looked like a cigarette case with a dark metal finish.

"What's that?" Benton asked with curiosity as Corbett flipped the case open and presented.

The taller man paused a moment and stared at Corbett in puzzlement. "Seriously?" He asked, reaching into the case to pick up one of the bullets. "This looks like is made from some kind of crystal. Its going to shatter the minute it hits him."

"I've been told that it won't," Corbett replied confidently.

Benton looked at the dozen projectiles in the case somewhat dubiously before asking again, "what's with the blue?"

Bruce arrived at the Kent farm a few hours after Clark's call.

He had been in Metropolis at the time but Clark's explanation of the situation was enough to cause Bruce to drive immediately to the small Kansas town. Calling Chloe to tell her where he would be when she returned home from Metropolis that evening, Bruce wasted no time driving to the Kent farm. Clark's telephone call had only been long enough to provide a summary of his situation but it told Bruce volumes. It wasn't often that Clark asked for help or for that matter needed it, yet something in his voice put Bruce on guard immediately.

If he didn't know better, he'd almost thought that Clark was afraid.

What could frighten an invulnerable Kryptonian caused Bruce enough concern to leave Gotham immediately and come to his friend's assistance. Since South America, Bruce Wayne's priorities had shifted somewhat. Although he was still determined to embark on the great crusade of his life, he had to confess, he was somewhat surprised that he would not be entering it alone. Bruce had yet to unveil this part of his future to Chloe but he sensed that when he did, she would not object.
Like Chloe, Clark Kent had become the best friend he thought was beyond his reach. Despite the
difference in their manner, *day and night*, Chloe called it; they shared a common ground in their
sense of right and wrong. While Bruce found Clark a little naïve at times, he also envied the
younger man for his ability to see the good in humanity when all Bruce could see was the evil. In
addition, Bruce found a friend with whom he could be himself with, that didn't require him
playing the part of the billionaire playboy, which could be tiresome after awhile.

"How is she?" Bruce asked as he sat across Clark at the Kent's kitchen table, nursing a freshly
made cup of coffee.

"Crushed," Clark answered simply before glancing upwards, "Lois is upstairs with her."

Bruce empathized with the young woman even if he had yet to meet her. Clark had filled him in
on the loss of the girl's parents and that particular wound was something Bruce was very familiar
with. "Good idea,' Bruce commented. "Anguish and guilt is not a good combination right now."

Clark could agree with that. "Did you get anything on that name I gave you?"

Bruce nodded, "Hank Cobb, or rather Henry Cobb works for a bio-technical company known as
Cadmus that is part of the De'Saad Corporation." He recited. "There isn't much on De'Saad. The
company keeps its information very close to the breast. There's an address in Gotham and it's only
recently relocated its office to Metropolis. I've asked Lucius to make some inquiries into De'Saad,
men talk more on the golf course than they do in stock reports." He concluded as a matter of
factly.

"Bio-technical?" Clark mused, aware that some of Lex Luthor's companies acted as front to his
more elicit projects, like Section 33.1. Perhaps this Cadmus operated in much the same way. "It
would make sense I suppose."

"Acquiring specimens to improve the profit share of a health based company?" Bruce nodded in
agreement, "I think it's a definite possibility. You and I should probably take a trip to Metropolis
and check out their facility, after we get Lois and Valerie out of here."

Clark paused a moment, hearing the wheels of a car in the distance, "someone's here," he tensed
and immediately stood up from his chair.

"Who?" Bruce asked following suit.

Clark saw a silver Yaris turning up the road and relaxed a little, dropping his enhanced vision to
look at Bruce. "It's Chloe." He declared.

Bruce felt that familiar sensation of warmth whenever Chloe was near and immediately rebuked
himself for getting distracted from the situation ahead. "Have you spoke to Lois about your plan?"

"Not yet," Clark answered quietly, not wishing to be overheard just yet. "She thinks I called you
over to figure things out."

"Well that would make sense in any case," Bruce added with a hint of smug teasing as he saw
Chloe's vehicle appear down dirt track leading to the house. "You realise she's not going to go
quietly."

"Like I'm not use to *that*," Clark snorted as he heard Chloe pull her car to a stop and started
towards the front door to greet her. Bruce did the same, his own brooding demeanor thawing just
enough to let him feel eagerness to see his girl.

Clark had swung open the door when suddenly, his enhanced hearing heard an explosion of
sound in the distance. It took his brain a fraction of a second to realise that it was a gunshot but he couldn't tell where it was coming from, nor had he had any time to do the same before the bullet met its mark. They had to be shooting at Chloe, he thought to himself and sped forward without second thought, determined to reach the blonde reporter before the bullet intended for her, did.

"Chloe get down!" Clark shouted a warning.

Chloe was directly in its path and Clark wasted no time, getting in front of it, expecting the projectile to bounce off his chest.

Except that it didn't.

There was a moment of exquisite pain where Clark Kent felt the wind knocked out of him. He staggered back a step or two, uncertain what had happened, until he looked down and saw the centre of his white t-shirt beginning to bloom from a tiny stain of crimson. With morbid fascination, he watched the red tide spread across his chest and thought distantly, I think I've been shot.

"CLARK!" Chloe screamed as she saw him going down.

Bruce was already on the move, bolting forward at lightning speed. "Get in the house!" He ordered straight away as Clark collapsed into the dirt.

"Oh my God," Chloe stuttered in shock, frozen to the spot.

"NOW!" He barked and sent her scurrying as he skidded to the ground next to his friend.

Blinded by fear and horror, Chloe stumbled through the door of the Kent house and was immediately greeted by Lois tearing down the stairs.

"What's happened?" She demanded. "I heard a gunshot!"

Lois shifted her gaze to the front lawn and froze when she saw Bruce kneeling over Clark's form. "Smallville," she whispered with a strained gasp before descending into panic. "SMALLVILLE!"

"Lois don't go out there!" Chloe grabbed her arm as Lois made for the door. "It's not safe!"

"I DON'T CARE!" She fairly roared. "Clark!" Lois yanked her arm free and raced out the front door.

Meanwhile Bruce was trying to examine the extent of Clark's injuries to determine if he could be moved. With snipers out there somewhere, Bruce realised he might not have a choice in the matter. Clark was drifting in and out of consciousness and Bruce could tell from the amount of blood loss that Clark had been hit in the anterior chest. If Clark hadn't run right in front of it, Bruce suspected the shot would be disabling not fatal. However, his attempt to save Chloe had ensured that it could well be that.

"Clark can you hear me?" Bruce tried to determine how much blood loss there was.

Clark blinked twice and Bruce could tell immediately that he had trouble focusing by the dilation of his pupils. He was going into shock, Bruce realised.

"I think I got shot," Clark manage to mutter somewhat incoherently..

"Always a genius," Bruce answered quickly as he decided he had to risk moving Clark. The men who had done this would soon be here and Bruce had a better chance of protecting Clark and the
others, if they were inside. "Come on big guy, I think we've had enough daylight today." Hauling Clark to his feet, Bruce supported his frame by putting Clark's arm around his shoulder and lifting. His friend was almost a dead weight with size 14 boots dragging across the ground as Bruce took him inside.

"Clark!" Lois burst out of the doorway and ran towards them both. "Oh Jesus baby," she cried at seeing the front of Clark's white t-shirt almost completely soiled with blood.

"Lois, get in the house!" Bruce ordered. "They haven't fired second shot because they're coming to collect him."

"Oh God," Lois raised her eyes to the distance, "those bastard!" She screamed in outrage before regaining her senses. This wasn't helping. She had to be calm. She was no good to Clark if she wasn't calm. Wiping her eyes with the back of her forearm she took Clark's dangling own and put it around her shoulder, helping Bruce move him into the house.

Once past the doorway, Chloe slammed the door shut behind them. "I've called the sheriff."

"They'll be gone before he gets here," Bruce said shortly. "Clear the kitchen table!".

Chloe nodded blindly and hurried to the table, yanking the table cloth and everything with like a clumsy magician's trick. No sooner than it was emptied, Bruce and Lois lay Clark down flat on his back. The back of Clark's head hit the wooden surface with a thud as he stared at the ceiling, his eyes were no longer focusing.

"Clark, stay with me!" Lois demanded as she clutched his hand by his side and leaned over him while Bruce examined the extent of his wound. However, Clark wasn't in any condition to listen, reacting to her voice only on a instinctual level. "Smallville, you listen to my voice okay? I'm right here baby, I'm not going anywhere," her voice was cracking as she saw the love of her life before her, his life's blood all over his hands. "So don't you dare leave me."

The damage was as bad as Bruce feared. He was no doctor but his extracurricular activities gave him more than a working knowledge of anatomy. The position of the bullet hole in the anterior meant that Clark's pericardium was probably penetrated and thus spurting blood with every beat of his heart. The diagnosis was not good.

"He's going to into shock," Bruce said grimly. "If we don't get him to a hospital now, he's going to die."
It was her fault.

Casting her gaze back to the sequence of events that led to this moment, like a fisherman casting his net to the sea, Valerie Beaudry found herself facing the irrefutable truth that would not be denied. Try as she might to heed the words of Lois Lane and Clark Kent, spoken out of kindness and pity, Valerie knew that she and she alone was responsible for the wretched place she now found herself, the wretched place she had consigned her parents with one act of rebellion.

While she had never imagined the consequences of her flight from home could amount to this, Valerie had suspected the nature of the men she was dealing with; the men who were so determined to reacquire her. She had not thought of the danger to her family. All she had thought about was finding Hank and escaping her tormentors. Not once did she think that the price of her freedom was the sacrifice of her parents.

After learning of their fates, Valerie had shut down mentally.

It was the only way to receive such news. She had cried and wailed, sobbed in anguish but despair and none of these things had been able to make the truth any easier to bear. In the end, she took the only course left to her; she disconnected herself from it. She sent the pain somewhere far and distant, enclosing it with high walls of indifference until she could feel nothing. Behind those walls, the pain was manageable and her sin not so overwhelming.

Hiding herself away in Clark Kent's room the way she had been isolated for the first two decades of her life, Valerie half listened to Lois Lane's attempt to assuage her guilt. Even though the wounds were too fresh for Lois' words of comfort to affect her anguish significantly, Valerie was grateful for the effort. In the face of so much danger, the duo had taken a step forward to protect her, for no other reason than she needed help.

She had been in the room when she heard the gunshots. Even through her grief and self-pity, the crack of a high-powered rifle had sliced through the air, alerting both Valerie and Lois to its presence. Lois had stood up while Valerie lifted her face from the pillow she had been sobbing into, looking at each other with apprehension at the knowledge that the men who had tried to take her a few days before, were back.

However, the exchange was brief because then there was a new voice. A scream of fear calling Clark's name and Lois' face drained of colour. Since meeting the woman, Valerie had come to believe there was nothing that could obliterate the veneer of unflappable spirit that Lois Lane seem to wear around herself like armour. Seeing it shatter like glass when an unfamiliar voice screamed Clark's name, shook Valerie to the core.

Lois had bolted out of the room, without looking back to Valerie, leaving the younger woman stunned in her wake. Valerie swung her feet over the edge of the bed and dried her eyes. Outside, the sound of the rifle and the scream that followed it had dissipated into a cacophony of chattering, frantic voices. Valerie was suddenly gripped with the fear that she had visited the same doom on her new friends as she had on her parents.

Descending the stairs, Valerie saw her worst fears realized when she saw Lois, along with two new faces she did not recognise in the kitchen. The petite blond was talking on the phone rather excitedly while the man was standing over Clark Kent who was lying across the kitchen table, bloody and terribly wounded. Lois held Clark's hand as she hunched over him, her fingers and her clothes smeared with blood.
"Come on Smallville," Lois was crying out frantically. "Stay with me! Listen to my voice! Do you hear me? Listen to my voice! BRUCE…he's losing consciousness!" Lois wailed helplessly. Her panic was all consuming and on a woman like Lois, it was also quite unnerving.

The kind of help that Clark needed was beyond Bruce Wayne. He did what he could for Clark but knew it wasn't enough. Basic or even advanced first aid was not going to be of any help in this instance. Clark needed surgery, the kind of surgery that could repair major organ and arterial damage. To say nothing of the fact that while Clark looked human, he was not and there were aspects to Kryptonian physiology that Bruce simply did not have the knowledge to attend.

"I've got 911!" Chloe declared to all who were present. She managed a brief glance at Valerie before returning her attention to the phone. "Yes, at the Kent Farm," she spoke to the operator. "There's been a shooting! We need someone out here right away!"

Valerie turned away unable to look anymore. Instead, she drifted to the doorway feeling a bubble of rage grow inside her, needing expression, wanting vengeance.

"WHAT THE f**k WAS THAT?" John Corben bellowed at the sniper who had taken the shot at Clark Kent.

"He heard it coming," the man said coldly, not about to explain himself as John stood over him, hunched over the rifle he had used to deliver the blue projectile to Clark's Kent's body.

"Of course he heard it coming!" John exclaimed. "I gave you the files! Did you read them or did you use them to wipe your ass?"

"He threw himself in front of the bullet!" The sniper growled, standing up to face down Corben. "I was aiming to wing him but the stupid bastard moved!"

"You f**king moron!" John barked almost ready to beat the shit out of the man for this blunder. Mr. Canto was not going to be happy at this turn of events. They were meant to bring back the Kryptonian, not kill him.

"John! John! Calm down!" Benton stepped between the two men, creating a barricade with his large frame. "We've got a mission to complete."

John pulled away seething, as did his would be opponent as Benton continued speaking. "It was bad luck John. He heard the bullet and must have thought we were targeting the girl since they can't hurt him."

John listened to Benton's explanation and knew that his trusted lieutenant was correct in the assessment of the facts. Even with his great speed, Clark Kent would not have time to recognise that the bullet was made of the same substance as his planet of origin. He would not have guessed the danger until it was too late.

"Okay," John said calming down, "you're right, we still have a mission to complete. We go in and get the both of them. The situation isn't totally screwed. My intelligence tells me if you remove the bullet, his body will heal."

"He'll be pretty pissed," Benton pointed out.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it." John retorted.
"Bruce," Chloe stepped forward hanging up the phone. "We have to take the bullet out."

"We can't," Bruce stated, looking at Chloe. "It's not just a matter of taking the bullet out; it's pierced through his organs. He needs a surgeon."

"I know," Chloe nodded, looking at Clark and convinced that this was the only course of action left to them. "The bullet is kryptonite Bruce," she looked at him imploringly, certain that because of Clark's condition, the thought had not occurred to Lois yet. "The longer it stays inside of him, the worse he's going to be. He won't survive long enough for the paramedics to get here."

Bruce stared at her for a moment and then considered what he knew of the substance that Clark was so vulnerable to. Kryptonite, as long as it was in close proximity, Clark was in danger. Once the bullet was out, his natural healing abilities would kick into place. If they got him outside, into the sunlight, where Clark had once said his powers drew their strength, it might even aid the process.

Possibilities aside, Bruce knew they didn't have a choice. Chloe was right, if they didn't take it out now, he'd die of Kryptonite poisoning anyway. Right now, they really had nothing to lose by trying.

"Alright," he said quickly, "go find some alcohol. See if Mrs. Kent has some kind of a First Aid kit lying around. We need something to sterilize the wound."

"Can you do this?" Lois raised her eyes to Bruce, finally gaining enough awareness of the conversation to respond. Clark was no longer coherent and the grip he had on her hand was barely registering, serving to heighten Lois' fears even more.

"I don't know," Bruce answered, feeling helpless because he couldn't give her a surer response than that. For a man accustomed to being in control of his situation, this was territory he had no wish to revisit. He had no desire to see another person he cared about dying because of a bullet.

No, that wasn't going to happen. He wouldn't let it. "He's not going to die," Bruce said firmly, as much for her as it was for him. "Not if I can help it."

Bruce started searching the drawers in the Kent kitchen, looking for the tools he would need to do this. As it was, he was mindful that they would soon have company. The men who had done this to Clark would soon be coming for him. His best hope was to get Clark on his feet before that happened. If they arrived here before the Kryptonite bullet was removed, it was more than likely the bastards would leave it in there just to make sure Clark was manageable until they place him in a controlled environment.

In one of the drawers, he found a set of needle nosed pliers, most likely used for odd jobs around the house. It looked relatively clean but Bruce took the precaution of holding it under the tap, letting the hot water sterilize it somewhat.

Chloe came hurrying back into the room a moment later, carrying a small white box with a red cross. "I found this in the bathroom," she announced, putting the first aid kit down and flipping over the lid. "Its has iodine in it. Guess Mrs. Kent got used to mending a lot of injuries over the years."

That had to be an understatement of the century, Lois thought as she considered all the things she had seen in this house since she arrived here.

"Clark," Lois spoke to him, desperate to have him hear her, not to slip away into some darkness where she would never find him again. "We're going to help you okay?" She held his hand
against her cheek, "please hang on for me Smallville, please." Her voice was breaking again and she was trying not to feel so pathetically helpless. The man she loved was dying before her eyes and her inability to do anything to stop it was almost as bad as seeing him in this state.

Bruce returned to the table with Chloe and regarded them both seriously, "I'm going to need your help holding him down. If I have to do this, it has to be fast and its going to hurt. Being invulnerable as he has been, he probably has a low pain threshold. For the record, its a bad idea trying removing this bullet without the right skills or the tools but we don't have a choice it seems. Those men will be coming back; we can't let them take Clark with this bullet inside of him."

"Then stop talking and let's do it," Lois said firmly, straightening up and wiping her eyes. Time to gain control of her emotions, she told herself. Clark needed her together, not this desperate wreck. "Chloe, you want to get his other side?" She asked quietly.

Chloe gave her cousin a look of admiration. "I'm on it," she smiled and rounded the table to hold down Clark's shoulder and arm. Chloe kept her eyes fixed on Bruce because looking at Clark was too hard. The playboy billionaire with the hidden depths had yielded an unexpected bonus, the strength that could bolster even her formidable spirit. She could lean on Bruce, the way she was never able to lean on Clark. Right now, she relied on Bruce to keep her strong.

Bruce drew in a breath and upon exhaling, moved quickly. Tearing Clark's blood stained shirt apart, he used the fabric to clean away the blood that had caked around the entry wound. By now, Clark was completely unconscious despite Lois' attempt to keep him lucid. He did not offer any protest when Bruce dragged fabric over his ruined flesh.

"Oh my God…" Lois gasped seeing the bullet wound and its proximity to Clark's heart. Her face melted into an expression of horror and panic.

"Come on Lane," Chloe snapped her out of it with a sharp rebuke. "Hold together here."

Lois snapped to with a nod, looking away from it and into her lover's face. Unconscious, he looked almost as if he was sleeping and Lois was grateful that he could not see what was happening to him.

"Okay," Bruce looked at the ragged hole, not large than quarter against Clark's skin. "Hold him." He ordered and without wasting any time, inserted the length of the long nose pliers into the wound, careful to follow the bullet's path into Clark's chest without causing any further damage.

Unconscious or not, the pain registered and Clark came back to life suddenly, eyes snapping open as he uttered a sharp groan of pain. He attempted to move which only cause Chloe and Lois to hold him down harder.

"KEEP HIM STILL!" Bruce snapped, yet to feel the fragment that was causing so much damage as he probed deeper.

"Stay still Smallville," Lois whispered in his ear, even if Clark was beyond hearing. "You need to stay down." It was killing her to make him go through this but like Chloe, she knew it was the only way. They had to get that thing out of him!.

"Bruce can you find it?" Chloe asked frantically, trying not to let her own panic run with her.

Bruce Wayne's hands were covered in blood, as the wound pulsed out fresh blood with the intrusion of metal. It splattered across his shirt, with spots on his face and yet he was determined. After a moment, he felt the pliers brush against something hard, something not bone or flesh. Fingers moving with a surgeon's precision, he probed a little more before realising he had what he
sought. Wasting no time, he clamped onto the projectile with the pliers and extracted it out gently, struggling against Clark’s writhing reaction to the pain.

After what felt like an eternity, the bullet that may yet kill Clark Kent, made its appearance into the light of day but instead of a piece of green meteor rock, Bruce found himself staring at something completely unexpected.

"What is that?" Chloe asked first. Clark stopped struggling after the bullet was removed, lapsing into unconsciousness with an exhausted groan.

"I don't know," Bruce confessed staring at the small fragment for a moment, his mind making several leaps as he analysed everything that had happened since Clark was hit and maybe a few events before that. Those men had seen what Clark could do and needed a way to neutralize them. Bruce had made a few preliminaries studies into kryptonite since meeting Clark. He knew that save this curious fragments of a dead planet, nothing else on Earth was able to harm Clark Kent. Occam's razor said that 'All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best' and it certainly was true now, Bruce thought. This fragment was kryptonite but it was of a kind that Clark Kent had never seen before.

With everything that was taking place in the kitchen, it was perfectly understandable that no one noticed Valerie Beaudry stepping unto the porch of the Kent home. She could hear everything that was going inside but made no move to intervene. They didn't need her there. Where they needed her was out here, keeping watch for the men who had done this to Clark. She kept herself hidden in the corner of the porch, obscured by a rose bush that provided just enough cover to ensure she would not be seen by any comers.

Inside, she felt strangely clear. She knew was she needed to do now, what steps she had to protect her friends. They would not suffer the same fate as her parents, of this Valerie was determined. She waited patiently for the enemy to arrive, certain that it wouldn't be long since they wouldn't give up their blood hound search for her. A minute passed and then another, until ten had ticked by without Valerie making a move. She ignored the stiffness in her limbs as she crouched down low, waiting.

Eventually they did come as she expected, a dozen of them.

Valerie peered through the bushes, watching them approach with their rifles and their restraints. The anger surface inside of her again, remembering the tests, the agonies she endured every day, the parents they had stolen from her and finally the friends wanted to help. Allowing them to close in, she became the spider in the web, waiting for her prey. When they were almost to the porch, Valerie stood up suddenly.

She gave them just enough time to react to her presence before she opened her mouth and screamed.

Behind her, the window blinds shuddered violently as glass shattered in places. The vibration of her cry shook the house perilously and Valerie moved off the porch, maintaining the deafening pitch while descending the steps leading to the grass. For once, she was using her abilities instead of allowing them to rule her, directing the pitch of it with deadly precision.

The men who attempted to fire their tranquilisers at her were swatted away by the sonic burst. Thrown so far into the air she knew that when they landed, they would not get up again. Not easily anyway. Every thing that was not bolted down, tractors, farm machinery, fence posts and mailboxes, were swept away with the tidal wave of that cry. She screamed until they stopped
coming, until they were gone entirely from her sight.

She stopped screaming when they were all gone, when all that was left was the wreckage that might have easily been mistaken for a tornado's destructive trail. Valerie collapsed onto the ground, exhausted but content that for the moment, the people who had tried to harm her and her friends, were gone.

"What in the hell was that?" Chloe asked after she had picked herself up from the floor. The Kent kitchen was a mess. The mysterious tremors that had shaken the house to its foundations had finally ceased. It had come out of nowhere and caught them all by surprised, making a situation that was already rife with insanity even worse. Dusting herself off, she looked around the Kent home and winced. The floor was strewn with objects that had shattered against the floor, books had fallen from their shelves an the house looked like someone had picked it up and shook it like a baby's rattle.

Lois, who was ordered to get down low during the commotion, stood up similarly shaken, still clutching Clark's hand. "It's Valerie." She explained breathlessly. "She must slipped out while we were trying to help Clark."

At the mention of his name, Lois turned hastily to her lover to update herself on his condition. Fortunately, his unconscious state allowed him to remain oblivious to what had happened. Bruce had shielded Clark with his upper body when the tremors had started, protecting him from any falling debris. For now, the only thing threatening Clark's life was the damage done by the bullet.

Her answer coincided with Valerie's return to the house. The young woman was sedate, frighteningly so and her expression sent a shudder through Lois. She dreaded to think what sight would greet them when they stepped outside.

"They've gone now," Valerie explained quietly. "I made them go away."

Chloe went to the window and peered through the curtains. What she saw was the aftermath of what looked like a hurricane. There were no sign of the men who had shot Clark. Judging by the mess outside, tractors had tipped over, farm machinery had been blow away, she wouldn't be surprised if those men were in the next county by now.

She hoped they broke every damn bone in their body, Chloe thought with a surge of anger.

Bruce however, was not about to assume they were safe from anything. Those men still knew where to find Clark and even if they didn't get him now, they'd come back in force. The best plan right now, was to not be here when that happened.

Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved his car keys and tossed them at Lois, "get my car started," he instructed as he prepared to move Clark. "We're leaving. Chloe, pack a small bag for Clark and then you and Valerie can follow me and Lois in your car to the hospital."

"Pack a bag?" Chloe stared at him.

"Clark's not coming back," Bruce said lifting Clark's arm, "Not until I deal with those sons of bitches. They've hurt my friend and pissed me off in the process. Believe me," he spoke with an expression of ice that was almost as frightening as what Valerie had done outside, "that is not a good thing to do... ever."
Flight

Thank God his car was still there, Bruce Wayne thought as he stepped out into the daylight.

Fortunately when Bruce arrived at the farm today, he had thought enough to park around the back with a mind to entering through the kitchen entrance. A thing most people were regular visitors to the Kents were accustomed to doing. Furthermore, he had no desire to give the press stalkers who had been following him around of late a reason to look too closely at his friendship with Clark Kent. In exposing their relationship to the world, Chloe's privacy had been lost, with the world watching everything she did with avid interest. Bruce wanted Chloe to have one place in the world she could come to without worrying about a lens snapping the moment.

With every detail of her life scrutinized and dissected by the medial, she needed one place that was untouched by the madness outside.

After Valerie's onslaught against the men who had shot Clark and sought to abduct them both, Chloe's Yaris was somewhere in the next state. With both cars belonging to Lois and Bruce parked in the back, Chloe had been forced to park in the front. The result of which had the vehicle swept away along with the small force had attempt to take the farm. Valerie's formidable abilities had given them some breathing room but Bruce held no illusions that those men wouldn't have contingency plans. They were professional contractors and built their trade on always having contingency plans.

While Chloe and Valerie hurried to pack their bags, Bruce and Lois moved Clark outside. Chloe's instructions had been clear, Clark needed sunlight to restore himself. Bruce had removed the blue projectile from his body but it was the sun, Chloe explained, that was the real source of Clark's powers. To heal fast, he needed it to recharge.

Clark was still unconscious but this wasn't entirely a bad thing.

Bruce had performed surgery using instruments that were not even close to adequate for tending injured flesh. Furthermore, they had nothing resembling painkillers and the depth of the wound would have ensured Clark would experience extreme pain if he were conscious. Although Bruce could easily carry Clark on his own, he enlisted Lois' help to ensure he didn't aggravate Clark's injuries any more than it was.

Besides, it was good to give Lois something to do.

The strain on her face showed even though she was trying very hard to hide it. This was a woman who didn't wear her heart on her sleeve and it wasn't the first time that Bruce considered that it must be quite something to win this girl's utter devotion. He suspected that Clark had not done it with his abilities. Clark's idealist was the perfect complement to Lois' cynicism, the way Bruce's own darkness was to Chloe's blinding light.

"Do you think they're still out there?" Lois asked as they carried Clark into the small patch of grass baking under the afternoon sun, beyond the kitchen door.

"Yes," Bruce said tight lipped, no hesitation in his reply. "The men that Valerie dealt with were on foot. They've got cars on the highway." He didn't say it as a possibility but rather fact. "They had to get Clark and Valerie out of here somehow."

"Jesus," Lois hissed. "We have to get out of here." She muttered.
"One thing at a time," Bruce retorted as they lay Clark down. The front of his chest was a mass of ruined flesh. Bruce had patched him as best as he could following the removal of the projectile but he was no surgeon.

The sunlight bathed Clark Kent's skin as he placed flat on his back. Lois was kneeling next to him, holding his hand, trying to hold it together. Bruce on the other hand, looked up to the sun, challenging it to heal its favourite sun. The sun held no comfort for Bruce the way it did for most, his sun was the moon.

"I'm here Clark," she spoke softly, the tough mask slid for a moment and Bruce caught a glimpse of the woman.

She loved him, he thought seeing her eyes. She really loved him.

Unconsciously, Bruce dropped a hand on Lois' shoulder and when she looked up at the man her cousin loved so much, found her fingers clasping his too.

He could feel warmth against his eyelids.

For a while there, Clark Kent had been wrapped in a blanket of darkness, surprised by how comforting it felt to be robbed of all senses. In the black, he was almost at peace. There was nothing to affect him, no pain, no thought, just a state of numb content. He didn't even remember his name or the memories that came with identity. No, it was quiet and it was painless.

When he felt the warmth of the sunshine invading that dark place, Clark was gripped by sensory overload. He could feel everything. The dissipating cold of the morning into the afternoon, the sounds he associated with the farm, sounds he had woke up to every day of his life, birds chirping, the lazy rustle of cornstalks in the field and even the distant drone of cars sweeping down the highway. He could hear voices, a chorus of discord, bouncing off each other, Lois and Bruce. Like cymbals clanging in unsynchronised rhythm.

And of course, the clearest sensation of all; the pain.

The pain was not a new thing. He had felt it before, brief things, far away things and each time, it felt like something that happened to someone else, like he was watching from afar. The pain was fleeting, it was brief and never long enough to do him serious harm. However, this time it was different. This time, it coursed through him like explosions inside his skull, suffusing his entire body, until every nerve ending screamed in protest. A sharp, cutting pain that radiated from his chest and would not yield no matter how much he tried to will it away.

He didn't know that sound had come from his lips, that he had groaned out loud, not until he heard Lois.

"Clark!" She did not speak the word but gasped it, the way a person drowning would gasp for the last breath of air.

Clark felt something wet and salty against his lips and though the pain had shocked him awake, the moisture against his skin made him open his eyes. Lois was looking over him, her face filled worry and relief all at the same time.

"Lois," he whispered. "Why are you crying?" He asked.

"Because you scared me you big dope," she spoke, her voice escaping her with what was neither a laugh nor a cry.
Bruce stared down at Clark's wound to see the wound receding, slowly.

"Clark, how quickly do you heal up when you're hurt?"

Clark swallowed thickly, trying to speak through the pain he was feeling. "Fast." He uttered.

Bruce switched his gaze to the gunshot wound again. The recovery was miraculous by any standard but it did not match with what Clark had just claimed.

"What's wrong?" Lois stared sharply at Bruce.

"He's not healing as fast as he should be," Bruce answered.

"He's never been shot like this before," Lois countered.

Bruce didn't think that was it but this was not the time to discuss it. "We can't stay here too long. Clark," he looked at his friend. "You're coming back with me to Gotham for awhile."

"No…" Clark started to protest.

"This place has been compromised," Bruce spoke, sparing him nothing. "They know where to find you and now by the looks of it, how to hurt you. Until we figure this out, you need to be away from here. It's not just you. They'll be after Lois as a means to get to you."

As well as Chloe, Bruce thought to himself.

Trying to sit up, Clark gave up with a groan of pain, falling back onto his back as he stared up into the sky with dislike at the idea of running but unable to deny that it wasn't just about him. It was about Lois too. "Alright," he gave in, not in any position to debate the matter.

With that settled, Bruce turned his thoughts to the problem of how they were going to get out of Smallville in one piece.

Corben was starting to think that maybe trying to bring in Clark Kent and Valerie Beaudry was really more trouble than it was worth.

No more than an hour later, John Corben remained parked by the highway near the Kent homestead. His black SUV was the only vehicle they had that wasn't scattered in pieces across the area. Believing that Valerie was still in the house, Bennett and the others had approached, with pick up vehicles inching closer to the homestead, ready for pick up when Bennet was done collecting their specimens. Unfortunately, Bennet had been wrong and he and the men with him had paid for it with their lives.

The girl was far more powerful than had previously reported and the result of this underestimation was him parked on the side of the highway, trying to decide if he should call in more bodies or abandon the retrieval order entirely. Deciding to leave that decision to someone with more authority than he, Corben reluctantly made the call to his employer.

"Hey!" Addison, his driver called out as Corben was starting to dial. "We've got movement!"

Without thinking, Corben snapped the cell phone close and a car driving down the road leading to the farm. Dragging a cloud of dust behind it, the black maserrati sedan raced down the dirt track, picking up speed and didn't bother to halt when it reached the junction where the road met the highway.
"Follow them!" Corben jumped into the SUV, certain that whoever was driving was trying to get Clark Kent to a hospital before his injuries killed him.

The SUV rumbled to life and gave chase, tearing down the highway at top speed after the sleek, black car.

"Do we know who that is in there?" Corben asked.

"Not sure," Addison answered as he footed the accelerating, causing the engine to roar louder under the hood. "They must have showed up before we did."

The blare of a horn followed the black Italian car swerving dangerously past a utility truck, causing its driver to skirt along the shoulder of the road to avoid coming into contact. The pursued vehicle continued on its way, oblivious to the havoc it had caused.

"Keep on him," Corben ordered, determined not to let another failure worsen what was already an unmitigated disaster. If they could at least get their hands on Kent, the day wouldn't be a complete waste. The SUV's engine roared even louder as the vehicle gave chase, bypassing the utility ahead in the same precarious manner. Unlike the maseratti, the SUV did clip the side of the truck, which honked loudly in outrage. However, Corben was not about to stop.

The maseratti maintained its top speed, moving so quickly across the black tar that it seemed almost like it was flying a few inches over it. Negotiating sharp turns and corners with the expert precision of someone who drove fast cars for a living, the SUV struggled to keep up. Corben slid open the door of the SUV open and leaned out far enough to take aim at the back of the car and fire.

The gun was gunfire was almost drowned out by the sounds of roaring engines. However, Corben was a good shot and he was certain that some of those bullets met their mark. Unfortunately, the vehicle kept surging ahead. Keeping far enough away to ensure that Corben would have to work at shooting out the tires.

An eighteen-wheeler crossed the Smallville bridge, with only a narrow gap of space between the railing and its enormous bulk.

"Oh you're screwed now," Addison gloated as he saw the fleeing car approach the truck. "He's going to have to stop."

However, as the car continued ahead, it didn't seem like it planned on stopping and even though the truck ahead was blaring its horn in warning, it kept forging ahead. Accelerating even.

"What the hell is he doing?" Addison asked, staring at the scene.

Without warning, the car veered to the side of the truck, slipping into the narrow space between it and the railing."

"JESUS!"

Wheels jumping the walkway running parallel to the bridge, the maseratti tilted on an angle as it drove by the truck. Sparks flying as it scraped along the side of the truck and continued onwards, the car disappeared behind the larger vehicle as it made good its escape.

"I don't get it," Addison shook his head as the truck continued off the bridge and the SUV move aside to let it pass.

"What?" Corben asked, wondering if the driver of the car was insane.
"Why didn't he just floor that thing?"

Corben stared. "What do you mean?"

"He's driving a maseratti," Addison snorted as the SUV entered the mouth of the bridge. "If he wanted to leave us in the dust, all he had to do was floor that thing and we'd never catch up. It's like…" his voice drifted off.

"f**k!" Corben cursed, realising what the driver had intended. "We've been had!"

However, the realisation came too late as both men looked up just in time to see the same car they had been pursuing now, bearing down on them from the other side of the bridge. Both vehicles faced each other as the distance between them narrowed.

"He's bluffing," Corben declared, convinced that this was some Hail Mary play.

The maserati kept coming.

Addison's knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel harder, throwing sidelong glances at Corben. Around them, the sound of roaring engines seemed to increase, until the sound became everything.

The car did not waver in its course. It was closing in.

"He's bluffing," Corben stated firmly, not about to flinch in this game of chicken.

Beads of sweat rolled down Addison's forehead as the man's resolve started to crumble.

"Corben…." He muttered.

"HE'S BLUFFING!" Corben snapped, refusing to give in. Defiant almost.

100 metres…75 metres…50 metres…

Through the sunlight bouncing off the windscreen, Corben could just make out the shape of the driver's face when suddenly, the SUV jerked sharply to the side, seconds away from collision.

"Addison you dumb f**k!" Corben screamed indignantly as the SUV veered out of control, leaping over the kerb and onto the walkway. Speed and loss of control propelled the vehicle through the railing, the lengths of steel no match against one tonne of steel moving at 100 miles an hour. The railings gave way, snapping with ease as the SUV ploughed straight through it and over the side of the bridge.

Following the wake of the accident, the black maseratti slowed down just long enough for the driver's side window to lower and for Bruce Wayne to decide that the chase was done.

"Miss Sullivan," a gentle voice said kindly to Chloe as she waited at the foot of the fold down walkway leading to the Lear Jet behind them. "I'm sure he's alright."

Chloe turned around to face Alfred Pennyworth, Bruce's butler and almost surrogate father standing behind her, with his comforting voice and equally soothing manner. In some ways, this man reminded her of Jonathan Kent, exuding the same quiet strength.

Bruce's gambit had worked. While he had taken off in the Maseratti, he had ordered Chloe and Lois to get Clark and Valerie out in her car. After he had drawn away the kidnappers, they had
left the Kent homestead without anyone in pursuit. Wasting no time, they had driven straight to
Smallville's tiny airport where the plane that Bruce had asked Alfred to bring to Smallville in
anticipation of Clark's recent troubles, awaited them.

"I know," she said with a tight lipped smile, "he's pretty resourceful."

"There's an understatement," the older man returned, genuinely pleased that his tortured charge
had found happiness with this young lady. Since their romance had bloomed, Chloe had been a
frequent visitor to Gotham and the mansion, delighting Alfred to no end. "Your cousin had settled
Master Kent."

"And Valerie?" Chloe asked of the young woman who had begun all this drama.

"She is sitting quietly," Alfred remarked with a look of sympathy. "The death of a parent is not an
easy thing to bear. She is holding up."

"I'm glad Bruce thought it was a good idea for you to come here," Chloe commented, grateful for
Alfred's presence.

"When Master Kent told him of the situation, Master Bruce thought that it might require Miss
Lane and her companion to make a discreet departure from Smallville. Although I must admit, I
didn't expect there to be such urgency involved when I was making the flight here."

"I don't think anyone did," Chloe sighed before the sound of a smooth engine, drew her gaze
away and she saw Bruce's black masseratti, driving past the gates towards them. Her face lit up in
happiness at seeing him and she was walking forward even before the car had come to a halt.

Bruce climbed out of the car only to be embraced fully by Chloe who was grateful that nothing
had happened to him. It was still hard to believe the things he could do without an iota of meteor
freak in his veins. Chloe was accustomed to her heroes being bullet proof, not capable of bleeding
and certainly not head over heels in love with them.

"Hey, I'm fine." He said surprised by the greeting, even if the sensation of her against him was
very welcomed.

"I know," she retorted, not wanting to appear needlessly concerned but unable to help it after
seeing what those men had done to Clark.

"You get here okay?" He asked, threading his fingers through hers as he walked towards Alfred
and the plane.

"In one piece," Chloe nodded. "They didn't even look back."

"I didn't think they would," Bruce cracked a smile as he turned his gaze to Alfred and tossed the
older man the keys to the car. "Need you to drive this car to Metropolis, old man. I'll have the jet
pick you up there."

Alfred caught the keys with one hand. "Very good Sir and shall I leave it at a questionable part of
town where it's certain to be stripped bare by the time I've hailed a cab."

"Alfred you read my mind," Bruce returned. "I don't want this car being traced back to us. I don't
think they got a look at the plates but its better to be safe than sorry."

"Of course," Alfred nodded and started towards the vehicle as Bruce and Chloe continued to the
plane.
"How's Clark?" Bruce asked.

"Not good," Chloe replied, allowing herself to think about the other very important man in her life. "I don't get it Bruce, he should be better by now. He heals fast when you remove the kryptonite, whatever the colour."

"Do we need to take him to the hospital?" Bruce inquired, deferring to Chloe's judgement on this since she was the one with the most experience with regard to Clark's Kryptonian heritage.

"No," she shook her head. "He is healing but it's just slower than it should be."

Bruce frowned and decided that it was a debate for when they were in the air. "We'll figure it out later. Let's get out of here first."

"Okay," she agreed with that. "Wait, with Alfred driving, who's going to be flying the plane?"

Bruce threw her a smirk, "I can think of someone." He declared, gesturing her to head up the steps.

"Is there anything you can't do?" She asked.

"Not that I've found yet," he said without a hint of smug.

Entering the cabin of the plane, Chloe found Valerie seated alone, gazing out the window. The girl had barely spoken since leaving the house and Chloe felt her heart go out to her, understanding why Lois had taken such an interest. She seemed so fragile. It was hard to believe that Valerie had saved all their lives back at the Kent Farm.

"Bruce, you're okay," Lois declared sighting the billionaire playboy as she remained next to Clark who was in one of the wide seats, covered with a blanket under her vigilant watch.

Still weak, Clark was trying to stay awake although he felt exhausted. Not just from the pain but from the healing process which was progressing painfully slow. "Told you," he muttered in Lois' direction.

Bruce pulled the door closed, locking the handle into place before approaching his friends. "If you're so smart, duck next time." Bruce retorted with gentle humour.

"Sure," Clark grumbled. "Pick on me when I'm weak."

Bruce looked down at him and asked seriously. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I got shot," Clark opened his eyes to give him a look. "Those men…?"

"Out of commission," Bruce replied. "For now."

"Thank God," Lois let out a sigh although she wanted to hurt them for what they had done to Clark, for what they had put her through.

"I can't keep running from them forever," Clark pointed out.

"You won't," Bruce said firmly starting towards the cockpit, "Once you're better, we'll deal with them but for right now, let's get out of here."

"Where are we going?" Lois inquired.

Bruce didn't look back as he answered, "to Gotham and the Manor."
It was hard to imagine that there was ever happiness in Wayne Manor.

No matter how many times Chloe visited, she could never shake the sense that it would do Bruce a world of good to walk out of this place and never look back. While this thought could never be more than wishful thinking on her part, Chloe could not help but think that Wayne Manor was also a monument to the grief he was unable to let go, the grief he had evolved into his great crusade.

Even when she walked through its palatial hallways and studied the fine art that adorned the walls, the dead eyes of Waynes past scrutinized from their portraits just as deeply as she did them. Wayne Manor was haunted by ghosts, not just of Bruce's ancestors but also by his parents, Thomas and Mary Wayne. To some degree it was also haunted by the eight year old boy who died the same night of his parents. His death was not a physical one but he had died just the same. Sometimes, Chloe was convinced if you listened hard enough, you could hear them still.

A week had passed since Chloe had arrived at the Manor with Clark, Lois and Valerie, escaping the abduction attempt at the farm. Chloe had been unable to go into work at the Planet since then, convinced by Bruce that if someone was trying to get to Clark, they would almost certainly use her as bait. Citing her current problems with tabloids as a reason to take early vacation, Chloe had thus remained at the Manor keeping Lois company while Clark recovered from the near fatal shooting he had suffered.

She also helped Bruce with their search to uncover the truth about their abductors and learn the truth behind Hank Cobb and the DeSaad Corporation for whom he worked. Unsurprisingly, there was very little on record that did not depict the company as anything more than what it claimed to be; a leader in biomedical equipment. However, Bruce was convinced there was more to it and though he wanted to go investigate the company himself, Chloe managed to talk him out of this course for awhile.

Particularly since Clark's powers had not returned.

It had been a week since the strange blue projectile was removed from Clark Kent's body. Bruce's studies of the material, compared to samples of green meteor rock, confirmed the truth he suspected in Smallville. Apart from minor differences in its chemical composition that caused variety in colour, the blue crystal was indeed kryptonite. Their enemy not only knew Clark's weakness but they also knew he was from Krypton. While green kryptonite could severely irradiate and kill Clark, it appeared blue kryptonite might be to render him powerless.

Although he had removed most traces of the crystal from Clark's body during the 'surgery' performed on the kitchen table of the Kent farm, Bruce was unconvinced that he had removed all of it. The composition of crystal was far different from lead. It fragmented more easily and used as a projectile, there could be shards throughout the Kryptonian's body. Bruce believed that they were small enough to be broken down by the body's natural processes but that could take time.

And Clark powerless when there were people out there who knew his secrets made him extremely vulnerable.

"Interesting," Bruce remarked as he was hunched over the eyepiece of the near-field scanning optical microscope inside the large cavern beneath the manor which Chloe secretly called Bruce's Peter Pan cave.
"What?" She looked up from the computer screen, pushing her steel rimmed glasses further along her nose, waiting for him to respond.

"I think I understand why these rocks affect Clark the way they do," he said blinking to adjust his focus after staring through the eyepiece for so long.

"How so?" Chloe asked. Her curiosity piqued. "I mean we always knew that they were pieces of Krypton but why would they affect him in that way? Wouldn't it mean all Kryptonians would be sick when it was part of the planet?"

"Not necessarily," Bruce faced her. "The specific level of a radioactivity probably came about during the planet's explosion. Clark said that the entire solar system was destroyed. If that's the case, the sun would have also been destroyed and anything in its path would have been hit with an unbelievable amount of radiation. To you and me, its just rock but to anyone from Krypton, this will kill him."

"So you actually have to be born on Krypton for it to work," Chloe nodded in understanding.

"Exactly," he answered. "It wouldn't affect a Kryptonian born on Earth."

"There's a frightening thought," she retorted, thinking of how many Kryptonians they had encountered over the years that weren't friendly. "Oh wait so when Zod showed up, that's why it wouldn't work on him."

"Right, Zod's body was from Earth not Krypton."

"So how does that help Clark?" She asked, impressed by Bruce's analysis but they needed to help Clark regain his powers.

"I'm not sure," Bruce shrugged. "The chemical bonds of blue kryptonite seem to break down faster than green. If he has any of it in his system, he might be able to purge it from his system so he can return to normal."

"You know we got the red kryptonite out of him by a Kryptonian device we got from the fortress. Clark returned it there after we were finished with Zod. Maybe we should try and get it."

"Let's give it a few more days to see if he comes out of it on his own." He replied. "these people knew enough about him to get the kryptonite. Let's not risk an ambush if they know about the fortress too." He pointed out.

"Great," Chloe sighed before jumping at the screech of something overhead. Looking up, she could see the slight flutter of wings in the shadows and immediately felt her skin crawl. The computer system that Bruce had at his disposal was unlike anything she had even seen. Utilising a quantum computer that massively sped up searches and optimisation calculations, it was guaranteed to make the current computer systems obsolete in a matter of years. She hadn't seen anything like this outside of a government facility or MIT. It was a dream to use, however, Bruce's choice of where to keep it left a lot to be desired.

"Why can't you get a dog like everyone else?" she asked, trying to hide her fear of the bats she couldn't quite make see, clinging to the stalactite ridden ceiling.

"If you don't bother them, they won't bother you," he said nonchalantly as he removed the samples and returned them to the sample container on his work bench a few feet away.

Chloe frowned and returned her attention to the screen, "I can't find anything on this DeSaad
Corporation and even less on Cadmus," she announced. "Everything down to their memos are legitimate. Doesn't look like they're up to no good, everything's a matter of public record."

Bruce shrugged as he returned to her side. "They're trying pretty hard to be normal which makes me wonder what they're hiding."

"They might not be hiding anything," she said, playing devil's advocate.

"Oh they're hiding something, when someone tries that hard to look normal, it usually means they have more secrets than anybody."

No kidding, Chloe thought.

Clark had gone without powers before and depending on the situation, he had been both pleased and unhappy without it.

During that period when Jor-El's punishment for his disobedience had resulted in a loss of powers, Clark had been dating Lana Lang and it was the only time in their relationship, he could honestly be himself around her. Thus, he hadn't minded so much. He had even settled down to a conventional life until it became apparent that the world needed his powers more than Lana needed a normal boyfriend.

Later on such episodes only proved further how much his powers were needed to protect his loved ones and sometimes, the danger they found themselves in had little to do with him. Like the situation that had been wrought upon him because of Valerie Beaudry. Clark didn't blame her of course, nor did he blame Lois for bringing Valerie to the farm. However, it did drive home how helpless he was to help them now that he had lost his powers.

Although his wounds from the gunshot had completely healed, Clark felt weak. Worse than that, he felt helpless. Although he was grateful to Bruce for opening his home to all of them, Clark longed for the farm, hated the possibility that his secret in the wrong hands could prevent him from going home again and even more daunting, was the fact he was unable to do a thing about it.

Although it was contrary to everything Jonathan Kent had taught him, Clark felt himself slipping deeper and deeper into a fit of depression and like everything else in his life of late, he was powerless to stop it.

Lois entered their room in Wayne Manor to find Clark exactly where she left him, in front of the television set looking more depressed than she had ever seen him. There was an irrefutable order to their relationship – he was the eternal optimist while she was the hard nosed cynic. They worked so well together because of this and watching him with this growing resentment in his eyes frightened her.

"Come on Smallville," she said standing in front of the TV while he was stretched out across the bed. "Let's get out of here. You've been cooped up all day, let's take a walk around the manor, and see what kind of Wayne dirt we can scoop out?" She teased.

"I thought you weren't doing the tabloid thing anymore," he grumbled.

Lois flashed him a withering look. "You're funny." She retorted and tugged at his foot when she sat at the edge of the bed. "Come on, move your ass. I'm not letting you lie around all day, moping. While, Chloe and Bruce are busy trying to figure out what DeSaad Corporation has to do with those creeps trying to grab you and Valerie, I thought we'd hit the streets. They have a branch office here in Gotham."
"I'm not moping," Clark said defensively as he rolled off the bed, trying to escape the argument. "I just don't think it's a good idea that it's a good idea for us to try and confront these people, not in the state I'm in. Right now, all I am to you is a liability. If they spot me while I'm with you, God only knows what they're willing to do to get to me. I won't let that be the reason that you get hurt Lois."

"Oh give me a break!" Lois exclaimed, not about to buy into his self-pitying nonsense. "I've been getting into trouble on my own long before I met you Smallville." She said with no small amount of exasperation. Getting off the bed, Lois crossed the distance between them and took his hand.

His love for Lois defied logic, defied description. He hadn't known he could ever be happy until he admitted he loved her. The idea of any harm coming to her, because of him, was a possibility that Clark Kent only entertained in his worst nightmares. Those men had almost killed him and they had murdered Valerie's parents without a second thought. He had no illusions as to what they would do to Lois if she got in their way.

"Maybe so Lois," Clark said quietly, "but this time I won't be able to get you out of it."

With that, he brushed past her and left the room before she had a chance to convince him otherwise.

"Self pity doesn't become you Clark," Bruce commented when Clark finally emerged from the guest room in the hallway outside.

Bruce hadn't meant to eavesdrop. He had come to find Clark in order to report the results of his analysis of the blue kryptonite. Upon approaching their door however, Bruce's acute hearing picked up snippets of conversation that told it was an inopportune time to intrude. He had stepped away when Clark's abrupt departure caught him out.

"I thought I'm the one with the great hearing," Clark remarked, feeling immediately guilty that his despondence had a witness other than Lois.

"Or was." He added with more than a hint of bitterness.

"So that's it?" Bruce looked at him, "your entire worth is based on your ability to bend steel bars? There's nothing more to Clark Kent than that?"

Clark frowned and started walking down the hall, away from Lois and hopefully Bruce. However, no such luck, the master of Wayne Manor followed. "Of course not," he answered after a moment, "but I am being realistic. I don't have your training and the way those guys want me, all I'm going to do if Lois is seen with me is to make her a target. I won't let her get hurt."

"So don't," Bruce retorted firmly, understanding Clark's fears but not about to encourage it either. "If you don't want to be helpless then don't be." He challenged the younger man.

Clark paused and stared at Bruce, "How do you suggest I do that?"

Bruce grinned, "By learning to not be helpless."

This was all her fault.

Lois had brought Valerie home to the farm when she should have taken the girl immediately to cops when news of her parents' death became known. Instead, Lois had held on to Valerie, partly
to help her and another part, much to her shame, for more selfish reasons. Valerie's story had dangled in front of her like a carrot and Lois had seen the opportunity for the story Pauline Kahn had challenged her to write.

As a result, they were now fugitives from their lives, not just her and Clark but Chloe too. Not only was there the chance he could be crippled permanently but Clark's secret was known to men who were willing to exploit it for their own ends. She had almost lost the love of her life and Lois wished she had considered the consequences of her actions before it was too late. Perhaps she might not have done things differently, it wasn't in her or Clark's nature to turn away anyone in need but they might have been more careful about it.

Her guilt wasn't rational, she knew it. It was borne out of the anguish of seeing Clark in so much pain and self-doubt. He was the one who was always making her feel better when things were at their darkest. It wasn't that long ago that Clark had told her she could do anything and Lois hated it because she couldn't offer him the same hope. She had to fix this. She had to find the men who had killed Valerie's family and tried to kidnap Clark so they could reclaim their lives again.

Getting dressed, Lois made a discreet departure from the Manor, using one of the many cars Bruce had in his garage and headed to Gotham. If nothing else, she was going to find out what DeSaad Corporation was all about and maybe even find a clue that would lead her to Cadmus.

"This is your answer?" Clark complained as he stared at Bruce across the padded floor of the Manor's fully equipped gymnasium.

The boxing helmet on his head felt uncomfortable and made Clark feel as if his field of vision was severely limited. Of course, he soon realised that this was largely because he was accustomed to having telescopic and x-ray vision at his disposal.

"Its one answer," Bruce remarked, also wearing the same helmet with his hands taped up for protective. "You're accustomed to your strength and your speed getting you out of trouble. Since you don't have those powers to rely on anymore, you're going to have to do things the old fashioned way."

"I know how to fight," Clark said defensively and then had to admit secretly that the number of times that he had encountered an opponent who matched him for strength, he hadn't exactly kicked ass. In fact, a lot of the time, he was often the one on the receiving end of a serious beat down.

"Really?" Bruce smirked, "then throw a punch at me."

"I'm not going to hit you Bruce," Clark protested, glaring at the man as if he was crazy. "This is stupid and a waste of time."

"Is it?" Bruce retaliated, not about to let Clark off the hook so easily. "You're so used to having these powers, you don't even think about the possibility of being hurt. You could have handled that bullet a dozen ways other than throwing yourself in front of it and still saved Chloe in the process. Only you didn't and that Clark is more dangerous than you not having powers."

"Chloe was in the path of that bullet," Clark returned, feeling somewhat foolish now that Bruce had put things that way. "I wasn't going to let her get hurt."

"I know that," Bruce answered. "I respect you for trying to save her life but you don't think – you react and that makes you predictable. You need to learn patience, to study the situation and realise the best way to get something done isn't necessarily the fastest. How many rooms have you run
into over the years with meteor rock because you didn't take five seconds out to see inside before barging into it? How many times has Chloe or Lois had to come save you because of that?"

More times than he'd like to admit, Clark thought. "You're making me feel like dumb ass." He pointed out.

"I'm only trying to show you that it doesn't take unusual powers to keep a person from being helpless." Bruce explained sympathetically. "Power enhances a person Clark, it doesn't make them. You're one of the best people I know and yes, not being able to do the things you can, must be terrible but you have to get past thinking that's all you are. Otherwise you'll be no good to Lois or yourself."

Clark absorbed Bruce's words because they were good words and not unlike something Jonathan Kent might tell him if he were here right now. Clark missed his father very much at that moment but he was also grateful to the friend who dared to make him listen, even when he didn't want to.

"I think I'm ready to hit you now," Clark retorted with a smile.

"Dream on, farm boy." Bruce grinned.
The world according to Lois Lane was relatively simple.

You had to have rules.

Secret Rules you had to follow - like a personal code of honour. There were other rules in the world of course but your rules were the ones that helped you get around all the others. The rules were an essential to what Lois called Lane's Guide to Survival in the Big, Bad World. Lois Lane lived her life by these rules, fashioned out of life as an army brat and all the lessons that came after which her shaped her being. No matter what she set out to accomplish in her life, the rules remained ingrained in her existence, occasionally warranting review for the changing times. However, the basic tenets remained the same because if you didn't have rules, you just wouldn't make it.

Rule No. 1 – Don't take crap from anyone.

Rule No. 2 – Guilt belongs to those who get caught.

Rule No. 3 – People let you down – get over it.

Rule No. 4 – Always clean up your own mess.

Rule No. 5 – Good boyfriends are hard to find. Take all steps to prevent dissection.

Rule No. 6 – Evil corporations must always be brought down.

Rule No. 7 – If someone is too perfect, they're usually hiding something. See Rule No. 5 and 6.

Rule No. 8 - Never underestimate flannel. On the right guy it can be hot. See Rule No. 5

Lois hated traffic.

Even though she was sitting in air-conditioned comfort while the outside world was baking in hot weather, Lois could feel her patience eroding away by the gridlock traffic she was enduring. Leaving Wayne Manor, Lois had been full of determination and drive to get some answers from the elusive DeSaad Industries. However, an hour in midday traffic had deflated much of her enthusiasm and inflated her growing annoyance at the whole situation. Her hopes of making a quick investigation of the company and returning to the Manor before anyone knew she was gone, seemed more and more unlikely. Furthermore, Lois suspected there might be some fallout from her loan of one of Bruce's vehicles.

Okay that was bullshit, he hadn't loaned her anything. However, if Daddy Warbucks was going to leave the keys to a gorgeous black Masserati just hanging around the garage, she couldn't be held responsible for what came next (Rule No. 2).

On this occasion however, Rule No.5 had her driving towards the imposing structure that was the DeSaad Tower. After her argument with Clark, Lois had needed to do something to put right the condition he presently found himself (Rule No.4). While she didn't regret helping Valerie, Lois did regret the consequences for Clark. By helping a stranger, Lois had inadvertently allowed Valerie's hunters to discover an even more valuable prize than a young woman with a sonic scream - an alien from Krypton.

With that one action, Lois had single-handedly destroyed the anonymity he had spent his whole
The worst of it was that Clark didn't even blame her for it.

He was too kind and noble for such a mean thought and there were times Lois feared his faith in people as much as she admired it. A long time ago, Lois had reached the conclusion that most people spent their lives disappointing each other (see Rule No.3). She did not want Clark to learn that lesson the hard way. On the face of it, it may appear that kryptonite was Clark Kent's greatest weakness but Lois knew better. Clark's greatest weakness was his heart.

And these days, it was more fragile than ever.

Already irritated by how long it took to reach her destination, Lois' disposition did not improve when she caught her first glimpse of the DeSaad Building.

Pretty fancy for a branch office, she thought staring at the building through the windscreen of the car as she searched for a parking space. Like the Monolith in that Kubrick film, the tower that stood a modest fifty storeys high, covered in dark glass and showed no visible signs of life to the outside world. A cold shudder she could not explain ran through her as she took in the sight of it, wondering if the architecture was deliberate. To make visitors feel awe when approaching it for the first time.

If so, then their purpose was lost entirely because the only emotion it generated in Lois was a sense of menace. For an absurd moment, she found herself thinking it looked evil. Get a grip Lois, she rebuked herself as she continued searching for a space.

Finally, Lois opted to park the car in secure lot across the street out of sight of any security cameras that might be spying on her from behind all that dark glass. Unfortunately, her chosen mode of transport was conspicuous to say the least and the last thing Lois wanted was to bring any more attention to herself than necessary.

A few minutes later, she was walking through the front door, prepared for anything.

Hank Cobb considered himself fortunate to be alive.

Currently exiled by his master, CEO Michael Canto of DeSaad Industries to the wilderness of Gotham, Hank knew that if Canto so wished it, his life could be forfeit at any time. Therefore, every moment he continued to breathe was a boon. Sending him to Gotham was a subtle way of getting rid of him that didn't require the expense of a bullet. Despite being a major metropolitan centre, likened to Metropolis or New York, Gotham was infamous for its underworld influences. The crime bosses ruled in Gotham and they did so with an iron fist. People were known to die violently for random, meaningless crimes that had no social boundary.

If socialites like Thomas and Martha Wayne could be gunned down in the street, what was to keep a mugger from blowing him away?

Nothing, that's what.

Until he regained his standing before Canto, Cobb was stuck like a rat in a maze, forced to run the labyrinth until his legs gave out or his master put him out of his misery for sheer boredom. However, Hank knew there was a way out, if he could just get a break. All he had to do was get Valerie on the phone and he could talk her right back into the fold.

And he was convinced that once they had Valerie, Canto would get the other specimen that had
given him such a hard on and John Corben had failed to capture.

Valerie – what a needy bitch she was, he thought resentfully as he viewed absently the multiple screens showing the live security footage of what was happening around the building.

All the time Hank had wasted, preparing her, cajoling her with sweet words, performing a minor miracle by seducing her over the Internet and bringing her into the organisation. The first part was simple enough. Her loneliness and naiveté made her easy to drawn into his web. If it wasn't for the fact that she was as ugly as f**k, he might have even felt sorry for her.

The same mutation that made Valerie capable of knocking out a city block with her screen had also made her a deformed mess of flesh and bone. Her family had been wise to keep her away from prying eyes because she looked like the Elephant man's younger sister. On the Internet, it was easy to tease her and pretend that looks didn't matter, that he loved her for her mind, her gentle spirit.

What a load of crap, he remembered thinking as he typed his responses laced with romantic nonsense that was sure to enchant any sheltered virgin. He promised her a new life, moonlight and roses and every cliché riddled declarations of love he could think of until she was ripe to break free from her parents' gilded cage.

Hearing about her deformity and seeing it in person had been two very different things and it had taken every bit of composure he had, to keep from recoiling in horror when he first laid eyes on her. Later on that night when he had taken her into his bed, Hank had to down a bottle of scotch first before he could even stomach the thought. However, the stakes were high and he knew that one act of intimacy would be enough to bind her to him. Fortunately for a young woman denied all physical contact, Hank didn't have to engage in any lengthy foreplay to get the results he wanted.

After he had taken her virginity, she was malleable to anything he wanted and that's when the testing began. The eggheads went to work, under Canto's supervision, taking the deformed freak of nature that Valerie had been and transforming her into something beautiful. Using surgical skills and technology that would put any Beverley Hills plastic surgeon to shame, the eggheads carved Valerie up like a roast, slicing away all her deformities until she became the blond goddess that Hank was more than happy to service.

Unfortunately, despite her beauty, despite the amplification of her power, Valerie was as needy as they came and Hank had little patience for spoiled little girls who wanted to monopolize his attention. When she complained about the testing, his response was to sleep with her and by then, she was beautiful enough for Hank to actually enjoy it. However, the silence didn't last long and Valerie would be bitching again about the tests, until he needed a timeout to keep himself from beating the crap out of her.

Still, Hank hadn't suspected she'd run out on him but run she did and now she was out there, somewhere. An ugly duckling turned into a swan on his dime, making him look bad to Canto who questioned his ability to control the woman he was screwing. Somehow, he had to get her back.

Suddenly a face appeared on the screen that made Hank sit up straighter in his chair, forgetting the melancholy brought on by his exile. The woman who stepped through the main doors of the building had Hank swivelling around in his chair to face his computer screen in an instant. Pulling up the images that had been sent to him from New York, taken during their last failed attempt to retrieve Valerie, Hank found a smile sneaking across his face when he realised who he was looking at.
Lois Lane…in Gotham City.

If she was here, was Valerie?

Still grinning, he reached for the phone and used the speed dial to get the connection he wanted. When the caller picked up, Hank wasted no time getting to the point.

"Corben, this is Hank." He said quickly, almost with glee. "I think I've located your missing farm boy."

For what seemed like the hundredth time today, Clark Kent found himself on his ass.

His body ached and he could feel every muscle groaning in protest. While he had experienced pain before, it went away quickly enough however, the prolonged variety that that lasted hours was something new and Clark couldn't get over how uncomfortable it could be. Even when he was the star quarterback of Smallville High, he was shielded from the injuries that came with the game and a part of him felt a little guilty about having that advantage. However, now that he was experiencing the aches and pains associated with a contact sport, Clark was rather grateful to have been spared all that.

The blows he sustained during his training session with Bruce were delivered through padded gloves but Clark could still feel them. Clark knew Bruce wasn't intentionally out to hurt him but their sparring had been tough and while he had admired Bruce's ability before, now he truly understood how dangerous the man could be. If this were what it felt like to be an opponent of Bruce Wayne when the gloves were on, what would it be like when those same gloves were off?

Worse yet, what was Bruce capable of when he really wanted to hurt somebody?

"You okay?" Bruce Wayne asked as he looked down at Clark, who hadn't moved from place he had landed after failing to avoid Bruce's use of a leg sweep.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Clark grumbled, taking the hand offered as he picked himself up off the mat.

"You're getting better," Bruce pointed out, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "You're staring to anticipate."

It was true. While Clark's skill level was still very much in the novice range right now, he was beginning to use his normal senses beyond their known limits. While Clark's powers were something to admire, Bruce also felt that they would be terribly distracting, allowing normal abilities to atrophy from lack of use. Clark Kent had a keen mind and his prowess on the football indicated that he could be well coordinated, he just had to learn to do it without the powers.

"You think so?" Clark asked recalling the last few instances when he had managed to avoid being hit by Bruce (though not for long) and had to concede the point. Although secretly, Clark suspected that no amount of anticipation was going to prepare him to hold his own in hand to hand combat with Bruce Wayne. Having seen the man in action against men who had the skill, Bruce was in a class of his own.

"You've only been at it a day," Bruce threw over his shoulder as he walked to the small refrigerator in the corner of the room. "Most people have to practise for months, years even to get good and even then, it may not be enough."

"So where did you learn to fight like this?" Clark asked, starting to pull off his gloves. He had never really asked Bruce about his skills except in passing.
"I spent a few months with an elite bad of ninja assassins in Tibet who had some interesting views on crime and punishment."

Clark rolled his eyes, "okay don't tell me."

"Seriously," Bruce retorted, upon reaching the refrigerator and removing his own gloves. "They recruited me, trained me and finally wanted me to join them but I didn't like their idea of justice so we parted company."

Clark suspected there was more to it than that but he was fascinated. "So how long did it take you to learn all it?"

Bruce tossed his Kansas visitor a bottle of water. "About seven years," he answered finding it liberating to have a friend he could trust implicitly with such truth about himself "Thanks to an old friend, I had an epiphany so I decided to go see the world, minus my identity. I picked up a lot of things from a lot of different people."

"What does that mean," Clark asked with a raised brow before taking a sip of his water. "Minus your identity?"

Bruce smiled faintly to himself, as if he was enjoying a private joke, "I had to find out who I was beneath everything I felt. Back then, I wasn't thinking straight. I was angry and dangerous. I could have gone either way so I needed to go out there and find myself so to speak, without the baggage of being Bruce Wayne."

There was no need to ask what had been the result of his anger, Clark thought. The reason for it was carefully preserved in every room in Wayne Manor. Lex's mansion had been no less opulent but there was a life to it, even if the walls were soaked with hidden menace. In Wayne Manor, there was nothing but emptiness. The only proof that the place had ever been anything different was the diminishing memory of happiness he saw in Bruce's eyes.

Once again, Clark felt singularly privileged to be the son of Jonathan and Martha Kent. They had filled a small, country farmhouse with all the warmth in the world, while this large sprawling house never had the chance to be anything more than a mausoleum for the dead.

"Is that when you did your famous disappearing act for seven year?" Clark inquired, somewhat fascinated because he needed to look at the possibilities for himself if his powers didn't return.

"That's it," he nodded. "I travelled the far east, spent some time in jail, learning how the other half lives."

"Well considering you came back with serious ass kicking abilities, I guess it worked for you."

Bruce chuckled at Clark's description. "I suppose that's one way to look at it."

"Maybe I need to do that…" Clark mused. "If I don't get these powers back, maybe I need to find out who I am without it." Or at the very least, take Jor-El up on his training, Clark thought silently. The few minutes he had spent after raising the Fortress had opened up an entire universe to him but Chloe's presence there and everything else that happened since, kept him from going back to complete that training.

"Don't model yourself after me Clark," Bruce said quickly. "I'm a poor choice."

"Chloe seems to think otherwise," Clark remarked. "Besides, you just need to lighten up a bit." A small smirk crossed Clark's face.
"Says the man everyone calls Boy Scout," Bruce snorted when he paused at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Another thing that Clark had learned since the loss of his powers was the fact that Bruce could hear things well before he did. Quite remarkable when you remembered he didn't have super hearing. Small, delicate footsteps against the parquet floor soon became audible to him and the stormy, broody expression on Bruce's face dissipated like the sun emerging from behind the clouds as Chloe appeared.

Clark watched the change and smiled inwardly. Whatever reservations he had about Chloe and Bruce vanished whenever these two were near each other. Chloe brought much needed light to Bruce's dark and tortured soul.

"Sorry to intrude on the male bonding," Chloe replied entering the gymnasium.

"I was giving Clark a break," Bruce tossed Clark a cocky smirk.

"Gee thanks," Clark threw back at him sarcastically, making a face at the same time.

"Wow, no issues here," Chloe laughed. "Actually, I wondered if you two have seen Lois around."

"Lois?" Clark remarked, a hint of guilt creeping into his voice as he remembered how he had left things with her earlier. "She was in our room the last time I saw her but that was a while ago."

Bruce walked to the intercom for the system installed in the house. A place like Wayne Manor was simply too big not to have one. "Alfred," Bruce spoke into it, confident that wherever the butler was in the house, he would answer soon enough. "Have you seen Lois anywhere?"

The response came almost a minute later, "apologies for the delay in answering Master Bruce, I am in the process of preparing dinner with a little assistance from Miss Valerie. I believe I saw Miss Lane heading towards the garage earlier on. I assumed she was going into town."

"Oh hell," Clark groaned, now fully cognizant of where Lois was. He should have known by now that she wouldn't take no for an answer and even if she did, would figure out some way to do it on her own. "She went to DeSaad Industries."

"Alone?" Chloe blurted out. "With no idea if DeSaad is involved with what's been happening to you and Valerie?"

"That's our Lois," Clark said through gritted teeth, with no small amount of exasperation in his voice while he started towards the door. He loved that woman but sometimes Clark suspected that even Gandhi would strangle her.

"What are you doing?" Chloe demanded, looking at Bruce for support. "Clark you can't go out there… not in your condition. Bruce," Chloe stared at her lover. "Tell him."

Bruce met her gaze with an unreadable expression on his face. He knew Chloe was worried for Clark and Bruce had to admit feeling a little apprehension as well. However, Clark may very well be his best friend and Bruce was not about to let him do anything stupid alone. "Clark, wait."

Clark halted long enough to look over his shoulder. "Don't try and talk me out of it Bruce, I'm going to get her."

"I know," Bruce sighed giving Chloe an apologetic look before he started walking towards Clark. "I'll drive."
Rule No. 6 – Evil corporations must always be brought down.

Note to self: Must amend Rule No. 6 'Most corporations are evil. Proceed with caution.'

In retrospect, Lois should have considered the possibility that straying into the orbit of DeSaad Industries was probably not the best idea to cross her mind in recent times. She had measured DeSaad against her experiences with Luthor Corp. Lex had always been careful to ensure a veneer of respectability over his more nefarious activities. For years, Clark had been able to barge into the Luthor residence and the company towers for his stand-offs with Lex, with little or no consequence. Lex was like a trapdoor spider, he waited until the opportunity to make his move.

Assuming that DeSaad would conduct their affairs in a similar manner had been a deadly miscalculation on Lois' part, one that now saw her at their mercy no sooner than she had gotten past the doors of the place. Lois had arrived at reception and introduced herself using one of the many aliases she had fabricated whenever she needed to do undercover work. In this instance it was Lucy Bly and 'Lucy' was doing a piece in the financial pages of the Sunday paper, highlighting new businesses in Gotham City. It seemed innocuous enough and 'Lucy' was promptly shown to the office of the General Manager of the Gotham branch of DeSaad.

The instant she was shown into Hank Cobb's office, Lois knew she was in trouble.

When the door closed behind her, Lois found she and Cobb weren't alone in the office. Men who resembled the mercenary types that worked for private security companies in Iraq and other such areas of conflict, stepped forward ominously. She considered struggling but had been around enough military men to know these were Special Forces types and a struggle would only put her at a disadvantage. She was a general's daughter and knew how to make a strategic withdrawal until the odds were better.

Escorted out of the DeSaad's benign offices, Lois was taken to the penthouse, perched at the top of the dark tower. Once there, Lois had been left in a plush living room of expensive leathers and pleasing views. Her guards maintained their distance, keeping the exits covered, allowing her the freedom to move around but with the clear understanding that should any attempt to escape be made, the consequences would be dire.

"You know granting me an interview would have been enough," she declared, glancing at her brutish guardians. "That's about as much of a sure thing as you can get. I mean I don't tend to run out once I land the interview. There's no need to keep me a captive audience." She continued to speak, proving her need to fill to awkward silences with chatter, no matter how much like blather it sounded.

The two men seemed unmoved by her speech and made Lois more and more unsettled. "So what are you guys? Green Berets? SEALs? SAS? I hear those guys kick ass." She asked, getting off the sofa and coming to the one standing by the door to the hallway leading to the front door and private elevator.

The man towered over her, standing about the same height as Clark but his build was different, bulky and made for attrition, with a jaw you'd need a plumbers wrench to break.

"I wouldn't waste my time, Miss Lane," a voice said behind her and Lois turned around to see Hank Cobb emerge from one of the other rooms adjoining the one she was in. "Mr. Burgess
doesn't speak unless he has something to say and so far you haven't given him reason to."

"Oh he loves me," Lois said flippantly, refusing to be insulted no matter what, still eyeing the stone faced Mr. Burgess. "He hides it well but I know he secretly adores me." Giving him a wink for good measure, she faced Cobb again.

"And I'm afraid you got my name wrong," Lois pointed out. "My name is Lucy Bly and I'm a free lancer with the Gotham Gazette." She explained, reciting the quick cover story she had created for herself before entering the place.

"You're Lois Lane," he said shortly, "daughter of Sam Lane, with a sister named Lucy and a cousin named Chloe. Currently, girlfriend to one Clark Kent, a very special young man."

Lois said nothing but how much they knew about her and her family was unnerving. His revelation about Clark felt even worse. "I have credentials..." she answered, feigning innocence as she walked towards her handbag on the coffee table. "I can prove who I am."

"I'm sure you do," Cobb replied with a laugh and went to the small bar in the corner of the room, scepticism in every bemused chuckle. "Would you like a drink?"

"No thanks," Lois said defiantly, refusing to admit anything.

"Come now Lois, there's no reason for us to be uncivilised about this," Cobb gave her a somewhat patronizing stare. "I'm having one."

Deciding she had better to play along until she knew what his game was, Lois lowered herself into leather sofa and conceded the point, "Alright then, water."

"How boring," he sighed but nonetheless went about pouring her a glass. Lois watched what he was doing, ensuring that he didn't put anything in her drink that might make her talk. After a few seconds, he joined her on the sofa, nursing a scotch in parallel to her tame water.

"Now let's talk," he smiled with perfect charm.

Lois took a moment to study him and realised there was good reason why Valerie would have fallen prey to this man. With his gold hair, green eyes and handsome chiselled features, he would have put to test the resolve of any woman, let alone a young girl who had been sheltered most of her life and dared not dream of love capable of love looking beyond her deformity.

"Well I had come here to get a story," Lois replied, not about to give up the façade of Lucy Bly just yet.

"You came here to find out about DeSaad because that's where Valerie told you I worked."

Damn. He wasn't going to be deterred, Lois thought.

"If you say so," she said ambiguously, "I was just interested in what you do for DeSaad Mr. Cobb."

Cobb smiled, "let's just say that I'm in acquisitions."

Acquisitions.

Like Valerie, Lois realised. Jesus. How many other unsuspecting girls was this son of a bitch luring out of their homes with his sweet talk into a Dr. Frankenstein nightmare?
In world of cyberspace where desperate people sought companionship, Hank Cobb had fertile ground to cultivate.

It didn't take long for Bruce and Clark to find the car that Lois had 'borrowed' from the Wayne Manor. All of the vehicles in the garage had been outfitted with GPS trackers since all of them were prestige cars with a high dollar value. The signal led them to the public parking structure where Lois had left the car prior to her visit to DeSaad Industries. Throughout the ride, Clark found himself increasingly annoyed at Lois and the foolhardy risks she took with her life. It was different when he was able to zip across town faster than a speeding bullet to get her out of trouble but now that his powers were gone, Clark feared what would happen when he wasn't able to play her knight in shining armour.

With the spare keys, Bruce was able to get into the vehicle, while Clark placed his hand against the hood of the car and noted that it was cold. The vehicle had been here for quite a while he thought unhappily before joining Bruce next to the driver's seat of the car.

"She's been gone for some time," Clark announced with a frown.

"Yes," Bruce agreed and was already searching through the glove compartment. "She left her identification here too." He pointed out. In the glove box was Lois' driver's license, her press credentials and credit cards. She even left her cell phone. A smart move in case of capture, Bruce thought. All someone had to do was ring the numbers listed and put trace on it. Everyone in Lois' life would become privy to her abductors.

"She's gone undercover." He stated.

"She could pull it off," Clark shrugged but didn't hold up too much hope. If everything had gone by the numbers, she would have called him by now and rub her victory in his face as proof of what could be done without powers.

*God, she could be galling at times.*

"You wouldn't be here if you thought that," Bruce retorted, staring ahead as he considered what their next move should be.

"No," Clark had to admit begrudgingly. "We have to find her."

"We'll have to wait until dark," Bruce looked at him. "In the meantime, you and I need to keep a watch on that building. Make sure that they don't try to move her before then."

"They might have done it already," Clark pointed out, remembering what lengths these people went to in order to reach him at the farm.

"My instinct says no," Bruce replied, part in truth and part in an effort ease Clark's growing fears for Lois' life. "Its one thing trying to snatch you from a little town in Kansas. Its quite another thing to smuggle someone out of a building in broad daylight. You know Lois better than I do – she wouldn't go quietly."

"Lois doesn't know the meaning of the word *quieter,*" Clark muttered, admiring that quality most of the time and loathing it during occasions like these.

"Good then you take this car and go around the back of the DeSaad Building. There's usually a service entrance. You keep an eye on that, take note of every vehicle that leaves, especially trucks. If they do try to get Lois out of here during the day, that will be the way they do it."
"What will you do?" Clark asked, thinking Bruce's plan was sound.

"I'll take the front," Bruce replied. "I can't go marching in there because its public information that I'm dating Chloe. If they have her, they'll know the connection and I won't get very far. Our best option is to wait until dark and then try to get into the place to search for Lois."

Deferring to Bruce's knowledge in such matters since without his powers, he could not simply scan the building to find her, Clark looked at the older man. "Thank you Bruce. I don't think I could do this without you."

"Alright, alright," Bruce retorted getting out of the car, "let's not get sentimental."

"You're not good with moments are you?" Clark shook his head as he took the keys to get into the driver's seat.

An odd thing had happened to Lois while she was sipping water, listening to Hank Cobb talk about his plans for world domination. Okay maybe not world domination but there was definitely something ominous in the way he spoke about Valerie and perhaps the others out there in the cyber world, ripe for the picking, waiting to be exploited. She had listened to him, giving nothing away, sipping at her water, waiting for the opportunity to make good her escape.

Only it never came because she fell asleep.

When Lois woke up, the sun outside the window had disappeared into the horizon, dragging the curtain of night across Gotham's dystopian skyline. She could see the moon staring at her and a sense of panic filled her being. Sitting up, she realised she was exactly where she last remembered, on the expensive leather sofa. Lois noticed that the lights were dimmed but her captors remained exactly where they were, at the door and the entrance to the hallway, leading out.

"What happened?" She demanded, "What the hell did you do me?"

They didn't answer and Lois could tell by their stony expressions that they weren't about to either. They had drugged her. She knew that much. The answer was irrelevant anyway. She could feel it in the fading disorientation, which wasn't from waking up abruptly, but rather from a drug induced slumber. She glanced at the glass on the table and took a sniff of the still remaining water. There didn't seem anything in it that might be a drug. Had he coated the glassware?

Whatever the method of delivery, Lois was nonetheless drugged and she stood up shakily to demand a new question of her captors, in this instance Mr. Burgess. "Where is Cobb?"

"Mr. Cobb has stepped out for the evening," Burgess answered aloofly. "However, he will be back when Mr. Corben arrives."

"Corben?" Lois asked, not recognizing the name. "Who is Mr. Corben?"

"I'm not authorized to give you that information Miss Lane but suffice to say, they wish to speak to you together." There was just enough hint of menace in his eyes to tell Lois that this wasn't going to be as civilised as her earlier tête-à-tête with Cobb but a real interrogation and all that it entailed.

She had to escape before that happened.

"I see her." Bruce stated lowering the night vision goggles as he looked across the space between DeSaad Towers and the roof of the Kane Building where he and Clark were presently standing.
"Where?" Clark demanded, reaching for the goggles.

The both of them were dressed in black with a ton of gear, half of which whose purpose was a mystery to Clark. Bruce seemed confident they needed all this equipment as they kept their presence hidden behind the parapet. Clark peered over the edge once he had retrieved the goggles and looked through them, searching for Lois.


Clark found her a moment later. Lois looked alright but irate. She was pacing across the carpeted floor, being watched by only one guard. The reflective glass lost its potency at night and allowed Clark a good look at Lois' prison. A surge of relief flooded him as he watched her and wished he could let her know that she wasn't alone and that help was on the way.

"We've got to get her out." He lowered the goggles and stared at Bruce.

"Of course we do,' Bruce retorted, busily rifling through the large duffle bag he had brought up here. "She's on the penthouse suite so that's our best way in and out."

Clark stared at him, a sinking feeling forming in his stomach as to what Bruce's plan might involve. His worst fears were confirmed when Bruce pulled out what look like a gas propelled grappling hook type gun and walked to another part of the room, one that was concealed better if not in direct line of sight of Lois and the penthouse. Still it gave them some freedom to move without being immediately noticed.

"You can't be serious," Clark blurted out. It was almost forty stories down! Even as they stood on the roof, the high velocity winds swept past them, threatening to take them off the edge if it felt so inclined.

"What's the matter, afraid of heights?" Bruce teased as he stood at the parapet and took aim for the maintenance side of the roof, away from the penthouse side of the building. He could see the railing and targeted that as the point of attachment.

"Just the sudden stop when you fall," Clark said dryly. "Bruce…I have a problem with heights."

Bruce lowered the grappling gun and stared at Clark, brows raised. "Seriously?"

"I'm okay if I can fly but take took some getting used to." Clark declared, swallowing thickly. "I mean I don't even like to go on a hot air balloon! When I first started to fly I had to take Lois with me because you know how she babbles about nothing and it was distracting but before that…I was just no good at it! I'm serious Bruce, I can't be sure how I'll manage if we have to get across that way, I could get us both killed."

"Clark," Bruce returned somewhat amused by the sight of six foot three farm boy going into full panic mode. "You're getting hysterical."

"I AM NOT HYSTERICAL!" Clark hissed.

"Clearly," Bruce rolled his eyes and lifted the gun before replying. "Well suck it up Kent, this is the only way in if you want to get to Lois."

Clark groaned inwardly and knew Bruce was right. There wasn't any other way in. With a sigh, he grumbled as the grappling hook exploded out of the gun with a bang and a hiss. "I'm going to so get her for this."
After what could possibly be the most terrifying incident of his life, not counting the day he heard Lana was marrying Lex, Clark Kent arrived on the roof of the DeSaad Building.

He had done so with his eyes closed all the way across the forty-storey drop until he reached the railing where Bruce hauled him over the edge. When he was a teenager, Clark had wanted nothing but to be normal, to be rid of his powers so that he and Lana could have a normal relationship. Over the years, he had come to realise it was a blessing and the advantages to the people he cared for could not be discounted. However, until recently, he didn't realise how much he missed being Kryptonian.

Clark missed being able to race across the fields at top speed, or being able to get his chores done in minutes as opposed to a whole day. He missed flying, feeling the wind in his hair and the stars beckoning him higher. Never was he more aware of his mortality than now, as he and Bruce Wayne prepared to storm the tower where his lady was being imprisoned. Following closely behind Bruce, Clark studied his friend and watched his movements.

Bruce was always deliberate and very prepared. The lock door of the maintenance area of the roof was no obstacle to the man as he extracted the tools from the belt around his waist. In seconds, the lock was eaten away by acid and Bruce motioned Clark to follow when he stepped through. Both their faces were concealed behind ski masks as Bruce had no desire to be recognised on any security camera. The small set of steps emptied into a narrow hallway that connected the penthouse to the fire stairs. In case of an emergency, this would be the only way out.

"When we go in, stay behind me. These men are most likely professional mercenaries and more than a match for your one day of training with me." Bruce instructed as he went through his backpack to hand Clark something that looked like very much like a gun.

"What is this?" Clark asked wondering if Bruce expected him to shoot someone. He couldn't imagine that was the case, considering Bruce's natural dislike for guns in general. However, he didn't want to complain either since Bruce's expertise made him feel quite ineffectual already.

"Tranquiliser gun," Bruce explained, going through the backpack to get the item he would need for the assault on the penthouse itself. "Anyone tries to go through the door, shoot them with that. Each pellet contains enough chemicals to put down a grizzly for a week. You can use that to cover me when we go in."

"You can count on me." Clark stated firmly, determined to be more than a fifth wheel while examining the weapon closely. Out of his depth, the best way to aid this operation was to follow Bruce's instructions as best he could.

"I know I can," Bruce gave him a little smile of confidence, aware that Clark was trying very hard not to get underfoot. "I'll go in first, count to five and follow. I'm going to introduce them to an experimental project that was abandoned by Wayne Tech," Bruce grinned as he padded stealthily towards the door, holding a silver device that was no bigger than a golf ball in his gloved hand. "Think of it as an EMP grenade. Oh and one other thing," he paused and looked back at Clark. "Put on the night vision goggles."

"Why?" Clark stared at him quizzically as he reached for the goggles around his neck.

"Trust me."
Lois hated feeling helpless and yet here she was faced with men who had guns. She could probably take the first guy but didn't think she could get to the second before he raised the alarm or worse yet, shot her. While she imagined that they wouldn't kill her, Lois could be incapacitated beyond any further ability to escape. She couldn't risk that. She had to bide her time and await the opportunity to escape that would prevent her from risking herself or sabotaging future efforts in case of failure.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang like someone kicking in the door. This was followed by the strangely electronic screeching that culminated in a loud burst of static that made her wince. Light bulbs shattered and the room was bathed in near pitch-black darkness. If it were not for the lights in the building outside Lois would have thought she was blind. Stumbling around in the dark, she heard the sounds of scuffling and what felt like punches being thrown in rapid succession.

"Lois," she suddenly felt a hand around her arm.

Oh, thank god! Lois Lane thought to herself as she recognised that voice. "Clark, is that you?"

"Of course its me," Clark hissed back. "Who else would storm a building in the middle of the night to come get you?"

"Hey I'm here too," Bruce's voice filtered through the darkness as he finished off Lois' guards, proving once again their training was no match for his.

"You guys got here just in time," Lois declared as she was let out of the penthouse by Clark who was able to see with the goggles over his eyes. "Hank Cobb, Valerie's boyfriend. He's here and he was bringing someone else back here to interrogate me."

"No kidding," Clark growled as they hurried up the corridor, leaving wreckage behind them. "Lois do you know how dangerous it was to come here yourself? You're lucky we were able to get to you. You could have been killed."

"Hey, I had to do something," Lois bit back defensively even though she knew he was right. Of course, only death would get her to admit it. "We needed information."

"Well if Cobb and this other guy had come back, you would have ended up giving it." Clark pointed out, still quite angry at the danger she had placed herself in. "Lois I can't always be there in time to save you. You were lucky this time."

"I can't take care of myself Clark Kent," she froze in her steps and jabbed him in the chest. She couldn't see him still because it was still dark but she could hear his breathing and her aim was good. "I do not need you to come rescue me, powers or not."

"HEY!" Bruce snapped cutting of any further argument. "You two are going to do this right now? Seriously?" His exasperation was clear even if neither could see his face.

"Sorry," Clark apologised and turned back to Lois, "come on Lois. Let's get out of here."

"I'm only coming with you because you went to all this trouble," she said haughtily. "But I would have gotten out of here myself...eventually."

In the darkness, someone who could have been either Clark or Bruce, swore.

"I expected a rescue attempt but this was really impressive," John Corben said staring at the digitised blip on the screen. The blip was moving steadily across the digitised schematic of the
building to the rooftop.

"This is the same guy you encountered in Smallville?" Hank Cobb asked from the inside of the security room of the DeSaad Building.

"Possibly," John answered thoughtfully. "EMP grenades, high tensile grappling hooks and night vision equipment to move in the dark. That costs money and I don't think Clark Kent has done that well in this year's wheat harvest. Whoever this guy is, he would have been worth the money."

"What about the tracer in her earring?" Hank asked, concerned that this was all for nothing if the circuitry implanted in Lois Lane's earring when she was unconscious, was fried due to the EMP grenade.

"See for yourself," John indicated the screen where the blip was moving fast. "Gotta love fiber optics." He grinned. "We'll track them and see where they go. Once we're sure of their location, we'll take Kent and Valerie."
Those who encountered him later in life could be forgiven in their belief that he had sprung fully formed from Zeus' split skull. They would think that he was always in supreme control of himself and his surroundings, that there was nothing beyond his abilities even if he was a human being without the powers they possessed. The truth is never that reassuring and Bruce Wayne would be the first to tell the misinformed few who knew his true self that like everyone else; he had to learn and study. Nothing that truly mattered to him had ever come easily. It had been learnt through years of discipline and sacrifice.

The person Bruce Wayne would eventually become exacted great cost and not all those dues were paid in sacrifice. Some were brutal lessons seared into his memory as the sting of defeat. Defeat, he would understand, came about because of mistakes and by the time Bruce Wayne vanished completely to emerge as the Dark Knight, he learned not to make them.

Unfortunately, he wasn't always so infallible.

In his manor surrounded by the best security provided by Wayne money, Bruce allowed himself to believe that he was somewhat untouchable. Since he was eight years old, the walls of Wayne Manor had protected him and given him respite from the madness that existed beyond, from the chaos that had taken his parents. It was the citadel from which he would launch his crusade against Gotham's underworld and Bruce had come to believe that it was impregnable thanks to the public façade he wore for the benefit of those who did not know him.

Not for the first time tonight, he was wrong.

"Bruce," Chloe asked, lifting her head from the crook of his arm, "how long do you think we have to stay out of sight like tis?"

The question was an abrupt interruption from the comfortable sojourn they were enjoying on the patio overlooking the manicured lawns of the Manor. Sitting up to adjust his own position on the rattan sofa, so that he could look her in the eye to give an honest answer, Bruce sighed, "I don't know. We have to find out what DeSaad knows about Clark and how many people are privy to that information."

"For the operation they mounted at the farm, that can't be a few." She pointed out.

"Not necessarily," Bruce countered, "underlings are seldom told the big picture. I suspect that a small number know that he's from Krypton. That's information you don't want to leak for fear of inviting other interested parties."

"God," Chloe groaned inwardly, remembering those. The other interested parties ranged from LuthorCorp to Homeland Security. All of it spelled a certain end to the anonymous existence that Clark enjoyed on the Kent farm. "It may never get back to normal for him, will it?"

"No," he answered after a long pause, debating whether or not he would lie to her and coming to the conclusion that it was a poor reason to break her trust. "To get some semblance of a normal life, he may have to disappear for awhile, make people forget about Clark Kent until everyone stops looking."
"I don't want him to be alone," she turned away. "He's finally happy Bruce, after so long…it isn't fair."

Bruce would often be the first one to tell her that life was seldom fair or merciful but he kept that thought to himself. He knew that he was too cynical and for a young man in his twenties, too jaded and that was why he adored Chloe Sullivan so. In some ways, she had his world weary perception but there were moments when hope and faith shined so brightly in her smile that it reached the heart so very shrouded in the dark inside him.

"I don't think Lois would ever let him be alone," Bruce offered with a faint smile. "I wouldn't worry Chloe. Everyone has a journey to make in their lives, sometimes that journey gets you lost in the wilderness for awhile but when you know where you're going, it makes you all the better for it. Clark has just started."

"And you?" Hazel eyes locked on him "Have you reached the end?"

His mind flashed immediately to the shadowy cave beneath the mansion and answered with an enigmatic smile, "I'm just beginning."

Not far away, just within sight of Wayne Manor's gothic over the tops of the trees surrounding the mansion, the air, previously still and pregnant with anticipation, began to cackle. Spidery tentacles of blue energy created fissures in mid air preceding a near deafening explosion of sound.

BOOM!

The wormhole opened in the middle of clearing, sending birds fleeing from the branches of trees and small wildlife scurrying away in fright. Illuminating the darkened space with its glow, the orb remained suspended as human shapes stepped through like visitors from the other side of the looking glass. Clad in black camouflage gear, carrying heavy artillery, it was difficult to distinguish them from one another and yet easy to assume menace. The leader strode forward comfortably, combat boots trudging across the grass as he stepped away and awaited his entourage to join him.

They numbered in the dozen and once they had stepped through the threshold of the wormhole, the passageway collapsed upon itself, vanishing as if it had never been and satisfied that its goal was achieved.

"Go dark," John Corben instructed as he slid the night vision goggles over his eyes.

One by one without question, it was done and with a simple hand gesture, the troop was on the move.

"We should have used that the first time we went to get him," Bennet pointed as he walked in stride with his team leader, "it would have save a lot of hassle."

"Keep your voice down," Corben grumbled as the mansion began to appear through the trees. They had selected their entry point carefully, just beyond the thick trees that framed the north side of the estate. From this point, no one would see them coming until they were almost on top of the mansion.

"Canto doesn't like us using the speciality items unless we absolutely have to," Corben retorted. "But he tells me Kent is worth the risk, the only one of his kind."
Bennet nodded in agreement, "yeah as far as meteor freaks go, he's got the full arsenal."

"That's one way to put it," Corben retorted shortly before showing the cut signal to end the chatter for now. From this point onwards, they had to move fast and strike hard.

This time, there would be hell to pay if Kent got away again.

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It was a clear night.

Bruce Wayne studied the sky and looked for another show of lightning that had appeared in the distance following the sound that resembled a thunderclap. However, there was no further signs of disturbance and Bruce debated whether or not there was reason to worry when what they had heard could be easily attributed to lightning.

Except it was clear night.

"Chloe," Bruce turned to her on the sofa, "go get Clark."

"What is it?" She asked, her expression becoming alarmed.

"I don't know…” Bruce said shaking his head. He had sophisticated security systems in place around the mansion and grounds. If someone had entered the grounds using any other entry way then the main gate, perimeter sensors would alert him to it. However, nothing had given away the presence of an intruder.

Suddenly he heard something whip past him so fast, he could feel the air shift near his cheek until it landed in Chloe's neck. It stopped her dead in her tracks as she reached instinctively for her neck where the metal projectile had imbedded itself.

"CHLOE!" He shouted and saw her go down. With one hand, he pulled up the lightweight rattan sofa, dislodging all the cushions and using its crisscrossing beams to shield himself as he made his way to her.

Chloe was out cold and Bruce quickly identified the projectile as a tranquiliser dart. He heard the clatter of metal against wood and saw the dart meant for him bouncing of the sofa and landing on the marble floor harmlessly. They were close, he realised even though a part of him demanded to know how they breached the perimeter of the Wayne estate without being seen.

_Doesn't matter now, _Bruce told himself promptly, _they're here._

Risking being hit by another shot from the tranquiliser gun, Bruce shoved away the sofa and grabbed Chloe, sweeping her up in his arms and making a beeline through the patio door to reach temporary safety. He did so feeling a dart tear through his shirt sleeve on the way past, narrowly avoiding his skin.

"Alfred!" Bruce shouted for his butler.

It took less than a second for Alfred to appear. The butler was out of breath, looking as if he had been running a marathon in as much time as it had taken for Bruce to call for him. "Master Bruce, we've have intruders. I don't know how they did it but they managed to enter the grounds without setting off any of the perimeter alarms…”

"Alfred it doesn't matter now," Bruce said sharply. "We're about to have guests. Take Chloe
downstairs to the cave and wait there. I'll get Clark and the others.

Handing Chloe to the one person he trusted more than himself, Bruce raced up the stairs. A passing glimpse through a window on route allowed him to see the intruders emerging from the tree line, at least eight that he could see so far and he did not doubt that there could be more. Reaching the top of the stairs, it was another few seconds before he opened the door to the room shared by Clark and Lois and saw neither. He heard the shower running in the bathroom and guessed quickly that the battling duo had made up. It explained why neither had heard the commotion.

Bruce was about to interrupt them when he paused at Lois' handbag and snatched it off the bureau. Emptying its contents, he saw nothing out of the ordinary but he was convinced this was how the Manor had been compromised. He should have known their rescue of Lois from DeSaad's Gotham branch was too easy. She hadn't been rescued...she had been let go. Bruce cursed his over confidence. It wasn't just Clark who was in jeopardy now but also his own identity as playboy billionaire, one he cultivated so carefully for his own needs.

It wouldn't be in her hand bag, he reasoned, it was too obvious. It had to be something on her. Scanning the room, he caught sight of a pair of earrings on the nightstand next to the bed. Retrieving them, he studied them carefully before placing them back on the bureau and smashing a heavy ornament against it, crushing the jewellery completely. When he removed the cast iron bust of some unknown model, he saw among the fragments of zirconia and hypo-allergenic steel, tiny strands of optic fibre.

"What the hell Bruce?" Clark demanded, having heard the thud and emerged from the shower, clad only in a towel.

"Get dressed Clark," Bruce ordered shortly, not wasting time on the niceties. "DeSaad's people are here. They planted a bug in Lois' earrings. We need to get Lois and Valerie into the cave."

"What?" Clark's first impulse to look out the window and in doing so saw the men that were closing in. This would not have happened if he had his powers, Clark thought frantically. Now he had compromised not only himself but also Bruce.

"Oh God," Lois gasped as she emerged, having heard enough to realise her earlier decision to infiltrate DeSaad was compounded into an even more catastrophic situation. "Bruce I'm so sorry."

"Save the apologies for later," Bruce replied approaching Clark. "Clark, come with me. We don't have much time. Lois, make sure you and Valerie get to the cave and stay there."

"What are you two going to do?" Lois demanded as she grabbed her clothes. Clark was already in his jeans, pulling a t-shirt over himself.

Bruce didn't answer.

Valerie had wanted to stay and fight but Lois didn't give her the chance. Dragging the girl out of the room she had hidden herself away the last weeks, to the secret entrance leading to Bruce's underground playpen, Lois knew that this was not the time for Valerie's devastating siren cry. She had only been down to the cave once before but it scared the hell out of her, mostly because Lois understood better than anyone that this was the place where the real Bruce Wayne came out to play. Everything above was the façade and she prayed that Chloe knew this too and could live with it.
"What is this place?" Valerie asked anxiously, still trapped between the need to flee and the desire to fight. This was her doing, all of it. The death of her parents, the misfortune she had brought to all the people who had tried to help her. At the end of things, there would be a final accounting and Valerie knew she would have to pay.

"Billionaire's secret club house," Lois retorted as they stepped off the elevator and saw Alfred attending to Chloe who was lying in a chair unconscious. "What happened to Chloe?"

"She's temporarily immobilized," he explained, "she was struck with a tranquiliser dart Miss Lane."

Christ this was getting worse by the minute. "Damn it," Lois exclaimed. "I shouldn't have gone to DeSaad. This is my fault. I did this!"

"No it's not yours," Valerie was quick to interject, "its mine. All of it."

"Ladies," Alfred said calmly, "this isn't the time to indulge in self-recrimination. The fault lies with the men who would do us harm. Let us leave it at that, shall we? Where is Master Bruce and Mister Kent?"

"I don't know," Lois said shaking her head, her fears for Clark and Bruce escalating now that her thoughts had returned to them. Bruce could take care of himself well enough but Clark was vulnerable, unaccustomed of dealing with enemies without his great powers. "He told us to come down here and took Clark with him."

Lois went to Chloe and kneeled down next to her cousin, taking her hand. "Chloe," she called out. "Come on cuz, wake up. This isn't the time to take a nap, too much happening around here." She tried to inject her usual flippancy into her tone but couldn't quite manage it. Chloe's breathing continued as if she were nothing more than taking a light nap but Lois' voice didn't wake her up.

Meanwhile Alfred went monitor screens displaying the signal from the security cameras placed throughout the mansion itself, searching for an idea of where Bruce and Clark might be. While he had difficulty finding them, he had no trouble seeing the dozen men who were even now, entering the house from several different access points. Suddenly, he heard the mechanism of the old elevator that Master Bruce used to reach the cave shift into motion. However, as the elevator descended towards the foot of the cave, one thing was soon clear.

It carried only one person.

"Where's Bruce?" Lois demanded when she saw Clark stepped out of the elevator car.

Clark's jaw was tight, not at all liking the plan that Bruce had forced him to agree to but knowing begrudgingly that there was no other way. All their futures depended on being free of DeSaad and they couldn't do that if they kept running. "Up there."

"Up there?" Lois exploded. "What do you mean up there?"

"Lois, we don't have time to discuss this right now. Bruce isn't sure how safe we'll be down here so we have to leave now." He said sharply walking past her and Valerie to approach Chloe. "What's wrong with Chloe, Alfred?"

"She was hit with a tranquiliser dart," Alfred answered, unhappy about Bruce's absence but astute enough to read between the lines that neither was Clark. He knew his young charge and if Bruce asked to be left behind, then there was a good reason for it. "She should wake up when the drug's effects wear off."
Clark nodded grimly, his insides twisting into a dozen kind of knots at having to leave Bruce behind. "Bruce asked me to tell you to take us to a safe place," he locked blue eyes with the older man. "He said you'd know where."

Alfred's face betrayed nothing and yet Clark could feel in his bones, the paternal fear Alfred was feeling for Bruce's safety. "That I do Mister Kent. Follow me."

"Clark we can't leave him!" Lois exclaimed. "They played nice with me because they wanted me to lead them to you but if they take Bruce, you know they won't be as reasonable. They killed Valerie's parents for god's sake!"

"I KNOW THAT LOIS!" Clark fairly roared making Lois jump. "This is Bruce's plan and it's the only one we have that might work for all our sakes. None of us is safe now, don't you understand? Even if I turned myself in, they'll kill everyone here just to keep it quiet. I don't like it any better than you Lois but it's the only way."

Lois swallowed thickly, trying to accustom herself to Clark's seldom seen temper. He rarely raised her voice to her in such a manner but when he did, Lois knew when to make a strategic withdrawal. "I hope Bruce knows what he's doing." She muttered as she saw Clark lean over to pick up Chloe from the chair, preparing to follow Alfred as instructed by Bruce.

Clark glanced at Chloe's unconscious face, feeling guilt so thick he could barely speak, wondering how he would explain it to her, when she woke up, that they had fled the manor, leaving Bruce behind.

Quietly, Clark whispered to himself, "I hope so too."

Seated behind his desk, pretending to play the part of the billionaire airhead that served him so well in the past, Bruce Wayne could hear the enemy moving throughout the mansion. The shattering of glass, the soft sounds of feet moving across the polished wood floor, were the tell tale signs of impending captivity. When these people had invaded his home, they had forced him into a corner. No longer was this about protecting Clark's secret or keeping DeSaad away from Valerie Beaudry, this was now about protecting the persona that was crucial to his future destiny.

Finishing off the glass of water on his desk, he eased back into the leather chair and waited for them to burst through the door, once they had finished searching the house for Clark. It wouldn't be long before they discovered that the mansion was empty and if by some remote chance they found their way to the cave, Alfred would ensure that Clark, Lois and Valerie were long gone by then.

Less than a minute later, they finally entered the room, dressed in black camouflage gear looking every bit the hired mercenaries that they were. The leader of the group stepped forward, the night vision goggles hanging around his neck, exposing only his eyes. The rest was hidden by a black ski mask.

"Good evening gentlemen," Bruce greeted. "Can I do something for you?"

"Where are your friends Mr. Wayne?" Corben asked, eyeing the younger man critically. While it made a certain amount of sense to discover that Lois Lane and Clark Kent were hiding out at the Wayne Manor, since Chloe Sullivan her cousin was dating Bruce Wayne, Corben was surprised to find Wayne still here, looking as if he was waiting for them. By all accounts, Wayne was a rich dilettante without an interesting thought in his overindulged head.
"Friends?" Bruce retaliated with innocence, "I have many friends. You'll have to be more specific than that."

"Clark Kent and Lois Lane," Corben clarified obligingly. "We know they were here."

"And you'd be right," Bruce replied, not bothering to deny it since they wouldn't have tracked Lois here if it were untrue. "They stopped by for a spot of dinner and then went on their merry little way. I believe they mentioned something about a road trip to see the Grand Canyon. If you get on the road out of town, you might just catch them."

"Very amusing Mr. Wayne," Corben declared coolly, "I hope you'll be this helpful with us when the time comes." Without further ado, he turned on his heels and barked to his comrades on the way out, "Take him."
For seven years, Bruce Wayne had searched the world. He travelled the globe seeking answers to the questions that had plagued him all his life. It was a quest to give direction to the fury he felt watching his parents die in front of him in that dark alley so long ago. Seven years in the forge and he had emerged as something uncompromising, relentless and infinitely patient. He knew his metamorphosis was not complete. The final product was still in a chrysalis, evolving.

What he would be, he had not become yet.

Therefore, he could be forgiven for the occasional lapse.

Like right now, as he drove towards Wayne Manor with Clark and Lois, having made good their escape from the DeSaad Building. The need for DeSaad to project a legitimate front had made it possible for them to escape without too much fanfare. As soon as the internal security systems were disabled, external security forces were rushing to the scene, limiting the capability of Lois' captors to pursue them as vehemently as they wished. Leaving the building the same way they had arrived, they were soon driving away from the city limits towards the road that took them back to the Manor.

Bruce was convinced if this Mr. Corben had arrived before they reached Lois; it was likely that they could have retrieved her at all. It seemed as if Hank Cobb was only a lackey, good for tricking young women into captivity through the Internet. Corben sounded like the man who made the decisions. Keeping the name in mind, Bruce planned to research the name with Chloe's help as soon as he got back to the cave.

That is, if he didn't ditch his two companions on the side of the road first.

"I'm just saying Smallville," Lois continued to insist as she sat in the back seat of the car "I could have gotten out that situation...eventually."

Not for the first time since they embarked on the trip home, Clark begged to differ.

"Are you kidding me Lois?" Clark looked over his shoulder from where he was riding shotgun with Bruce, disbelief etched in his features. "You said it yourself, they drugged you. God only knows what you told them while you were under."

Lois narrowed her eyes and glared at him because that remark stung. "What more could I have told them?" She demanded. "They already know that blue meteor rocks affect you! If they know that, they have to know you're from Krypton!"

"You could have told them where we've been hiding!" Clark pointed out.
Lois swallowed thickly unable to deny that possibility but she still refused to give up. It wasn't in her nature to admit she might have made a mistake and worst than that, she might have endangered not only herself and Clark but also everyone else at Wayne Manor. "If I had given that up," she said regrouping, "they wouldn't have wasted any time keeping me captive, they'd already have stormed the Manor and grabbed all of you."

If only to put an end to the argument because frankly this bickering was wearing thin on even Bruce Wayne's impressive patience, he added over the steering wheel. "That could be a possibility. They did seem very insistent on acquiring you Clark. If they had a location, they wouldn't have wasted any time coming after you."

"Thank Christ for small favours," Clark fumed, still angry and feeling more helpless than before. If it weren't for Bruce, he would never have been able to get into DeSaad and rescue Lois. Just how helpless he was, was starting to dawn on Clark and he was terrified that the next time Lois was in a dire situation, he wouldn't be able to help her. All his life, he had wanted to be a normal so that he could be with the woman he loved without having to worry about secrets. Now that he had what he wanted, Clark never imagined he would wish other wise. "We were lucky this time. Next time, someone could really get hurt."

The Manor came into view and Bruce pressed down on the accelerator a little harder than he ought, sending the car flying through the gates faster than was considered safe. However, he was trying to outrun an argument that was about to hit critical and he had no desire to be in the front line of this particular melee.

"This is what I do!" Lois exclaimed, getting angrier at his comments. She knew he was justified in being angry but Lois felt guilty enough. However, she refused to believe that she was completely helpless without his help. "I can't be an investigative journalist without taking risks Clark! I've managed to not get killed in the last two years."

"That's because I've almost always been there to save your ass Lane!" Clark bit back. "Even before you knew about my secret, do you have any idea how many times I've had to come to your rescue? Keeping up with you is a full time job even with my abilities!"

Even as he said it, Clark knew he crossed a line.

Ouch. Bruce thought, glancing at the rear view mirror to see Lois' look of dismay at Clark's return serve. Thank God, he thought when the front steps of the mansion came up along side of the car. If parking were an Olympic sport, then the amount of time that Bruce took to bring the vehicle to a stop would have qualified him for a medal. Hr was about to jump out of the car when Lois beat him to it. She slammed the door behind her and raced up the steps, saying nothing to Chloe as she rushed past.

A full ten seconds passed before Clark spoke.

"I over reacted didn't I?" He said with a grimace.

Bruce gave him a look of pure disbelief. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"I should go after her," Clark sighed, climbing out of the car.

"What was that about?" Chloe asked when Clark emerged, certain that something was wrong by the manner Lois had raced past her saying nothing. Even after a rescue, Lois Lane was never at a loss for words.

"I gotta talk to Lois," Clark retorted, not wanting to tell Chloe that he had behaved like jerk. Lois
would describe it better than he would later anyway. Hurrying up the stairs, he left Bruce to fill in the details.

"Judging by the fact that you're all here I assume everything went alright?" Chloe stared at Bruce puzzled as the storm named Lois and Clark shifted its destructive trail away from them.

"Pretty much," Bruce retorted, shutting the car door before approaching Chloe. Not for the first time today, Bruce thanked the gods that Chloe and her cousin were distinctly different.

"Then what was that?" She asked, quite bewildered.

"Who knows?" Bruce leaned forward to give her a kiss, "but I'm sure grovelling will be involved."

It wasn't difficult to find Lois even in a mansion as large as Wayne Manor.

Clark was only a few paces behind Lois, his long legs making up the distance as he hurried after her, feeling like a heel for behaving as he had. Bruce was right, he had overreacted but the reasons had nothing to do with Lois and her devil may care attitude. He had fallen in love with her because of those very qualities. Her ability to shake her fists and stand defiantly against all comers no matter what, had captured Clark Kent's imagination long before she captured his heart.

He didn't want that to change.

In truth, he wasn't nearly as angry with her as he was with himself. Clark liked being there for Lois. He liked being there when she was in over her head. Lois' fearlessness at being able to rush in where angels feared to tread was a quality Clark did not wish to impede just because of his own frailties. She wouldn't be the Lois he loved if she was any other way.

Entering the room they had been sharing since they began their stay at Wayne Manor, Clark didn't need enhanced hearing to hear the quiet tears coming from the bathroom. Clark could never stand to see Lois in tears, even when he wasn't in love with her. On those rare occasions, he was afforded a few of a beautiful, vulnerable woman who felt things more deeply than most despite her best efforts to hide it.

"Lois," Clark leaned against the bathroom door and said softly, "I'm sorry."

Her answer was another sniffle.

Clark winced at that sound. Kryptonite didn't feel this bad.

"Lois, I was a jerk. You being a pain in my ass is the one thing about you I love the most. I'm not angry that you take risks, I'm angry that I can't be there for you when you do. I don't know if I'm ever going to get my powers back and that makes me afraid that I might lose you. I love you more than I've ever loved anything. I can't imagine anything happening to you, not now. Not after I finally know what you mean to me."

The sniffling stopped and Clark took that as a good sign.

Sliding to the floor, he sat leaning against the door, continuing to speak. "All my life, this is what I wanted, to be normal. I hated keeping secrets from the people I cared about, it always felt like one lie after another. Other than my parents, you're the first person I've ever made a conscious decision to share the truth with. Everyone else found out by accident."

It was the true. Even with Chloe, his closest confidante, it had been circumstance that forced him
to share the truth with her. Lois was the first person that Clark had willingly told the truth.

"I never realised how much apart of me being Kryptonian was and now that I've lost that, I feel..." he shook his head. "I don't know what I feel..."

Suddenly the door opened behind her and Lois was staring at him. "Jeez Smallville, what next violins?" She stared at him impatiently. "You had me after 'I'm sorry'." Her lips quirked into the barest hint of a smile.

Clark stood up quickly and looked down at her, seeing the drying tears on her cheeks. "Lois I'm sorry." He repeated himself, guilty that he had wounded her so. "I didn't mean to be such .... "

"A dork? A jerk, jackass...idiot?" She fired at him.

Clark let out a rueful laugh. "Yeah," he admitted. "Any or all of those. Thanks for taking my apology so gracefully." He threw in sarcastically.

"Smallville," she winked. "It's me."

"Right," he chuckled as she took his hand led him to the bed. "What was I thinking?"

Lois sat down on the edge of the bed, all mischief fading from her face when she lifted his hand and brushed her lip against a callused knuckle. "Smallville, you were my knight in shining armour way before I found out you could leap tall buildings in a single bound. You may not be able to deflect bullets for me anymore but I'll always need you to be there and I don't plan on letting anything happen to me either. We've got too much stuff ahead of us for that. Following Whitesnake around when they do that cross country tour, buying our first sofa together, our Valentine's Day pact to put a burning effigy of cherubs on the front lawn..."

Clark burst into a grin, wondering how it was possible for her to make him feel so good by some of the absurd things that came out of her mouth. "Yeah love is definitely committing arson."

"Damn straight Smallville," she pushed him onto his back and climbed on top of him. "Besides," her expression became unreadable. "There are perks to you being normal you know?"

Clark raised a brow, staring at her intrigued. "Like what?"

Her response was an enigmatic smile as she reached behind her and released the pearl clip that held her hair in place. Auburn locks fell around her shoulders like a cascade of russet as her eyes locked with his. Clark watched mesmerized by that smile, never knowing what it meant when she employed it. Leaning down, he felt the soft strands caress his cheek an instant before Lois planted a deep, exploring kiss against his lips.

Oh, his brain finally caught up.

"Lois," he managed to speak as her kisses moved past his lips and down his jaw. "You mean...are you...now?" He stuttered a response.

"What are we waiting for Smallville?" her voice became soft and husky, filled with a seductive tone she seldom used and for good reason. He had no absolutely no defence against it.

"Nothing I can think of right now," Clark muttered incomprehensibly as his thoughts started to turn into gibberish. Lois' fingers were rolling the dark sweater he had been wearing up his body, her hands charting a tantalising journey past his taut muscles of stomach and up her chest.

"Besides the best part of a fight," she lifted her head long enough to look in his eyes, "is making
up." Lois winked.

The love Clark saw in hers allayed his doubts as did the fears he had about this moment. Months ago, when they had first started dating, his alter-ego Kal had made an appearance and in encountering Lois, enjoyed the intimacy Clark had been too afraid to share with her at time. With Kal's memories in his head, Clark had seen Lois responding to the less inhibited and certainly more aggressive side of his personality. Since then, he had resisted the urge to revisit the subject, fearful that if they did make love, she would crave *Kal* not him.

As she stripped away the sweater and tossed it aside, Clark saw no evidence of such thing. The desire he saw in Lois' eyes were for him and only him. Watching in fascination as she took charge, Clark quickly disregarded all the reasons why he hadn't taken this step with her before. As Lois continued to kiss him, her lips making a sensual journey along his collarbone and down his chest, Clark made one final attempt to reason with her.

"Lois," he said through heavy lidded eyes. "Are you sure?" He asked, his voice breathless.

Lois didn't answer. Her eyes met his with a smile his Presbyterian upbringing could only call *sinful* before she lowered her mouth unto a nipple and suckled insistently.

"Oh God," he hissed, having never experienced that particular type of foreplay before. Although he wasn't a virgin anymore (Thank God), his sexual encounters with Lana had been brief and Clark didn't count Kal's experiences as his own. They had been two inexperienced kids back then and though he had engaged in some intimacy with Lois, she had respected his decision to take it slow.

As he felt her lips, biting and nibbling at him, making him so hard and erect he could barely form thought, Clark Kent wondered what the hell he had been thinking.

His fingers threaded through her hair, savouring every strand of russet in his fingers, trying not to be overwhelmed by what she was making him feel. All those heated nights on the couch, trying not to let things get too far, trying to hold back for reasons he knew had little validity, Clark had denied not only himself but Lois too. He used to be afraid that he might hurt her but Kal had proved a fully sexual relationship with Lois was possible, if only he dared.

His eyes flew open when he felt her pulling at the zipper of his pants and Clark lifted his head to look down. Swallowing thickly, he felt another surge of dark lust as he hardened even more at sensation of her breath against his stomach as she freed him. His jaw tensed as her palm wrapped itself around his flesh and he barely managed to hold in the moan that wanted to escape.

"Lois…you don't have to…" he whispered even though his eyes said differently.

Lois smiled, suspecting by their earlier encounters that Clark and Lana's sex life had been very pedestrian. When she had been listening to him earlier on, it seemed as if Clark felt the loss of his powers made him less of a man. Part of the reason she was taking this step with him now was to remind him that he was every bit a man and being normal didn't mean he was powerless.

"See I told you," she smirked as she held him in her hands, teasing.

"What?" He barely managed to ask.

"Can't call you Smallville, can't I?" Lois winked.

"Lois!" Clark exclaimed indignantly before all other thoughts vanished from his mind as she took him into her mouth.
Clark thought he might die from how good it felt to have her slide up and down his length, her teeth biting into his skin just enough to pull a low groan from his mouth. His body wanted to push instinctively. Every sense came alive as he resisted the urge to thrust as far as he could into that incredible well of heat. Biting down as his fists knotted around the sheets, the voice inside his throat drowning in a silent scream of exquisite intensity.

The pleasure was beyond belief. Clark had heard about it, imagined how it might be but experiencing it for himself the first time was amazing, just as incredible as watching her work his flesh so expertly he could barely breathe.

Lois could hear him calling her name as she continued to taste him, hearing the helpless need in his voice unleashed her own desires for Clark. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen and though she hadn't loved him from the start, she was eternally grateful that she loved him now. She imagined what he would do to her when she finally moved the seduction to that level and felt a shudder of arousal moving through her like a ripple. For now, Lois wanted him to feel pleasure the likes of which he had never known. She wanted Clark to know that who he was should be celebrated, power or not, that nothing between them would ever change. His inexperience brought out the best in her and Lois was determined that their first time together was everything he imagined.

It was also even more comforting when Lois realised nothing in any of this reminded her of Kal. This moment belonged only to Clark and her.

"God Lois," she heard him groan. "I love you," he chanted over and over again. "I love you so much."

He was close, she could feel his control beginning to slip. He was thrusting so frantically into her mouth that there was no other conclusion. She glanced up was gripped by the perfect expression of pleasure on his face. His mouth was gasping for air and his hands were snaked in her hair. She doubted that he was even aware that he was guiding her descent.

Jesus, Lois thought to herself as she felt an intense sensation of desire surging savagely through her upon seeing his beautiful body squirming in pleasure. Did he even have any idea how incredible he looked at his moment, glistening with sweat, gasping aloud and making her wish there were lips there to capture that perfect mouth to plunder it as relentlessly as she was doing the rest of him?

"Lois," she heard him groan, his voice pleading at her desperately. "You, you have to stop." Lois stopped what she was doing and felt a moment of dismay. Had she pushed him before he was ready for this? She was almost afraid to ask, "Smallville?"

It was nothing less than torture to say those words but through the ecstasy she was making him experience, Clark knew what he wanted more than her mouth doing sinful things to him.

"This is our first time Lois, it should be special." Smouldering blue eyes met hers with a smile. "I want us to get there together."

Understanding him fully, Lois burst into a radiant smile and never thought she could adore him any more than she already did. "Well if you insist..." she smirked.

"I insist," he whispered, head still spinning. She was still fully clothed and with fingers trembling slightly, Clark worked the buttons of her blouse loose, popping them one after the other until the
silk slid off her shoulders. After everything that had happened so far, Lois felt somewhat self-conscious when she revealed herself to him. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen her naked before but this wasn’t just about flesh, it was intimacy.

"Let me," she said unhooking the clasp on her bra and shivering when his big hands slid the straps off and discarded the flimsy piece of lace material.

Naked to the waist, Clark took a moment to appreciate the sight of Lois sitting on top of him, with her tousled hair and the sculpted perfection of her body in front of him. He remembered all those times he had admired her from afar. What this girl could do to a bikini should be outlawed.

"You're beautiful Lane." He teased and was rewarded by a rare blush creeping into her cheeks. Cupping large hands over the perfectly formed breasts, Clark kneaded the flesh tenderly, a soft groan escaping him as he felt the tight nub of her nipples beneath his palms. Pushing himself upright, he caught a rosebud peak into his mouth and washed gently with his tongue. Another hand slid around her back, holding her in place as he began to suckling her flesh with as much mercy as she had given him earlier.

"Oh Clark," Lois whimpered, feeling teeth and tongue, biting and tugging insistently at her. Her back arched, pushing more of herself into that gloriously sensuous mouth.

"f**k," he grunted upon hearing that fevered cry. Was there anything as good as hearing your girlfriend cry out like that? "Lois, you're going to kill me."

"What a way to go Smallville," she muttered blissfully, feeling the surge of dampness between her legs as he continued to tease her. "God I need you inside me."

"You're so bossy," he grumbled playfully, hearing Lois’ needy voice had emboldened Clark somewhat and he flipped them over, changing positions so that he was on top of her. Pulling back just enough to kick of his pants, Clark approached Lois with a knowing smile and removed the rest of her clothes. Once again, he was lost to the sight of her completely naked before him. She was the sexiest woman he had ever seen, with a body for sin and a spirit equal to none.

Lois sighed at how satisfying his weight felt against her when Clark lowered himself onto her body. She immediately ran hands over his strong back, shuddering when she felt him pressing hard against her lower belly.

Clamping her mouth when she pulled him to her, they carried out a heated contest of duelling tongues as he slid one hand under her thigh and entwined the fingers of the other between hers. Her body moved under his like warm silk fluttering in the wind and the sensation made him so hard he had could barely think coherently. As his desire continued to build, his fingers tentatively explored the soft, delicate folds of velvet amongst damp curls. Fascinated by her warmth and emboldened by muscles that clenched around his fingers upon contact, Clark never thought a sense of touch could feel so satisfying.

"Jesus." His voice escaped him in a grunt. "You feel so good Lois."

Lois was beyond hearing.

"God, don't stop." She mumbled senselessly, her hips gyrating as she began riding his hand. His fingers were just wonderful and she wondered through a haze, just how he knew exactly where to touch her since this was the farthest they had ever gone sexually. She could feel him pressing up the wall of her slick depths, exploring her as if she were some wonderful new discovery.

"Never," he whispered even though he was not even conscious of having spoken. Her body was
hard and taut under him, while her moist depths were ecstasy personified in a sensuous mix of heat wet and pressure. Her muscles kept tightening around his fingers, driving him damn near insane. She was finally his in a way that he had only dreamed about before.

"Smallville," Lois opened her eyes and looked at him. For all they were doing to each other, it wasn't enough. "I need you inside me." She begged in low hungry voice. "Please, come inside me."

Clark nodded, unable to offer a witty response to match her earlier teasing. He was so hard he could barely think. Hearing Lois plead like that had to be most erotic thing he had ever heard in his life. Clark never thought that there could be so much satisfaction in knowing that a woman like her could want him so badly. Losing his powers, being ordinary, it didn't seem so important if he could make Lois feel like this every day for the rest of their lives.

Sliding eagerly between her legs, he felt his thoughts fragment as he nudged past her soft, wet folds. His breath caught and he stiffened at the exquisite pleasure of penetration. Closing his eyes and biting down hard, he had to brace himself as warm suction coaxed him in with promises of agonising sensation when Lois wrapped her legs around his waist and sheathed him entirely.

Christ, she felt so good. How could he have held back so long?

"So tight," he muttered incoherently into her hair, "God, you're so tight."

Clark filled Lois like no one before, like no one she would ever want again. Just the initial stages of their coupling had sent her spiralling into a whirlwind of sensation from which she never wanted to surface. Her fingers slid over the firm muscles of his rear now that he was exactly where he should be. It was beyond reason how he was making her feel, Lois had never imagined it could be like this. She loved the smell of him, the taste of him, the way he felt buried inside of her all the way to the hilt.

"I love you Smallville," she whispered.

He raised his head just long enough to meet her eyes and though he was lost in sensation, Clark still appreciated the significance of her words. His cobalt coloured eyes sparkled just enough to show her his happiness before pleasure exerted control and he began to thrust into her.

It did not take Clark long to develop a rhythm although he knew it had been too long since the last time for him to last as long as he would have liked. Pumping into her warmth, feeling her muscles tighten around him, Clark felt slightly comforted by the fact that he didn't think Lois would last much longer either.

Jesus, he was f**king incredible, she thought blissfully out as his pace increased and he was starting to pound into her relentlessly, every ounce of pent up desire was finally finding its release and Lois was grateful for all of it.

Lois called his name repeatedly, unaware that words were leaving her mouth. It didn't matter so long as he continued what it was he was doing. She was flying higher and higher with each hard thrust, until she could hardly breathe for the pleasure of him. This was what was missing when she was forced to make love to Kal, this was what made Clark so distinctively different. With Clark, there was hard, driving desire but there was also tenderness and the mix was uniquely his. Lois knew at that moment, she would go to her dying day, never wanting to be with anyone else.

"Lois," Clark whimpered helplessly. "I can't hold on..."

Lois took his face in her hands and smiled, thinking he never looked as handsome as he did this
moment, when he was about to succumb to the incredible dance of pleasure they had created together. "Let go Smallville," she whispered kissing him once more. "Let go."

Permission granted, his face contorted into a silent scream of pleasure as he gave in to the pent up desires he had held back for so long. It wasn't just the sex but the experience of being able to give everything of himself to someone. For once, he could do it without worrying about the consequences or feeling doubt that they would run away from him in fear.

With his release, Clark took Lois with him. Feeling him stiffen inside her was all she needed to push her over the edge. Like the sunrise on the horizon, Lois could feel warmth and light, until she could see nothing else but sheer brilliance. What made it sweeter had nothing to do with technique or skill and everything to do with the fact that she would love this man always.

"Do you think we should check on them?" Chloe asked Bruce over a cup of coffee in the kitchen. She hated it when her two best friends were mad at each other.

"Even I'm not brave enough to get in the middle of that argument," Bruce retorted, taking a sip from his own cup. "I'm sure they'll come down when they're ready."

"Okay," Chloe said dubiously. "But if they kill each other, I'm blaming you."
The House That Valerie Built

Returning to the Kawatchee Caves was like returning to the womb.

So much about his destiny was revealed in the ancient pictographs he found on the walls of this cave, drawn by a tribe decimated like so many in North America's bloody history. Through the years, the meaning of them had remained an enigma, defying him to unravel the secret behind the curious language that no one else but he seemed to understand. The Kawatchee had thought they had uncovered the language of God when what they had found was the message in a bottle for Kal-El of Krypton.

Leaving Metropolis, Clark had driven straight to Smallville, taking the back roads known only to a native of these parts to reach the caves. He was careful to avoid the main roads or wander anywhere near the Kent Farm. He did not know how vigilant these people from DeSaad were but he wasn't taking any chances. Not when Bruce's life hung in the balance and certainly not when his future depended on his reaching the caves without interference. The gamble worked and he arrived at the site of the abandoned archaeological excavation that took place within the caves years ago, without incident.

In recent years, the Luthor Trust to protect the caves had fallen back to the Kawatchee Tribe who decided that there was enough plunder of their tribal heritage and barred any further research from being undertaken. Fortunately, the chamber containing the most valuable artifact remained relatively anonymous due to the fact that it could only be revealed by someone possessing Kryptonian DNA. To everyone else, it was simply a cave. To Kal-El, the cave was home to one of the last remaining portals that led to the Fortress. Normally, Clark himself would have little reason to use the cave to reach Jor-El's fortress since flying enabled him to get there on his own.

However, on this occasion, it was his only hope of making himself whole again.

Climbing over the fence that surrounded the caves, Clark landed on the gravel covered ground and took the familiar path to the entrance. There were signs posted everywhere telling trespassers to stay out but he ignored this. As he entered the mouth of the cave and immediately lost the sun on his back, he was once again overwhelmed by the shadows within. There were some lights inside the cave but not enough for him to see clearly. The loss of his enhanced vision was particularly galling at these moments. Fortunately, the passage was one he knew well though after traveling it so many times in the past. Clark followed the meandering twists and turns through rock, ignoring the pictographs that told his story to the world if they only understood the language as he closed in on his destination.

The chamber was located at the very depths of the cave, past the drawing of Naman and Seegeth that gave Lex Luthor such delusions of grandeur. Clark hardly paid attention to it, having faced worst enemies since Lex to know that he couldn't wait his whole life for an apocalyptic foe that may never come.

Waiting for doomsday was a waste of time, he decided. It would find you when it was ready.

He reached the cave and the far wall where once he had vanished for three months but this time there he felt no fear and Clark took a deep breath, praying that whatever had been done to him would not stop the portal from activating and sending him through. If this did not work, then he had no idea how else to save Bruce. Taking a deep breath, Clark put himself into the hands of fate and stepped forward into the portal, letting it take him where it would.

If anywhere at all.
Glaring bright light assaulted him so suddenly that Clark was blinded as he lost his footing and landed face first in the snow. Icy prickles made him shudder in reaction as he immediately gathered himself onto his knees and hugged his arms to his body, never realizing how debilitating cold could be. He suddenly felt guilty for the few times he had brought Chloe and Lois to this place. The icy wind blew across his face felt like lashes as Clark stood up slowly to surveyed the scene to determine where he was.

He was standing up to his shins in snow, in the middle of glacier field. In the distance he could see mountains, covered in snow. On the other side, he saw glaciers. The sun was high in the sky, blazing down with all its might but it did nothing to aid his tolerance of the biting cold. It took him a fraction of a second longer to find the Fortress and once again, he forgot how beautiful it was, gleaming in the sunlight. A dazzling jewel surrounded by ice. Clark rushed here so fast whenever he came; he never really stopped to see how incredible it was.

For a brief moment, Clark wondered if all buildings in Krypton were constructed this way and not for the first time, felt a tinge of sorrow at the loss of his home world. Krypton had its own beauty like Earth. The Fortress was a good ten minutes walk and so Clark let out a heavy sigh, watching his breath frost the air front of him as he breathed and started walking. At least, the activity would keep him warm he thought. Walking across the snow, Clark developed a new appreciation for his Kryptonian abilities and wondered how hard it must be for Lois, Chloe and Bruce to go through this everyday, to live with this pain all the time.

After what seemed to be the longest ten minutes of his life, Clark reached the uneven steps of the Fortress walls. Walking under the crisscrossing columns, Clark made his way to the central hub of the Fortress controls. He never knew how to communicate directly with the father that supposedly lived in these unusual walls since Jor-El was always waiting for him with some terrible decree or prophetic warning.

"Father," he spoke out loud when he reached the controls and saw it lifeless, waiting perhaps for his input to come alive. Perhaps it required some stimulus from him to do so before.

"Father, its Kal-El." He repeated himself again, louder this time, using the Kryptonian name that still sounded odd to him. He was Clark Kent first, he always would be. He would fight being Kal-El as long as he could.

"Father, there's something wrong with me." He pleaded, wishing that it was a person he was speaking to and wondering if disembodied voice was so different form the man and whether flesh and blood would make Jor-El any easier to relate to. "Father, my powers are gone."

"Your powers are not gone Kal-El." Jor-El's eloquent voice spoke in correspondence with the central hub coming alive with a familiar white glow. The crystals it held seemingly even brighter under the sunlight, almost luminescent. "They have been nullified."

"Nullified?" Clark asked, wishing he could speak to the man face to face. "I don't understand."

"You have been infected by blue kryptonite. Blue kryptonite renders all Kryptonians powerless by nullifying the properties of the yellow sun upon our body chemistry. Remove the blue kryptonite and you shall be restored."

Not that different from what Bruce had already theorized, Clark thought to himself. "I don't know how," he admitted," feeling foolish and stupid. "It's in my blood. It will take weeks and my friends are in trouble. I need to be restored now."

There was a slight pause and if it seemed as if a disembodied voice could be exasperated, Clark certainly got the feeling Jor-El was experiencing that emotion in the silence that followed. Clark
was suddenly gripped with the awful feeling that Jor-El wouldn't help, that he would leave things to follow their course, as he had done on other occasions. However, a panel slid open from the side of the hub, revealing a device that looked not unlike the object Milton Fine had used to remove the silver kryptonite in his bloodstream that had driven him half crazy years ago.

"This device will remove the blue kryptonite particles from your body," Jor-El's voice spoke again and Clark felt a surge of relief as he walked across the uneven floor to retrieve it. He had honestly thought that Jor-El would refuse him or worse yet, place some terrible price tag to this kindness or demand some retribution for his human weaknesses. Memories of what it had cost Jonathan Kent still haunted Clark to this day.

Laying his hand on the device, it felt cold like any hospital instrument. Clark wasted no time pressing it up against his skin. The extraction would be painful, Clark was under no illusions about that but Bruce was also enduring agony himself right now, of that Clark had no doubt. Bruce would do it and die protecting him because Clark understood how much Bruce cared about his friends. They were precious to him, they took the place of the family he lost and he would do anything to spare them. For that, Clark would do the same for his best friend.

"Thank you father," Clark said as he braced himself wanting to get this over and done with as quickly as possible so that he could get back to Lois and Chloe.

Predictably however, it seemed Jor-El was not about to let him do that without a parting shot.

"Kal-El," the cold, emotionless voice boomed once more. "The time is coming where you will be unable to hide from your destiny. Your love for your friends does you credit but until you become what you are destined to be, you will only cause them harm. These words are not spoken to deny you the right to choose your own path but as warning that you imperil them by your defiance. Accept who you are before someone you truly care about pays the price. When that happens, I will not be able to help you."

Something about the warning cut to the bone more than Jor-El's previous ominous warnings and Clark wondered if Jor-El was making some veiled threat. "Are you threatening me, Jor-El?" He glared into the crystal beams, daring Jor-El to show himself if he could.

"I make no threat Kal-El," the voice sighed, "It is as I have spoken - a warning. You may take it as you will."

"Fine," Clark retorted and returned to what he was doing. "I'll take it under advisement." And with that, he pushed down the toggle that activated the device against his skin.

The pain was almost immediate. However bad it had been before, now it was worse. Possibly for the first time in his life, Clark screamed. If it was, then he had some comfort in the fact that he didn't scream long because everything went black soon after.

"Jesus Ollie," Lois complained as she paced the floor of Oliver's office becoming more and more exasperated. "How long does it take to fly back to Metropolis from Bulgaria? Bruce doesn't have that much time!"

It had been hours since Clark had left and even though the GPS told them exactly where Bruce was, it offered them no comfort because until Clark got back from the fortress, they were helpless. As it was Bruce was being held in a longitudinal and latitude location that placed him two hours out of Metropolis in a sparsely populated area that was normally nothing but cornfields. A nice rural location where they could do God only knows what to meteor infected humans, Lois thought. Meanwhile, Lois and Alfred were left with trying to calm Chloe down but also preventing Valerie from slipping further and further into guilt that this was all her fault.
To assuage Chloe's growing anxiety; Lois decided to try Oliver again hoping he might be closer than he had been the last time she had called.

"Alright Russia?" She raged when he corrected her that he was in fact in Russia and that he was still somewhere over the Atlantic and was doing the best he could to get back faster.

"You know if you superhero types are going to save the world, you might think about teleportation devices!" She snapped and then sighed because it wasn't his fault. Oliver was doing the best he could. "I know you're doing everything you can. I'm sorry Ollie," she sighed. "I'll talk to you when you get back in okay?"

"OH GOD!"

An anguished cry from the living room made Lois stop what she was doing immediately, particularly when she recognized whose voice it was. Chloe.

"Ollie I gotta go," Lois said abruptly, giving the Archer on the other end of the line no opportunity to respond before she hung up the phone and dashed out of his usurped office. Lois emerged into the walkway overlooking the living room of the Queen Penthouse and saw Chloe kneeling on the floor next to the coffee table where they had left the GPS. The expression on her face turned Lois' blood to ice as Chloe clung to the device, visibly trembling. She was on the verge of a complete emotional breakdown and so shocked was Lois at seeing her normally so together cousin, that for a second, she was rooted to the spot, too terrified to ask what had driven Chloe to such an outburst.

There was only one thing, her inner voice responded automatically. Bruce.

Only when Alfred emerged from the kitchen did Lois' brain jump start into action again and she was bounding down the steps, two at a time, to reach Chloe side.

"Chloe, what is it?" Lois demanded skidding to the floor next to her. "What's happened?"

"The signal," Chloe said barely able to speak, her eyes darting from Lois' face to the display on the GPS screen. The screen whose blank face revealed all without her needing to say the words, the signal was gone. "It's gone."

Indeed it was. The screen that gave them the comfort of at least knowing where Bruce Wayne was now disconcertingly dark, with no sign of any life at all. Whether it was indication that the bug Bruce had implanted himself was malfunctioning or something worse, remained maddening elusive. Unfortunately, Chloe, whose hope was already hanging by a tenuous thread, was inclined to believe the worst. Considering what they knew about Bruce and his sheer refusal to yield to torture, it may well be justified.

Nevertheless Lois refused to give up on the billionaire playboy who since they met him, had turned out to be the smartest man they knew. Bruce would find a way. "Maybe it's not working…" Lois declared, trying to think of all the explanations as to why the signal would no longer transmit although each possibility did not bode well enough for Bruce and Lois was reluctant to voice them.

"It was implanted inside Bruce!" Chloe bit back barely able to keep her voice from cracking. "They would have had to get it out of him to shut it off! Either that or it short circuited…inside of him! That much of a jolt would kill most people! Oh Bruce…"

"Chloe, this doesn't mean anything…" Lois protested.

"She's right Miss," Alfred interjected in that comforting tone that reminded her so much of
Jonathan Kent that hearing it sometimes made Lois miss the man all over again. She wondered if Clark felt the same way in Alfred's company. "Master Bruce isn't most people. If anyone can surprise me, it's him. He wouldn't let himself fall into a situation he couldn't get out of. He'd find that rather...sloppy." Alfred looked at her with a hint of smile, trying to give her some hope in the face of her despair.

Chloe met Alfred's gaze, eyes glistening and nodded. "You're right there," she tried to smile but didn't quite manage it. "If there's one thing he knows how to do is surprise."

He had been the surprise alright. Bruce was the Prince Charming who came out of nowhere to sweep her off her feet. At first she had thought him to be just another misunderstood celebrity, hiding a secret pain and more depth than he showed the world. Later on, she found out that he was a hero in his own right, one that stood almost on equal ground with Clark's physical powers.

"Oh God Lois," Chloe started to sob allowing herself to be pulled into Alfred's embrace, "I'm so scared. I know I shouldn't be but I can't help it. For everything that he is, he's still human. Even if he doesn't always remember it."

Behind them, watching the scene, Valerie Beaudry saw the house that she had built.

The girl listened to the pain of Chloe Sullivan, a stranger whose life she had ruined just as surely as she had ruined Clark Kent's by exposing him to DeSaad, to say nothing about the parents who now lay dead on some mortician's slab awaiting burial. All of it had been her fault. She had been so desperate for affection that she allowed someone like Hank into her life, allowed him to trick her with his promises and subsequently brought doom and grief to everyone who cared about her. Lois Lane's act of kindness and these people's willingness to defend her still, despite their losses taught Valerie about true friendship then all of Hank's false promises.

She left the room silently and went to the hallway leading to the front door and peered at the mirror on the wall above a side table. Looking into the reflection, she saw a beautiful woman staring back at her whom she did not know. Even her face was Hank's creation. She had allowed him to cut her up and turn her from an ugly duckling into a swan.

A swan with a siren song that killed.

She couldn't let this go on. Lois and her friends would die to protect her and for that gesture, Valerie would love them dearly to the end of her days but it was not a sacrifice she would ask them to make. The keys to Oliver Queen's fleet of cars hung on an ornate key rack on the wall. Picking one, she didn't care which, she cast a final look at the only real friends she had made in the outside world and went out the front door.

She knew where they were keeping Bruce Wayne and before she brought their house of lies down around their ears, she would make them let him go.

And then Hank would pay.

The two men made their way down the long corridor carrying between them an unconscious and battered Bruce Wayne from the windowless room where Bennet had conducted his interrogation. With toes scrapping against the concrete floor as they dragged him along and tiny droplets of blood following their trail from the red stream that ran rivulets down Wayne's bare and pockmarked bruised chest, Wayne was in no shape to protest. A dead weight, he offered no help as they carried him back to his cell, seemingly oblivious to their presence while they carried out
their rather indifferent conversation about him.

"Can't believe this guy hasn't broken yet," the first man, dressed in the dark suits reserved for professional security, declared to his companion.

"Yeah," the second man wearing the same type of suit chuckled, revealing a mouthful of yellowed teeth from too much cigarettes "I was sure Bennett was gonna pop a vein trying to get him to talk. It didn't make him look too good in front of Corben, that's for sure. He's supposed to be the No.1 guy for information retrieval."

"Well if Wayne knows what's good for him when he wakes up," the first remarked as they neared the end of the corridor, "he'd better talk. I hear Bennett's getting more creative. Mr. Billionaire Screws Every Super Model Alive might find his style cramped if Bennett decides to find a blow torch to play with." This seemed to strike the man as particularly funny as he spent a few minute guffawing out loud.

"Hey watch it!" His companion grumbled, "You're getting blood on my shoes."

Suddenly, without warning the lifeless figure they had been holding came to life. Without giving either man time to react, Bruce Wayne took a step back and promptly smashed both men's skulls together with more force than someone in his condition should be able. A loud crack filled the empty hallway as the duo went down with a thud on either side of him. They went down quick and silently as he expected they would and when they hit the ground, he was perfectly confident they would be out cold.

Bruce stepped waste no time acting as soon as they were out. He wasn't going to make the mistake of thinking that no one would be happening by and immediately removed the shoes one of his captors had been so particular about. Checking the size, it fit him well enough. Reaching into their jackets', he searched them quickly, seeking out anything useful. Bruce shoved a folded Swiss Army pocket knife and a cell phone into his pocket before stripping one of the jackets. Wiping the blood off his skin, it wouldn't do to leave any more of trail than he had.

As he hurried down the hall, he smashed the lights on the ceiling as he went, raining glass on the floor as darkness followed him. When he heard the commotion of security discovering his escape as he expected that would, almost five minute had passed and Bruce was already where he needed to be. When he was being brought to interrogation, he had studied the layout of the place as best he could. Using the Swiss Army knife he had stolen, he opened the grill of the air vent and escaped into the building ventilation system.

Once inside the narrow space, Bruce kicked off his shoes again, preferring bare feet to maintain his stealth as he moved quickly through the passage, taking himself as far as he could get away from the voices shouting orders to recapture him. He crawled for almost 15 minutes before he took a moment to rest. The escape had taken most of his reserved strength and now he needed to recuperate for a few minute before he continued moving again.

Bruce was aware he couldn't afford to stay in one place long.

If he did, they would find him and he had just too much to do to be ready to die just yet
It was more than an hour later that they'd realized that Valerie had gone.

Each of them had retreated to their respective corners, like punch drunk fighters needing a breather after a particularly bad round. Chloe had disappeared into Oliver's study, making the most of her time with the state of the art computer system Oliver had in place and yet even as she waited for the system to initialize, she found herself thinking that it was nowhere as sophisticated as the set up Bruce had in his cave.

Thoughts of him immediately reminded that she was hiding in this room because she was trying not to show Lois and Alfred just how terrified she was at his continued absence. He was the strongest man she knew excepting Clark and in sheer force of will; Clark did not have Bruce's endurance. She'd seen him single minded with an intensity that alarmed her at times. There was only dark in his world, every corner of it was shadowed by the spectre of his dead parents and she wished with all her heart that she could wipe clean the blood splattered over that little boy in the alley.

And yet despite this, Chloe also knew that she had become the unexpected light in his life. She sat at Oliver's work station and resumed her search for any information about DeSaad which had almost no history until the arrival of its CEO, a Michael Canto. Canto like his company also had no history prior to the birth of his company. No birth records, no social security number, nothing. It could have been guarded but Chloe had also hacked into the IRS records and found a pending investigation into the man which had been placed on hold because the investigator into the case had vanished mysteriously. Furthermore, Canto didn't like to be seen. He preferred to remain in the shadows, the puppet master, pulling the strings of his corporate flunkies, acting as the face of the company.

If that didn't sound ominous to Chloe, then she didn't know what did.

Bruce had once told her the greater the lengths to create the illusion, the darker the secret.

For her own sojourn, Lois found herself on the roof top of Oliver's clock tower. The walkway surrounding the large clock face was almost one of the highest places in Metropolis. Standing against the railing, she felt the wind whip at her hair as she looked into the city. With amusement, she noted some of the nearby roofs had tell tale signs of Oliver's presence; stray arrows embedded in the spaces between slates. Oliver had dropped everything to get back to Metropolis as soon as possible in answer for her plea of help. Perhaps things hadn't worked out between them but they still had a special place in each other's hearts and Lois would always love him a little for that.

However, on this occasion, Lois was on the balcony, standing at the top of Metropolis' loftiest heights, because here, she felt closer to Clark, not Oliver. With the city beneath her, the wind in her hair, it almost felt as if she were flying with him again. In her heart, Lois would love Clark no matter what but she couldn't deny that if his powers were indeed gone, what she would missed most about them was the fact that she couldn't fly with him anymore.

She would miss that a lot.

Unfortunately, Lois knew that it was Clark who would have the most difficulty with being normal. These last few weeks had hard but the reality of permanence had yet to sink in. She feared that when he realised he could not rush off to someone's aid because what made Clark so unique
was not his power but his compassion, the realisation of his helplessness would cripple him. The imperative of his life which was to help anyone, whatever the situation. Until now, he never had to worry about consequences. If he didn't get his powers back, he'd be faced with nothing but consequences.

Lois didn't know if he was strong enough to bear it.

He wasn't like Bruce, driven by a past trauma. Clark helped because Jonathan and Martha Kent had raised him with values that might seem dated to some but was a kindness the world seemed to need. He helped because he could. Lois didn't want to see that broken inside of him, for any reason.

Alfred Pennyworth consoled himself the way he always did when times were at their darkest.

He made tea.

Hurtling through the years of memories spent in the Wayne household, he thought of all the times that he had prepared tea whenever there was some crisis. In the beginning of his tenure, tea had just been an import he brought with him from England. Mrs. Wayne had enjoyed it when she was pregnant, finding it less vulgar than coffee. During her pregnancy, Alfred introduced her to different forms of tea, Earl Grey, Lemon Scented, Chamomile and even Chrysanthemum. Although Alfred had joined the family through his association with Thomas during the war, it was with Martha that he formed a close bond. There were many afternoons where he listened to the former socialite with a conscience talking to him about her hopes for the child she was carrying.

After the baby was born, Martha opted to remain faithful to her new found beverage, preferring white tea above all else and Alfred took pride in serving it to her as he looked upon the infant she called her 'little prince' unaware that later on in life, that moniker would follow him for a completely different reasons. When Martha and Thomas had been taken away from them, Alfred had served Bruce tea, soothing a wound that would never be healed, loving Martha's son as if he was Alfred's own. As if tea and friendship made Bruce every much his as he was Martha's.

Alfred had served tea much like this, the night the boy had been delivered back to Wayne Manor with Martha and Thomas' blood still soaked in his clothes.

The butler had tried his best to wash it clean but by then it was too late, the blood had seeped past the skin, straight into the soul. The little boy who went out with his parents that night to a picture show was gone. What came back was a force of nature in the making. Frankenstein was building a monster in the bowels of the Manor and what shape this beast would take was something Alfred was almost afraid to find out.

Having made tea and some lunch to accompany it, Alfred went to seek out the young ladies and in his quest for them, felt some light in his fears for his surrogate child. Miss Chloe had entered Master Bruce's life and brought with her friends that were as true as any the butler could have hoped for Martha's little prince. The friendships that were forming between the quartet were binding and ones that gave Alfred some comfort Bruce would never be alone after he was gone.

He found Miss Chloe easily enough; she was hunched over Master Queen's computer trying to find means to help Bruce out of his current predicament. Alfred let her know that there was lunch to which she lifted her gaze and flashed him that smile which felt like all the light in the world. In that one moment, Alfred knew right away why Bruce had fallen so hard for the girl. She was the sunlight his dark soul needed so badly.

She'd be there in a moment, she'd told him before going back to work, gracious to the last even if
her eyes hide bravely how frightened she was.

Alfred left her then to go find Miss Lois on the balcony and found her staring into the city, with the wind in her hair looking like Boadicea about to face a legion of Romans, defiant. One thing he had learned about this woman was that her lack of fear near rivalled Bruce. She was in her way, a force to be reckoned with too. It explained easily why she could be the only one for the strongest being on the planet.

Like Chloe, Lois gave Alfred promises to come in shortly and so Alfred continued onwards, visiting the newest member to the group although he was unconvinced at her longevity. Valerie was the fulcrum upon which this situation had been set into motion. Having listened to snippets of Valerie's tale, he wondered if the friendship offered to her by Lois, despite all the consequences, would restore the young woman's faith in people. Certainly, she had been manipulated enough by strangers and the price for her naiveté, was too heavy for any person to pay.

Entering the room where the girl had taken refuge since their arrival here, he noted her absence and immediately frowned because he hadn't seen her elsewhere. A quick investigation of the rest of the penthouse suite forced Alfred to reach an unpleasant conclusion. Valerie was gone. It didn't take much more investigation for him to see that the tracking device that charted Master Bruce's location was gone, as was a set of keys from one of many to Oliver's collection of cars.

With a sigh, Alfred realised didn't require Bruce's deductive skills to determine where Valerie was going.

"Miss Chloe," Alfred went to her first because she was closest. "Miss Valerie is gone. I think she had gone after Master Bruce."

"Oh No!" Chloe exclaimed with dismay, cursing herself belatedly that they hadn't seen this coming. Valerie had voiced her guilt at bringing this on them and because she hadn't repeated herself in the last few hours, they had foolishly believed that the subject was closed. But how could it be? How could they think that when Chloe herself had gone to pieces because of Bruce's abduction, Lois was openly worried that Clark being crippled for life and her own parents being murdered? Pushing herself away from the desk, Chloe hurried past Alfred, in search of her cousin.

"Where's Lois?" she asked.

"Miss Lois is on the roof," Alfred said calmly.

"How long since you saw her? Valerie I mean?" Chloe asked, trying to determine just how much of a head start Valerie had.

"Not in the last hour," Alfred said regretfully.

"LOIS!" Chloe hollered for her cousin before returning her attention back to Alfred. "We should we able to tell from the timestamp on the security cameras in the elevators," she declared. "LOIS!"

"What?" Lois Lane hurried into the hallway, having heard her cousin's cry and fearing the worst. The pace of her footsteps indicating she was running. "What's happened?"

"Its Valerie," Chloe said meeting her in the middle of the passage, "she's gone."

"Oh hell," Lois curses. "Two guesses as to where she went," the tall brunette sighed.

"I only need one..." Chloe retorted.
"She took the tracker and a set of keys," Alfred added.

Lois cursed under her breath. "We have to go after her..."

"Go after her?" Chloe stared at Lois. "Lois, she's going to him...to Hank."

"And then he'll know where we are and what little leverage Clark might have had or any chance we've got to get Bruce back will be gone," Lois returned swiftly. "We need to get to her before she reaches him."

Chloe couldn't argue with that and a part of her wanted to do something other than just wait around. Of course it was a bad idea, she knew that. However, right now the desire to be closer to Bruce over rode her good sense. When it came to Bruce Wayne, Chloe often found herself thinking with her heart more than her brain.

It would have pleased her to know that Bruce had exactly the same problem.

Bruce Wayne had assumed that he was in one of DeSaad's Corporations many research facilities.

Granted this one was a little more off the beaten track than most but then again Bruce could be forgiven for thinking that the facility where the company conducted its torture sessions would need to be placed in a remote location. However, as he explored the complex through the maze of electrical access tunnels and ventilation shafts, Bruce began to discover a very different purpose to the facility once he was able to identify what he was seeing through the cracks of vents and the steel mesh of iron grates. What he saw was enough to send cold shudders through the seemingly impregnable shell of his granite composure.

All this time, Bruce had assumed that DeSaad's purpose was to glean from the meta human subjects the company had been collecting, the secrets to their abilities for the purposes of bio-weapons development and the almighty dollar. When it came to conglomerates, Bruce knew the score. Wayne Enterprises under the guidance of Lucius Fox and his own careful eye was a profit based company that offset its fiscal pursuits by engaging in numerous charity works. The Wayne Foundation existed to give back from the community the wealth that Wayne Enterprises made because of it. Other companies like LutherCorp, Stagg Industries and now DeSaad were not so altruistic.

Until now he never imagined it was about anything else but money.

Now he realised it was about power.

It was easy to mistake one for the other. Being wealthy gave one a certain amount of power, power over one's existence and the ability to affect others but what DeSaad was attempting to do was something entirely different.

They were trying to grow super humans.

As he crawled through the vast network of tunnels and shafts leading him from section to section of the facility, one step ahead of DeSaad's formidable security force, Bruce, took the opportunity to learn all he could about the organisation that was so determined to add Clark Kent to its menagerie. Emerging onto the floor of what he had thought to be some kind of medical storage area, Bruce soon learned he was partly corrected. What he found was a Frankenstein's laboratory of human bodies suspended in viscous green fluid, inside nameless tanks where their bodies were assaulted with machines whose purpose he could not discern. Yet judging by the mutation he was seeing, the devices were altering these helpless people on a genetic level never before imagined.
Was this what they had done to Valerie? Had they changed the ugly duckling she had been into the swan that is, by placing her in a tank just like this? Was this what they had planned for Clark once they were done taking him apart to learn what it was that made so powerful? The thought horrified Bruce who had believed until now that there wasn't a great deal that could shake his composure.

Walking along the rows of tanks and there were so many it boggled the mind, Bruce stared into their empty faces. With their eyes open, they continued to stare into nothingness as tubes were inserted through their flesh pumping the noxious green fluid he was almost certain was some kind solution extracted from the properties of meteor rock. As if someone was trying to recreate the meta human transformations that had taken place in Smallville since the first meteor shower brought Clark to Earth.

Bruce observed as much as he could, until the macabre scene forced his eyes away from those tanks and its occupants. Wanting to know precisely what was being done to these people so that they could be helped when he brought the authorities back here, Bruce made his way to the front of the room where a workstation and computer were left unattended. Sliding behind the keyboard, he went to work quickly, trying to learn something of the work that was being conducted here. What he encountered straight away was the demand for an access code to view the project file whose name left him just as puzzled as the rest of this.

**ANTI-LIFE EQUATION**

"Miss Lane, I am not certain that this is a wise idea," Alfred protested as he followed Lois and Chloe into the area of the parking lot below the tower where Oliver's fleets of cars were kept.

"We don't have a choice Alfred," Lois said carrying the small duffel bag of supplies she had 'liberated' from Oliver's secret room of Green Arrow equipment. "If we don't get to Valerie before she gets to Hank, it could end up being very bad."

Chloe followed her cousin, not about to disagree but she wondered if she and Lois were really the best people qualified to go after the young woman. True, she wanted Bruce back but if there was one thing being around Bruce Wayne had taught her, it was never rush into a situation without thinking it through. This situation certainly fell into that category. Torn between her desire to help Bruce and what he would do in this situation, Chloe could do nothing more than be caught up in the tsunami that was Lois Lane on a mission.

"And if she does?" Alfred asked. "You would imperil both yourselves by attempting to retrieve her."

"Alfred, if she's gets to him before we do, then we'll sit tight and wait for Oliver to show up." She looked at the man with pure innocence.

"Oh please," Chloe rolled her eyes, "even I don't believe that."

"You are not helping the situation," Lois gave her a look. "Besides, if we're lucky we might be able to see where they've taken Bruce."

"Look," Chloe stared at her cousin critically, "I want to be there for Bruce more than anything but I know what he would say in this situation and that's to be careful. We don't want to add to the mess that this has become."

"I know," Lois said remembering Chloe's stake in this. "I promise if it's too late to get to her, we'll get out of there and wait for Ollie and his pals to show up but Chloe," Lois drew a deep breath
remembering what Valerie was capable of. "Valerie has got a lot of power and she's plenty mad right now. I'm afraid if she gets there and she's provoked, she's going to go nuclear on us. We don't know what the full extent of her powers are. She could destroy everything in sight if she gets mad enough and that could mean Bruce. She may not know what she's doing until its too late."

Hating to admit that Lois was right and wanting to go after Bruce, Chloe finally relented. "We'll be careful Alfred," she looked the old butler in the eye and meant it. "If Clark comes back, tell him what's happened and try to give him some hot chocolate or something because he will freak out."

"I'll do my best," Alfred nodded, however his expression was clearly one of disapproval. "Although I suspect it will do little good."

When he heard the footsteps, Bruce could have left but he didn't.

He listened closely and noted not the steps of many, which would be most conducive to a search party, but just one set of feet approaching the door at an almost languid pace. He left the work station and hid behind the tanks, watching cautiously as the door opened. A few seconds later, a shape entered and it was not the form of heavy set men like those who had had tortured him earlier but a more elegant figure. The face belonged to someone he could have met while playing the part of Bruce Wayne, playboy. Someone with whom he could have shared idle chatter over hors d'oeuvres and champagne at one charity function or another. Dressed in a suit that Bruce himself might have worn, the man made his way to the work station and paused before sweeping his gaze around the room.

"Bruce Wayne," the man spoke out. "Come out, come out wherever you are.

The smart thing would have been to stay put but Bruce wanted answers and he suspected, now would be the time to get them.

Stepping out of the shadow, Bruce kept his distance, ensuring that even if the stranger cried out, he could make it back to the air vent he had used to sneak into the place, ahead of DeSaad's security. "So is this Cadmus or DeSaad?"

"Doesn't really matter," the man shrugged his shoulders. "It's all the same and its all mine."

"And you are?" Bruce folded his arms and stared at the man, trying to place him.

"Michael Canto," he introduced himself.

"You're a man of mystery Mr. Canto," Bruce replied. "You've kept yourself out of the public eye for the CEO of a very large company."

"And yet," Canto leaned against the workstation. "You've kept yourself very much in the public eye and still managed to do the same. Very impressive. I don't think I've seen Mr. Corben quite that annoyed since I've employed him. I think you rather surprised him."

"So what is the anti-life equation?" Bruce found himself asking, eyes fixed on Canto in case the man attempted to make any sudden moves.

Canto laughed shortly before his expression sobered. "It is nothing you can imagine."

"Try me," Bruce insisted, suspecting the answer was to the key to all of this.

"Alright," Canto retorted as if he were addressing a petulant child."The anti-life equation is a
"The mathematical formula that when relayed in precisely the right sequence, transmitted telepathically into the brain will destroy all free will because it opens the neural pathways to the understanding that life, hope and freedom are pointless and the only choice left is to submit."

"You're serious," Bruce spoke after a long moment. "You actually believe such an equation exists, to control human behaviour in that way?" It was laughable but the look on Canto's face revealed a man who thought otherwise.

Canto laughed harder, "not just human behaviour, all behaviour. Every living thing in the universe."

Bruce decided then that this guy was insane. It was impossible. Mind control he could accept but a magical formula that simply made such a thing possible? It was ridiculous and yet Canto didn't seem to be mad or for that matter, deluded. Of course, sane men could convince themselves of anything. He was proof.

"And you want to put my friend in there?" Bruce declared, gesturing to the tanks.

"Clark Kent?" Canto's eyes widened as if Bruce was the one who was mad. "Of course not, it will kill him. We were using these subjects to try and filter the equation out of human DNA. To see if the answer was there. But your friend Clark, he is Kryptonian but you know that, don't you?"

Bruce allowed his expression to betray nothing.

"Curious thing about Kryptonians, they were the most technological advanced race that existed in the last twenty thousand years. They had no peer anywhere in the universe, absolutely brilliant the lot of them. But unfortunately, short sighted. Their arrogance in the belief that their sun Rao could explode never even occurred to them and when it finally did, it was too late. They had knowledge that took centuries for other races to acquire and in the end, they couldn't even save themselves. The only survivor of their planet was the result of one terrified father's paranoia. Sad really."

And with a flash of insight, Bruce realised what Clark's role in all this was. "You think Clark knows," he stared at Canto. "You think his Kryptonian DNA, whatever, has the answer to this equation?"

Canto smiled and applauded, "Bravo Mr. Wayne. Bravo."
In the story, the ugly duckling looked into her reflection and was beautiful.

All Valerie Beaudry had ever wanted was to look at her reflection and not turn away in disgust. She wanted to go outside into the world and be counted, not some outcast that needed to be hidden away at all costs but a person in her own right. Was it such a terrible thing to want to belong or to be loved? She had not thought so and everything that had brought to this moment in time, was done so that she could feel that someone loved her.

She just had not counted that the price for that external beauty would be her soul.

Her parents were dead. The friends who had shielded her were now facing anguish and loss because of her; Clark's loss of his incredible powers and Bruce's abduction and possible death at the hands of her pursuers. All this because she had trusted the wrong man, a man who claimed he'd loved her. She had been such a fool and Hank had played her. He'd used her, turned her into this creation and unleashed it upon the world.

She'd killed to stay free. She'd destroyed those who dared to give her shelter. When she saw Chloe's anguish at the possibility that Bruce was dead, Valerie knew that she could not allow this to continue any further. She'd been a coward who'd let the others do the fighting for her and now it was time to deal with Hank and DeSaad herself. Whatever happened, she would endanger no one else.

Having stolen the device that allowed them to track Bruce Wayne, Valerie had studied the small display and followed the trail to the last place the signal had been detected before it was so abruptly silenced. Compelled onwards by Chloe's terrified cry when that signal had died because the woman had assumed the worst, Valerie drove the vehicle she had stolen as it took her out of Metropolis. She'd left New Troy Island behind her and was beyond the city limits when she arrived at long last at her destination.

It was a state of the art complex a good ten miles off the main highway and she approached the tall, mesh fences that seemed to surround it, there was no denying the menace that emanated from the place. The facility stretched across the landscape, with too many windowless buildings and men patrolling the ground with dogs, men with guns strapped to their side, who looked unafraid to use them. She could see cameras perched on the tops of fences, their lenses scrutinizing the terrain with machine efficiency, missing nothing.

No doubt when the car had rolled down the road towards the main sentry box, they had seen her. She had no doubt as she brought the car to a slow halt, that Hank was already preparing the line he would use to calm her down, to assure her that this had been some terrible mistake. She almost could hear the words he would use, the smile he had charmed her with, the one he had used to convince her to let her become DeSaad's guinea pigs.

Alright then, Hank, I'm here.

Frankenstein's monster had come home.

"Now the question of the day," Canto stared at Bruce from the access panel behind which he was standing, "what do we do with you?"
Earlier, Bruce had seen the man's hand move subtly across the workstation as they'd been talking. He wasn't stupid. He didn't think that Canto was giving him all this information about the improbable Anti-Life Equation for conversation. No, Canto had been stalling for time. Bruce had no doubt that even now, Corben and his goon squad were racing here to retrieve him and Bruce had no illusions that they intended to keep him alive. He was human and knew their secret. It was a secret they intended to keep.

"I have a few ideas of my own," Bruce remarked as he retreated up the way he came.

Canto seemed to expect this and emerged from the workstation, approaching Bruce one step at a time. Bruce studied him quickly and saw no sign of a gun. Of course that meant nothing. Canto was a mystery and in this menagerie of horror, where humans could be turned into mutations of life, anything was possible. "I'm afraid that's not possible."

"I gathered as much," Bruce shifted his gaze to the ventilation shaft, calculating the amount of time it would take to get there and whether or not he could avoid Canto before that happened. "I take it that goon squad of yours in on their way here?"

Canto broke into a grin. "Mr Wayne, you surprised me and that's not often done. This doesn't have to end badly. You're a resourceful man, perhaps the most resourceful I've encountered since my time here, and you could do worse than to ally yourself with me."

Bruce nodded. "I suppose I could," he was still moving slowly towards the vent. "But I've never been one to make the best decisions."

Canto's expression darkened, his eyes narrowing with calculation. "That is a shame…." He started to stay when suddenly the cell phone in his jacket began buzzing.

It was enough of an opening. Bruce sprinted forward, running in full strides as Canto looked up and cursed behind him. The man bolted after Bruce and had he looked behind, the Gothamite would have been surprised by how fast Canto could move. In a matter of strides, he was almost caught up to Bruce, choosing to ignore the phone that continued to buzz, demanding attention.

His suspicions about Canto's ability proven somewhat correct, Bruce knew he could not be recapture. This time, he had no element of surprise even if they left him alive long enough to plan another escape, which he doubted. Making a running jump for the open mouth of the vent, Bruce leapt through the small space and slid forward when he landed, just as he felt Canto's hands make a grab for a foot.

The smooth surface and the velocity, in which he had entered the shaft, propelled him forward across the floor on his belly out of Canto's reach. Before he came to a stop, Bruce had already started scrambling forward, putting as much distance between them as he disappeared around the corner. He glanced briefly over his shoulder and saw Canto making no mood to pursue him, most likely deciding that it was work better suited for the paid muscle.

"Keep running Mr Wayne," Canto called out ominously, "but you can't hide forever, we will find you."

_Not if I can help it you sick sons of bitches_, Bruce thought and continued moving, mapping out in his head what came next and how he was going to get to Clark. He had to warn Clark to stay the hell away from here because Canto and his people were insane and they'd dissect Clark into tiny little pieces to find the answer to their equation.

While they didn't have the tracking device that Valerie had stolen to lead her to where Bruce was
being held, Chloe and Lois had the next best thing; the GPS tracer on the vehicle she'd stolen to get there. Oliver Queen had ensured that all his vehicles had been tagged with GPS devices and it had been a relative simple process for Chloe to hack into his tracking system to find out exactly where Valerie had gone.

Their pursuit had taken them out of Metropolis to its outskirts, on the other side of the river where the industrial area thinned out into undeveloped land covered with tall grass. Instead of driving all the way down the small road that diverted off the highway, Lois and Chloe had pulled up a good mile before the tracking signal had stopped, hiding their car in the wild grass.

"We should have waited for Ollie," Chloe frowned, "or get some help." She said walking through the grass, swatting bugs and errant blades of out of her face. It wasn't that she was afraid to go rescue Bruce because frankly, the waiting had been driving her insane but Chloe was accustomed to being the voice of reason when faced with her cousins driven recklessness. "If we get captured, we're only going to give them the ammunition to make Bruce or Clark do whatever they want."

"We're not going to get caught," Lois snorted, throwing her cousin a withering look. "We're just going to see where she is and then head out. Hell we might even be able to call the police, tell them they kidnapped her and Bruce."

Of course Lois knew that the police would do nothing to help the situation because who knew what Valerie would say once she was back in Hank's power and Bruce was probably too well hidden for any cop to find him during a routine search. However, the tactic might buy them time until Clark got here. Inwardly, Lois feared that Clark wouldn't get here in time or worse yet, he'd get here without his powers and they'd be in the same position, except that DeSaad would have two bargaining pieces, not just one.

Chloe's expression was dubious as to the effectiveness of the police in this matter but she held her tongue for the moment. The truth was, she wanted to see for herself that Bruce was okay, that the sudden deactivation of the implant he'd been wearing was because it had been damaged and not because he was dead. The need in her was strong enough to override good sense which was why she had agreed to this in the first place. However, that didn't stop the tendrils of doubt from creeping in at the first opportunity.

They had been walking up a slight hill, shielded by the vegetation and preventing them from seeing was up ahead. However as they reached the top, Lois immediately grabbed Chloe's arm and dropped to her knees, diving for cover in the grass.

"What?" Chloe hissed, keeping her voice down just in case. Her nerves shot already, she watched Lois give her the quiet signal before glancing ahead.

In front of them, on the other side of the hill, surrounded by a chain mail fence that issued warnings of electrocution through angry red signs was an industrial complex that was the source of the GPS signal given off by Valerie's vehicle. The fence was patrolled by security guards accompanied by dogs not to mention the security cameras that were mounted high so the perimeter would be under surveillance at all times.

"I think they're in there," Lois said sarcastically as she stated the obvious.

"Yeah," Chloe nodded in agreement. "The whole place says 'go away'."

Lois pulled out the binoculars she had stashed in her backpack when she'd 'borrowed' a couple of things from Ollie's workshop at the clock tower. Peering through it, she examined the compound, noted that the buildings were not very tall but she saw a lot of concrete on the ground and the vast dimensions of the place made her wonder if there was more going on underneath the facility than
"I can't see Valerie's car," Lois remarked.

"They probably got it out of sight as soon as she showed up." Chloe offered. "She must have given herself up. There's no way they could get close enough to her to take her captive without Valerie turning the place inside out."

"Why would she do that?" Lois shook her head in disbelief. "She can't possibly think these guys would be just satisfied with getting their hands on her. Not after what they did to Clark." Even as Lois thought that, the memory of Clark bloodied and bleeding flashed in her and made her shudder.

"I don't know," Chloe returned, wishing she could see more than buildings and scary looking security guards trolling the compound. "I don't think she's naïve enough to believe that, not after what they did to her parents or think that there's a way to placate....." her voice drifted off as an ugly thought filled her head.

Lois saw the realization dawn on her cousin's face, "what?"

"Lois," Chloe looked up swallowing thickly, "what if she didn't come here to give herself up. We don't know how strong her powers actually are? There's only so much a person can take, what if they've pushed her too far?"

The first time she had come face to face with Hank, her heart had been beating so fast she could hardly breathe. He was everything she'd wanted; a handsome, charming man who saw past her ugliness and loved her. Every digital word he'd written was cherished and during the empty nights in her bed after she'd found him, she read them over and over again, convincing herself that this wasn't some dream that he was real.

Later on when they met face to face and he gave her the means to make her beautiful beyond anything she could have imagined, she still couldn't believe he was real. Studying herself in the mirror at the graceful, elfin creature she'd become, she was overcome so many times, with the emotion of gratitude that someone, somewhere had loved her; Valerie.

However, now as she was brought to him within the cold heart of the complex, having surrendered to the security guards at the gate, she knew that she had been right to doubt. It was a dream, all of it, an illusion of what she had so desperately wanted and he had used it. He had used her. Hank, with his charming smile and movie star good looks, who oozed poetry from his words because he knew what it was she needed to here to do as he wished.

"Val, baby!" He crossed the expensive rug of the office she'd been brought into and wrapped her in an embrace as if he were a lover worried for her welfare and not because one of his lab rats had escaped her cage. Behind her, she could imagine the man Corben and the other guards and hired mercenary snorting in derision.

The imagination wasn't so far from the truth because they were. Inside the office, deep in the heart of the complex, a place they had to take an elevator to reach, Corben met Cobb's gaze as they made contact while he was still hugging Valerie. A smile of triumph on his lips indicated that he was still able to pull Valerie's strings. A little bit of kindness and he'd have the little freak on her hands and knees, begging for it.

_Dumb bitch_, Corben thought watching the display. _Was she really buying his act?_

Whether or not she was, Corben was taking no chances. Every guard in the room had tranq guns
and were ready to fire if the insipid cow so much as looked at Corben the wrong way. After what had happened earlier, he was damned if he was going to let the girl get the upper hand as she did during their earlier encounters, with or without her Kryptonian protector.

"I'm sorry Hank," Valerie said trying to remain unaffected by his embrace, her mind immediately thinking of all the nights when he'd made ardent love to her, telling Valerie all the things she wanted to hear. His warmth provoked the flame in her chest, though the passion he intended to generate was not affection but rather anger. "I'm sorry that nothing you said was ever real." She shoved him away.

Hank's expression showed nothing but dismay. "Val, how can you think that? Didn't I do everything I promised? Look at you honey," he touched her chin. "You're beautiful. You're the most beautiful woman in the world now because of me. I gave you that. I wouldn't have given you that if I didn't love you."

Her eyes misted over because she wanted so much to believe him but it was always a lie. "You also turned me into a monster and killed my parents!" She hissed.

Behind her Corben nodded at his men who were on standby with their weapons when it looked like Cobb's slick tongue was going to get him out of trouble with the girl.

"That wasn't me…" Hank started to say but Valerie cut him off.

"Stop lying to me!" She shouted through her tears. "You destroyed everything, my parents, my body and now my friends!"

Suddenly without warning, Hank's arm shot out, the tazer in his hand caught Valerie under her rib cage, delivering enough of a charge for the girl to stagger back, her body jerking around like a marionette. His expression of sympathy and kindness became dark with menace and derision.

"COBB, what the fuck!" Corben shouted as Valerie fell on the ground.

Hank didn't answer him. Instead he crossed bent down to where Valerie was spasming on the rug and back handed across the face, a rush of blood escaping her broken nose. She was in too much pain to be able to react to the blow out of utter contempt.

"Damn right it was a lie, you little bitch!" He snorted, making sure that she got a look at his face through her glazed eyes. "I paid some little tech geek to write all that crap for me. You think I actually was actually at the keyboard writing all that crap you were salivating over every night? You think I have to use that shit to get a woman… a real woman into the sack? You are a fucking freak, long before I met you! But you were what the Boss wanted so I fed you a carrot and watched you run after it. When I fucked you, I had to get drunk first. It was the only way I could manage getting it up with a dog like you! You want the truth Val, there it is. Have a nice fucking day."

Corben was on the man in a second, furious with disbelief. He grabbed Hank and shoved him against the wall. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you know what you've done?"

"I gave the little cooze what she deserved!" The man hissed.

"You just shot her up with 50000 volts!" Corben slammed an elbow over the man's neck, fairly tempted to break his neck for his stupidity and arrogance. "We can't use the tranqs without killing her!"

Hank's eyes widened in realization.

It wasn't possible for Valerie to believe that anything could hurt more than the tazer he'd hit her
with but each word were cuts in her flesh, every cruel thing he'd said had drawn blood. As Valerie's thoughts gained coherence, she processed everything he'd said and realized how big a fool she'd been. She'd known he'd used her but she'd never suspected to what extent and now… now… it was worse than a lie. She had no name for what he'd done to her. The rage expanded inside her like a ball of white hot rage, permeating every corner, until her thoughts became inflamed with it, until the world in front of her eyes went from rosy to red and then black. It made her shake, made her fists clench and until it reached her skin and had no way to go except one.

Rushing up her throat like bile, it escaped her in a howl of anguish from a dying animal preparing for the end.

He needed to stop. Needed to catch his breath.

The injuries sustained during his torture were taking its toll on Bruce and he knew there would come a point where will alone would not allow him to continue, no matter how much of it he had. Wounded and pushed beyond the limits of his endurance, Bruce scrambled through the seemingly labyrinthine vents and air shafts that ran throughout the DeSaad complex, seeking a way out.

As it was, his ability to remain concealed indefinitely in the hollows of the facility was dwindling as the search parties began to invade the spaces in an effort of track him down. So far, he'd avoided to near misses but Bruce was a realist, he was in pain and exhausted while his captives were fresh and many. He couldn't keep out of their reach forever. Furthermore, the strain on his limbs, crawling on all fours, his back hunched was starting to cause his muscles to cramp up, adding a further strain to his body.

Bruce paused, catching his breath that was determined to escape him in loud pants, the sweat running down his face and his limbs from the narrow confines was not aiding his situation. Wiping his brow with his forearm, he looked up ahead to another vent and took a moment to rest before approach it to see where it might lead to. Light poured through it through louvers, illuminating the dark space slightly and attracting Bruce to it like a moth to the flame.

There were voices talking and for a moment Bruce considered heading away but those voices made no effort to conceal themselves which told Bruce they weren't Corben or his men. If they were tracking him, they'd be silent. He was almost to the grate when suddenly he heard a scream. An angered, tortured scream that seemed to tear a whole in the world. It belonged to a woman and with surge of alarm, Bruce realized he recognized it. Valerie.

It was his last thought before the entire world went mad.

Valerie's anguished cry was only a prelude to the full torrent of her rage and when she sucked in air and screamed again, the walls around him were suddenly swept like leaves caught in hurricane. Metal ripped with a high pitched screech that would have made Bruce wince if not for the fact that he was too busy trying to hold onto something and failing because everything around him was in the same position, hurtling through the air, caught in a gale, helplessly.

The force in which Valerie unleashed her fury tore not only the room apart but also the building. As Bruce hurtled through the air, undoubtedly rushing to meet his eminent death when he landed, he found himself caught in a shockwave that was radiating outward with Valerie at its epicenter. Disorientated as he tumbled through the air with no control whatsoever and being bombarded by virtually anything on the ground that had been caught in the wake of Valerie's rage, he was battered and bruised, getting bloodier by the minute.
If the landing didn't kill him, the assault by the wreckage in the maelstrom would.

Even with his heightened senses, he could barely make out what was happening on the ground, there was too much flying at him and past him for Bruce to focus clearly. However, what he could see was the DeSaad facility crumbling around Valerie. The large sprawl was being demolished in a manner not unlike those film clips of the 1950's showing the effect of an atomic explosion on a model Nevada town.

He could see her continuing to scream, until it was not just his body that was in the air. He saw others, some where alive, arms flaying, trying to find some way to get to the ground without dying, while others had not been so lucky. Like Bruce, they too had been assaulted by the wreckage and had not survived it. The facility had completely destroyed but Valerie was not done yet, he could still hear her banshee's wail through the rushing of air through his ears as he started to descend, the ground rushing up to greet him.

He was going to die, he realized and for the first time in his life, he was rather at a loss at what to do. He had no tricks to play, no clever way to get himself out of the situation. For once, Bruce was completely helpless and it was going to cost him everything. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out Valerie's sonic onslaught and the pain that gripped his body. Coming to the conclusion that he would not fight death when there was no way to escape it, Bruce chose to meet his end by revisiting the things that held any meaning for him and the person that mattered most.

Chloe.

Of all the things he would miss, it was the life he would have had with her that stung the most. She had brought light into his life when he did not think it possible to every have any part of his soul brightened again. Furthermore, it rankled knowing that he could have made her happy. Him, Bruce Wayne who was tragically wounded from childhood, was capable of making anyone happy was revelation. Yet, he knew with certainty that he could have given Chloe that. Now it was too….

"I got you Bruce."

Bruce blinked and opened his eyes to see Clark having a firm grip on him, halting his crash landing and superseding it with a controlled descent.

Stupefied and yet eternally grateful, Bruce managed a hoarse reply. "Clark?"

"Yeah," Clark smiled and nodded, not needing to elaborate that his visit to Jor-El had not been in vain. As the gale from Valerie's onslaught continued to bellow around them, Clark said with similar gratitude and relief that he was able to get here in time, that he was able to save his best friend.

"I got your back Bruce," he declared. "I got your back."

And Bruce was never more grateful for that in his life.

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

CHAPTER 18: PANDORA

In the story the ugly duckling becomes the swan and is loved.

But that story had never been hers. Hers was the story of Pandora. A cautionary tale of wanting
too much and then learning in the worst possible way that wanting a thing and having were two
distinct things. In Pandora's case, she was forever despised for unleashing destruction upon the
entire human race.

As Valerie stood in the epicenter of destruction, her powerful scream reducing everything about
her to rubble, she prayed that it would destroy her too. The violent fury that had propelled her at
the onset of this was exhausting itself, the pent up rage nearly spent and in its wake there was
nothing but cold, empty despair. For this visage of beauty, she had sacrificed everything; her
family, her friends and her soul.

The debris above her head was a swirling vortex of ruin, some of it had landed but most of it was
still in the air. Within the maelstrom she could see objects hurtling about and was reminded of the
leaves in the park caught by a particularly focused gale. Trees had become uprooted, ripped away
from the ground, their roots dangling beneath them, the earth struggling to keep them alive in
clumps of soil. A computer monitor screen, a piece of glass from a broken window and a fragment
of shattered concrete made up the mix.

The ground beneath her had fissured, the sonic assault had dug out a crater and she wondered
fleeting if she screamed loud enough, would the world crack open like an egg and swallow her?
She didn't care, she wanted to obliterate everything, to fight off the empty despair with anything as
long as she didn't feel the pain. If it had to be mindless violence then so be it.

Suddenly her eyes caught sight of something in the maelstrom and the screaming died abruptly in
her throat. The voice withering out of her like her soul being burnt from her flesh. Amidst the
destruction of metal, plastic and wood, Valerie saw something that made her blood run cold.

A body.

Ruined and bloodied, it belonged to a woman and was being jerked about like a marionette under
the control of an unskilled puppeteer. She was not alone. It was more than just one body but rather
bodies. How many of them were there? She hadn't even considered the innocents that might have
been employed by DeSaad, not the puppet masters that had turned her into this terrible thing but
the office workers and the custodial staff who had no idea what it was their corporation really did
for its profit. People who were now dead because of her. Collateral damage to her rage.

Valerie tumbled to her knees, doubling over in a sob as the sky started to rain the airborne debris
around her ears as she withdrew her power from the storm above her. She barely noticed the
deadly barrage that could very well bury her, paying no heed to the tremors in the ground as the
collective rubble of DeSaad complex was scattered across the landscape.

What she did hear was a powerful explosion of sound, a near deafening boom that did not come
from her. Lifting her head, she saw and then blinked once or twice, as Michael Canto emerged out
fissure radiating bright, white light that materialized out of thin air, with no discernible source. For
an instance, Valerie did not know what she was seeing. It was as if he'd found a way to rip
through reality.

He stepped out and looked at the devastation and began to applaud.

"Brava! Valerie." His grin broad, he approached her without fear, lowering himself to his feet to
take her hand. "Come now my dear, this is not the time to weep. Look at what you have done.
Its magnificent."

"Its not magnificent!" She spat, scrambling backwards as if his attempt to comfort was scalding.
"All those people…" she glanced at a body of a man she could see not far away from her, lying in
a pile of wreckage that comprised of a chair, a bathroom sink and torn partitions of a wall. "I killed
"Yes you did," Canto agreed but for him this was not a bad thing, though for the sake of the present argument, he hid that fact from the girl. "That’s because you have little or no control over your powers. Nothing great is simply given Valerie," he closed the distance between them and took her hand, "it has to be earned by work and focus. You were made this thing and I regret that you weren't nurtured, that things became as bad as it did but it doesn't have to be this way. Hank Cobb lied to you, he was a salesman and he treated you like property, I won't."

Valerie wanted to protest but he was right, this had happened because of rage. She had killed people because she could not control this thing that had been done to her. She couldn't allow that to continue. Too many had been hurt because of her already. Wiping her tears, she looked at him with wet eyes. "What…what do you want me to do?"

It was the hill that saved them.

There had been no time to react when Lois heard that scream. Jolted into action by the memory of what had followed when she last heard Valerie raise her voice to the heavens, Lois didn't wait to see the imminent destruction. She simply grabbed Chloe and ran, aware that they had almost no time to get clear of what was coming. Dragging her cousin back the way they'd come, Chloe offered no protest as she as she heard the roar of wind and rushing wave of power erupting behind them. It overtook them easily and swept them off their feet like rag dolls, throwing them forward until they landed face first in the dirt and crushed grass.

There was no time to recover as they scrambled on their hands and knees to take shelter behind the steep incline of the hill, using it to shield themselves from the devastating wave of Valerie's siren cry. As they pressed their backs against the ground, they saw the full extent of Valerie Beaudry's rage. Cars and telephone poles flew over their heads, people were flung past them screaming, flailing their arms wildly as they were caught by the violent expulsion of energy like debris. Hiding in the shadow of the hill, there was nothing to do but gape in transfixed horror as the destruction passed them over like an arch angel on a mission.

Even though they were keeping their heads down, huddled together as they tried to avoid being hit by the raining torrent of debris and objects landing haphazardly around them like artillery fire, Lois could see the fear in Chloe's eyes was not out of fear of her own safety or that of her cousin. No, Chloe was thinking about Bruce, clinging to hope that he could have survived this carnage even though what they had seen so far was rapidly discounting the possibility.

Suddenly something wet and heavy landed a few feet away from them, a sickly squelching sound that somehow penetrated the noise around them. It was the body of man whose white coverall were now stained with dirt and blood. His features unrecognizable as he lay dead and the image of him, snapped the last vestiges of reason in Chloe.

"BRUCE!" She exclaimed and started frantically crawling up the hill, trying to get to the top so that she could see what was happening and maybe find him.

"Chloe!" Lois cried out and scrambled after her. "Come back!"

Chloe wasn't listening. Unlike Lois, she wasn't given to impulsiveness. Being Clark Kent's friend had taught her patience but seeing that body was more than she could stand. She loved Bruce Wayne more than she'd ever loved any man, even more than that girlish crush on Clark so many years ago. The thought that everything that he was, the extraordinary man he had made himself, dying so soon after she found him was beyond her ability to imagine. Climbing up the hill, her fingers digging in the dirt, she was determined that if she couldn't find him, then she wanted to die.
Chloe! Are you crazy…." Lois shouted when suddenly the chaos came to an abrupt halt. Objects fell down around their heads and Lois had to pull her legs under her chin in a fetal position to stop from being hit.

Chloe reached the crest of the hill and looked at the place where DeSaad had been. It looked like the middle of a war zone. There were fragments and debris everywhere. She was reminded of a scene she'd seen in the news once, on the site a plane had crashed. Even the grass on the hill was flattened. Where DeSaad had been as a small crater surrounded by wreckage. Chloe couldn't even begin to imagine where Bruce might be in all this.

Lois was still covering her head in her hands when she heard something that made her look up, a subtle breath of a wind that was familiar to her. What she saw made her expelled the air from her lungs in a soft, grateful gasp as two familiar figures began to descend from the sky.

"Clark!" She called out, not caring who heard. Clark was flying! Not only was she overjoyed at seeing him but she was relieved that he had been made whole again. So much of him lay in his ability to help people. Lois had been so afraid that had Clark lost that ability, it would have left his spirit even more crippled than his body.

At Lois' cry, Chloe looked over her shoulder and saw Clark descending…with Bruce. She let out a strangled sob of relief and practically tumbled down the hill to join her cousin who was running towards the two men.

Lois' joy at seeing Clark was short lived when she saw what state Bruce was in. There didn't seem to be an inch of Bruce's upper body that wasn't covered with a bruise of some kind. His face was just as badly injured and it was hard to remember that his was a face that graced magazine covers on a daily basis.

"Oh my God Bruce," Lois glanced at Clark who looked somber. "He's alright but we need to get him to a hospital."

"Bruce!" Chloe exclaimed and threw her arms around Bruce, embracing him even though it was Clark who was holding him up. "You came back to me," she was weeping as she took his ravaged face in her hands covered it in kisses.

"Always," Bruce whispered, savoring her touch, grateful for her after what he'd been through today.

With one hand still firmly gripped around Bruce's arm to keep the man on his feet as he and Chloe continued their reunion, Clark also found himself on the receiving end of a heated kiss as Lois wrapped one arm around him and pulled him close. Never one able to refuse Lois anything, Clark allowed himself to savor the warmth of her mouth after the cold hostility in the fortress. When she pulled back, her eyes were shining with happiness.

"It worked," she said without him needing to explain.

"Yeah," Clark nodded, "but it wasn't any fun getting that stuff out of me." He admitted readily. Nor was he able to shake the warning given by Jor-El that sooner or later, his refusal to train would bring harm to someone he loved. However, Clark didn't want to spoil the moment between him and Lois by dredging that up today.

"Clark," Bruce spoke up, reminding them that there was still unfinished business left with DeSaad, even if their facility was destroyed. "We need to find Valerie."
"Valerie!" Lois exclaimed remembering the cause of all this destruction. "We followed her here. She snuck out of the clock tower and stole one of Ollie's cars."

"We tried to catch up to her before she gave herself up," Chloe took up the narrative, still holding on to Bruce. "We were too late."

"Could she still be alive?" Lois asked, not expecting an answer.

"Let me check," Clark said automatically, turning his head in the direction of the site where DeSaad used to stand, scanning the debris covered plain for any sign of the girl. "I see her... she's not alone. She's with some guy. Well dressed."

"Describe him," Bruce said quickly, the adrenaline coursing through his body and the respite from Clark's rescue allowing him to regain some strength. He started to disengage himself from the Kryptonian's grip and stand on his own two feet.

"It sounds like Canto," he declared when Clark gave him a description. "Clark we need to get to her."

"I'll go," he said quickly, preparing to leave. "You get Bruce to a hospital..."

"I'm going with you," Bruce said firmly, having none of that.

"What no Bruce," Chloe protested. "You're in no shape to deal with DeSaad and Valerie if she goes critical again." She had refused to let him go, too shaken by his injuries to let him go.

"Bruce she's right," Clark answered, still concerned about Bruce's state. "I got this."

"Clark you can't go by yourself," Bruce said firmly, his jaw set as he faced off his best friend. "Canto is not human, I'm sure of it. He spoke about Krypton like he knew it personally and considering that he knew what blue kryptonite does, it's a safe bet to assume that if you went at him again he might have some other trick up his sleeve."

"Not human?" Lois exclaimed, another flash of Clark's bleeding body surfaced in her mind and suddenly, she wasn't all that agreeable to let him go off on his own either.

"Yes," Bruce nodded, "I got loose when they captured me and I ran into him, Michael Canto. Clark he's believes that the key to solving some universal equation of mind control lies in DNA. Specifically your DNA because you're from Krypton. He thinks that because the Kryptonians were so advanced technologically it's your genes that may have the answer. You can't fall into his hands again. I saw what they were doing to people in there," he turned away and gestured to the wreckage before them. "Not all the bodies in this mess worked for DeSaad. There were people being mutated in some kind of maturation tank. Whatever they did to Valerie, they were doing to hundreds."

"Then we should wait," Chloe interjected, happy at the idea of either of them going. What Bruce had said made Clark their prize and what he knew, would need silencing permanently.

Clark took all this in and recalled what Bruce had taught him these last few weeks about his power making him reckless. "I won't leave her," Clark said firmly, wanting it clear that he wasn't going to leave Valerie to her fate just to save himself.

"Then don't," Bruce understood the conflict in his eyes but knew that Clark was in the mind to listen to alternatives. "But I'm coming with you."

"Bruce...." Chloe started to protest, torn by the desire to help Valerie and her fears for his life. "I
"Hey," Bruce took her face in his hands and kissed her lips gently, "I got this far didn't I?" He asked, his eyes filled with affection. "I'm just going along to make sure Clark doesn't do anything stupid."

"Thanks," Clark shot him a withering look and then asked in a more sober tone. "Bruce, are you up to this?" He had to hear it from the man himself. The evidence of his eyes indicated otherwise but Bruce Wayne was no ordinary human. Sheer will drove him and weakness was something he would not submit to, no matter what the price. In some ways, he was a harder task master on himself than Lionel Luther was on Lex. However, Bruce's ambitions for himself had a nobler purpose and at the heart of him, once you got past the granite, was a good man trying hard to remember what it was to connect.

"I'll be fine," Bruce answered, seeing that Clark didn't doubt his word and took some pride in that. It was good to have a friend who understood you on a fundamental level.

"Smallville," Lois started to speak but Clark cut her off, perfectly aware of what was coming. "You and Chloe, get back to the car and wait there," he ordered. "No arguments Lane."

"But…" Lois wanted to protest but the intensity of his blue eyes on her silenced her. She hated being left behind, it cut to the core of insecurities but she also trusted this man more than any other. If he asked, she would do because he wasn't asking it lightly of her or Chloe. If this was a bad as Bruce indicated, her presence and that of Chloe's would only be a hindrance to Clark and possibly leverage if this Canto wanted the upper hand. No she couldn't let that happen.

"Alright," she conceded defeat, glancing at Chloe to back her up on this because begrudgingly, she knew it was the right call. "We'll go. You just be careful." She gave him a quick hug and backed off.

"Ditto," Chloe whispered, her gaze meeting Bruce's. It should have been easier for her to do this, after all these years of watching Clark hurry off to fight one enemy after another but it wasn't. Not when it came to Bruce.

"I'll be okay," he assured her, kissing her on the forehead before turning to Clark, "let's go finish this."

"Take my hand Valerie," Canto gave Valerie Beaudry his hand. "Take my hand and you'll never be alone again. I promise."

Valerie hesitated. What Canto offered was inviting but she knew that Hank had offered her things too and it had been all gone wrong. Yet she could not refuse him despite her fear because she had understood a few things herself as she stood amongst the destruction she had caused. She was dangerous.

"Where are we going?" She asked half heartedly even though she knew the answer did not matter. She would go with him nonetheless. Besides, the question was rhetorical because the answer lay beyond that fissure radiating energy behind him. Beyond it was a world she did not know or could possibly imagine. It was a world she might not be able to escape once entering but seeing what carnage she had wrought in this one, there was no doubt she would not go.

"To a world where power is appreciated," Canto replied, paying the question lip service because it was the usual human nonsense that was making her ask these things. Still, he knew that it was
necessary to play the part she needed, just a little longer. "We will show you how to refine your

talents, turn your scream into song. Isn't this what you wanted?" He asked, gazing at her intently,

It was.

And with that decision solidifying in her brain, Valerie wiped the moisture of her damp cheeks,
swallowed away her hesitation and fear for good, deciding then and there that she would have no
more to do with it and closed her fists around his hand.

"Yes," she nodded. Its what I want. Take me away from this. Take me away before I hurt anyone
else."

"That's what I wanted to hear Valerie, my beautiful siren," he smiled at her, flashing her those
movie star looks that women so often surrendered to. "My beautiful swan." He said leading her
towards the portal.

"Valerie, don't do it!" Clark Kent's voice halted them both in their steps.

Clark had landed on the ground a respectful distance away from the duo, mindful of Bruce's
warning about Canto's knowledge of his Kryptonian heritage and more specifically how to
neutralize his abilities. Canto and DeSaad had already once robbed him of his powers, Clark was
not giving them the opportunity to do it again.

"Mr. Kent," Canto's eyes lit up, suddenly filled with the warm, glowing prospect that he may not
only deliver a swan but also a Kryptonian. "Finally we meet. It's a pleasure."

The charming smile that Canto had offered to Valerie to cajole her into going with him turned into
something more serpentine and calculating, though Clark doubted that Valerie saw it.

"I wish I could say the same," Clark retorted, trying to use his enhanced vision to see what was
inside the fissure but it would not penetrate the energy radiating from it. However, he had enough
experience with portals, particularly those that on occasion had deposited him in the Phantom
Zone, to know that what was on the other side was probably not good. As it was, he could hear
something odd emanating from it, the sound of wings beating, the way a flock of geese made
when they flying south.

"Clark go away," Valerie declared, "I know what I'm doing." She insisted. "I'm hurting too many
people with my powers. I can't control it and I've brought you nothing but danger and pain." She
looked at him and implored him to leave her because she did not want to be talked out of her
decision.

"Valerie, I know this sounds like the easy way out but it isn't," Clark tried to convince her. "This
man, isn't what he says he is!" Clark turned to him, inching closer, intending to spirit Valerie away
before either of them had a chance to act. As Bruce had instructed, he had to use his head. "You're
going to use her for your equation aren't you?" He accused.

"Oh I think Valerie understands all too well what I am," Canto answered nonplussed by the
mention of the Anti-Life Equation, "and what she is. In my world, she will be celebrated, a sword
that will be sharpened and tempered. An instrument of power and envy, not revulsion and
exploitation. You can come too Clark, you could be second to none in my world, a warrior and a
new god. A king if you wish it. All you have to do is join me."

Clark knew a 'dark side' pitch when he heard one and he wasn't biting. "No," Clark shook his
head. "I think got what you're selling and its no interest to me." He said finally risking the use of
his powers by racing ahead, disappearing in a blink of an eye as he moved across the place like a
red blur towards Valerie.

Suddenly two strobes of reddish energy shot out through the crack and struck Clark full in the hest before he could reach her. The power that hit him was like nothing Clark had ever felt in his life. It struck him the way a bat would hit a ball and send the damn thing out of the park. Clark was halted in his steps and thrown across the ground like a rag doll. He slammed into the earth, plough a trail in his wake before hitting a pile of wreckage, his whole body aching.

What the hell was that? Clark managed to think disjointedly.

"Clark!" He heard Valerie cry out. "Please let me go." She begged.

"Come my dear," Canto declared, reaching for something in his jacket and as they continued towards the fissure. The object in his hand looked like somewhat stylized version of the modern IPhone, though Canto knew that it was farthest thing from the truth. "Its time to go."

"Valerie, don't," Clark got to his feet shakily, feeling the pain of that blast through his invulnerability but refusing to let it stop him. "There are people here who can help you, who care about you," he tried once more to reach her. "Don't give up on us."

"Clark you don't understand," Valerie shook her head, "I'm giving up on me."

The beating wings that Clark could hear was growing louder and it took him an instant to know that it was coming through the portal. He couldn't see what was coming but it didn't take a genius to realize that it was not something he wanted to unleash into this world. Making another effort to reach Valerie again, Clark shot forward when suddenly the beams of energy shot through the opening again and this time Clark moved to avoid it except…

…it followed him.

The beams were following him. Suddenly, Clark found himself on the defensive, racing to outrun the beams of energy that appeared to have a will of their own. He zigzagged in and out of the piles of wreckage, hoping to dispel it against the debris but there was no such respite. The beams of energy continued to chase and Clark wondered if he could outrun them indefinitely.

"Michael," Valerie shot the man a look. "Stop it! I said I'd go with you!"

"This is not your affair Valerie," Canto said coolly, "my master needs the Kryptonian and I aim to bring Clark to him."

"No I won't let you!," Valerie hissed, not about to let the man harm Clark. She was leaving with him because she wanted to keep from endangering the friends who had gone out of their way to help her, despite the personal cost. She opened her mouth to scream, to halt this but Canto was too fast for her, anticipating the reaction. Grabbing her by the arms, he shoved her into the fissure before she could utter her destructive siren cry.

The scream Valerie finally emitted as she disappeared into the light was as piercing as any she'd uttered before but unfortunately for her, too little too late.

Bruce Wayne watched in secret.

He'd asked Clark to set him down a short distance away from where Valerie was, so he could approach stealthily and act if it was necessary, if Clark found himself on the defensive as he was now. He'd made his way through the obstacle of wreckage and debris that was the former DeSaad facility, hoping that he wouldn't have to step in. However, as he felt the rush of wind that was generated as Clark ran to avoid the energy beams chasing him, Bruce knew he had to act.
Unfortunately, he was not in time to save Valerie.

She'd made her devil's bargain with Canto and realized at the end what a tragic mistake she'd made but it was too late for that. Wherever, she was now, Bruce knew that it was some place they could not follow. Worse yet, he was hearing sounds emanating from the fissure that was clearly disturbing. Something other than those deadly energy beams was approaching the portal, preparing to enter this world.

Canto was not following Valerie, waiting for Clark to exhaust himself, Bruce realized and saw the device in his hand. He kept glancing at it and Bruce wondered if he was using it to keep the fissure open. If Bruce could get to it, then perhaps he could shut down the doorway between the worlds and help Clark.

It was worth a shot.

Meanwhile Clark was continuing to run, zigzagging through the maze of destruction, trying to avoid the energy beams that were intent on catching up to him. Whatever it was, it was able to keep up with him and worst yet, follow the uneven path he'd taken to shake it off. Clark knew he couldn't keep this up forever and this was keeping him from helping Valerie.

Think Clark, think. Stop reacting, not acting.

An idea struck him at that moment. It was crazy but then again, it was the best shot he had. Veering away from the wreckage, Clark kept ahead of the beams but left the DeSaad premises entirely. Crossing over the empty fields surrounding the former complex, he reached the road and kept going, the beams continuing their relentless pursuit. Clark knew where he was headed but he had to take the shortest route, devoid of innocent bystanders so they would not fall prey to beam's deadly onslaught.

Skirting the edge of the city, Clark headed for Metropolis Bay, his destination in mind as he passed the shore and slammed into the water, creating a loud splash as he entered the depths. Moving through the murkiness, the heat from the energy beams caused the ocean to sizzle, boiling it as it passed through the water. Clark knew that there was no way to prevent it from hitting something but at least he could minimize the damage.

Skimming the seabed, Clark knew where he was headed. A few weeks ago, he'd seen something on TV about an all WWII destroyer that had sunk outside of Metropolis Bay. Home to coral and seaweed for the last seventy years, Clark saw the silhouette of the ship in front of him and headed right for it. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the energy beam still behind him, running him down even under water.

Clark hastened his speed, widening the gap until he was able to round the vessel.

Grabbing the metal hull, Clark grabbed the aging wreck and tore it from its undersea floor, flinging it in the path of the energy blast. Sediment shaken loose, the water turned from blue to near grey and if not for his enhanced vision, he would have seen nothing. Schools of fish scattered away from the scene of the battle, broken fragments of coral floated freely through the water, drifting on the wave of the artificial current.

The ship exploded in mid stern, snapping apart in half with a tremendous explosion that no doubt would be seen from the surface. The shock wave threw the water threw him back a little and for a moment, there was nothing in front of him but silt and frothy bubbles. Clark imagined the undersea eruption would have been seen by ships up above, an unexplained water spout appearing out of nowhere. However, when the water settled, Clark was rewarded by the sight of
the ship scattered across the floor of the seabed, the beams of energy no more.

Now it was time to get back to Valerie and Bruce.

The speed in which he returned ensured that his clothes were dry by the time he made it back to the ruined DeSaad facility a few minutes later. However, only Michael Canto remained and Valerie Beaudry was nowhere in sight. Scanning the area with his enhanced vision, Clark soon determined that Bruce was attempting a stealthy approached on the CEO of DeSaad but Valerie was nowhere in sight. With a sinking feeling, Clark came to the realization that he might have been too late, that Valerie had already stepped through the portal.

"Where is she?" Clark demanded.

"She's where she should be," Canto smiled triumphantly, "as you will be."

The sound of beating wings, continued to grow and Clark saw the silhouettes of something attempting to the emerged through the portal.

"Clark!" Bruce finally emerged from behind the upturned car lying a few feet away, "he's carrying some kind of alien device, get it and destroy it!"

Canto shot Bruce Wayne a look of open hostility and at the mention of the device, instantly reached for the jacket pocket in which he kept it. Clark gave him no time to react beyond that look of surprise. It took less than a second for Clark to snatch the object that Bruce was determined they have.

"Give that back to me!" the man hissed and hurried to the portal. "Hurry!" He shouted at the fissure, "come through!"

"Destroy it Clark!" Bruce shouted, unaware whether or not the device really controlled the gateway between the worlds but at the moment, it was the best hunch he had. Besides, it appeared Canto was calling for reinforcements.

Never one to doubt Bruce, particularly when he could hear the approach of something through the portal… a large number of something's as a matter of fact, Clark crushed the device in his fist, shattering it completely. It met its demise with a spike of energy that created spidery tendrils around his forearm before vanishing entirely. Clark discarded the remains at his feet and looked up to see the fissure beginning to waver, the light radiating form it appeared to be fracturing as if something had disrupted its energy supply.

"Clark," Bruce said hurrying forward, trying to recoup his strength because his injuries were making themselves felt again. "We need to get to Canto," he cried out. "We need him to get Valerie back."

"Right," Clark nodded having already leapt to that conclusion himself and sped towards the man preparing to deny him his escape..

However, Canto had already anticipated this and retaliated with a smirk of triumph, "Heroes." He snorted. "You are so damn predictable. I'm afraid I have to take my leave of you gentlemen, but rest assured, we will meet again, someday."

And with that, he slipped into the diminishing doorway, the energy offering the two men a final wink of contempt before vanishing all together.

Taking Valerie with it.
Loose Ends

They searched but Valerie was nowhere to be found.

Clark scoured one end of the ruined facility to the other, scanning every pile of debris, turning over upturned cars, scanning the maze of collapsed tunnels beneath the main complex and still found nothing. He'd even taken to the air in case she'd run off on her own and was wandering the countryside alone but there was no sign of her. With a sickening realisation, Clark had to admit begrudgingly that Valerie may have slipped through the portal into that other world Canto had promised her would be so much better than this one.

Bruce was hardly surprised by his lack of success. He'd actually warned Clark not to get his hopes up in finding her. Bruce hadn't seen Valerie step through the portal but the fact that she had vanished without a trace, seemed to indicate the she had indeed taken Canto's offer. Whatever happened to her now, he told Clark, it was out of their hands. One could only help a person so much. At some point, Valerie had to bear the consequences of her actions. He hoped for her sake, she had made the right choice but he was too much a pessimist to hold out hope that things had turned out as rosy as all that for the young woman.

Of course Clark knew Bruce was right. There was no other explanation and all evidence pointed to the fact that Valerie had left them. He remembered the Phantom Zone and considered how fortunate he had been to find a way out of it again. However, he remembered those who had no such escape and what had happened to those poor trapped souls. Whether or not they'd deserved it, he could not banish anyone to a prison for all eternity unless he had no other choice.

He hoped wherever Valerie was; she would not have to endure her fate for that long.

In any case, he had more immediate concerns after he'd abandoned his search for Valerie. In the wreckage, he'd found that not all the bodies lying in the debris were dead. Some were alive and clinging to their mortality with the thin thread of life that remained in their broken bodies. They could be saved and with the ratio of dead being so much greater than those who still lived, Clark was determined to save as many of them as he could.

Among the dead however and there was a lot of them, was Hank Cobb, Valerie's duplicitous lover. He'd only been identifiable by his wallet. His handsome face which had been the instrument of his deception for so many young women was near unrecognisable when he was crushed by the section of wall Clark found him under. It was almost poetic justice, Bruce thought.

Before the authorities could be notified about what had gone on at this complex, Clark needed to get Bruce, Chloe and Lois away from here. There would be too many questions otherwise. With his x-ray vision, Clark could tell just how badly injured Bruce was, despite his claims to the contrary. It was a testament to the man's will that he'd been able to function this far. From the tortures suffered at the hands of Canto's men, one of whom was found dead, to the battering he received when he'd been caught in the maelstrom of Valerie's deadly sonic scream, Bruce was at the limits of his strength.

Bruce would only agree to leave the scene if Clark took him to the manor. The Gothamite was unprepared to face the questions by the authorities, as well as explain why DeSaad had abducted him when he had no discernible connection to the company. Clark would have preferred taking him to the hospital but Bruce would hear none of it. There was only one person who could attend his injuries and that would be a dignified aging butler who seemed to think that tea was the remedy for everything.
It surprised Bruce how much he wanted Alfred to bring him some.

In the end, after consultation with Chloe and Lois, Clark took only Bruce and Chloe back to Gotham City, leaving them at Wayne Manor. Bruce had assured him that he would be contacting a doctor that he knew, a Leslie Tompkins who would tend his injuries without asking too many questions. In the meantime, Clark let Alfred know he could return to the manor and was not surprised to learn that the butler was soon in the air, on his way home to treat his young master.

Lois had opted to stay behind and while Clark protested this first, she won him over with her arguments. First; someone had to call the authorities and let them know what it was they'd be dealing with. It couldn't be either Clark or Bruce. Neither of them could be connected to this as it would raise uncomfortable questions. Clark thrived on anonymity and Bruce had cultivated a persona for the media that would be destroyed if it became entangled with DeSaad. Chloe needed to remain with Bruce leaving Lois, with her credentials as a reporter, the only person with a legitimate reason for being here.

It was disturbing enough that John Corben knew Clark's secret. His body had not been found in the wreckage amongst Cobbs as well as Bennett, the sniper who had shot Clark. Lois had no doubt that Corben would be turning up sooner or later and Lois wanted to be ready for him when he did. There were enough bodies in the rubble for Lois to be able to ensure that he'd be made Public Enemy No.1 by the time she was through with him. She wanted everyone to know what had happened here; that what had been done to Valerie by DeSaad would never be repeated again.

Finally and this was somewhat selfish, she knew that but Lois Lane to stay because she had a story.

An honest to God exclusive with enough intrigue and scandal to ensure that she get that place in the Daily Planet she so desperately wanted.

Thus when the authorities finally arrived on the scene, Lois was there to greet them. She passed herself off as a freelance reporter working for the Daily Planet who'd been led her by a source named Valerie Beaudry. Valerie had told her about being subjected to torturous genetic experiments and had fled from her captors who then proceeded to harm the people in her life in their efforts to retrieve her. The death of the Beaudry's parents seemed to corroborate Lois' claims and how she had traced Valerie to this facility only to find this destruction. She had no idea where Valerie was now. If she was even alive.

That part at least, Lois thought ironically, was true.

Once the forensic teams began sifting through the wreckage, unearthing dead bodies, maturation tanks and other biological samples that revealed in grisly detail just what was happening at the DeSaad facility, Lois' story seemed to have credence. The site was soon cordoned off and Lois was escorted to her car but she did so knowing Clark had her cell phone with enough images on it to act as proof when she wrote her story.

She drove straight to the Daily Planet and asked the use of an empty desk (in the basement) to begin writing her story, determined to put DeSaad out of business once and for all and to ensure that Lois Lane, reporter for the Daily Planet had arrived.

DESAAD CORPORATION
OR FRANKENSTEIN'S LABORATORY?
By Lois Lane
"Not bad if I say so myself," Lois Lane beamed as she sat on the edge of Perry White's desk in the bullpen of the Daily Planet where other senior reporters were going about their business, rushing back and forth, gathering research as they filed their own stories.

It was early the next morning and her story had hit the stands. Lois had come to the Daily Planet to use its premises for some follow up reporting as well as to catch up with her mentor who had advised her during its writing. Working with the man had cemented Lois' admiration for him. It seemed Perry knew just how to phrase things so she'd listen and he had a no nonsense attitude and a way of looking at this that was not unlike her own, except he seemed to know how to make it work for him instead of being an obstacle.

She really did adore him.

"Don't get cocky kid," Perry offered her a little smirk through the cigar he was holding in between his teeth, oblivious to the no-smoking sign as tendrils of the stuff curled around the air in front of him. "Have you been to DeSaad's head office in Gotham?"

"Heading there now," Lois made a face as she waved away the noxious smoke. "Jeez Perry, lung cancer much?" She frowned at him making a grab for the cigar, which he prevented by swatting her hand away.

"You gotta die of something Lane," Perry grinned, ignoring the jibe. "And that's Mr. White to you, rookie."

"Hey there's no smoking in here!" Someone shouted from across the bullpen.

"Stick your head out of a window and that should help!" Perry hollered back.

"Nice, Perry," Lois ignored the comment and gave him a wink of mischief because his cantankerous self was so damn entertaining. "I've got an interview scheduled with the acting CEO, a guy named Paul Westfield. I want to ask him about Project Cadmus since Michael Canto has gone AWOL."

Of course Lois knew where Michael Canto had gone but that bit of information was not subject for print, at least without exposing Clark and Bruce.

"Cadmus?" Perry asked.

"Yeah, Valerie mentioned it." Lois explained, "And I didn't want to use it in the story because we really don't have any proof on paper that it exists or that it has any connection to DeSaad. I think it might have been some super secret genetic laboratory but I've only got Valerie's word on that and no corroboration. I want to ask him and see what his reaction to it. Whether he knows about it or not, before he has a chance to give me a prepared answer."

"Good," Perry nodded in approval, glad the young woman was thinking like a good reporter who wanted real facts, not innuendo that made for tabloid fodder. "Any sign of her?"

"No," Lois returned somberly, saddened not only because she wasn't giving Perry the whole truth but also because she really didn't know where Valerie was and worried that the girl was somewhere in a hell of her own making. "I don't know where she is. I just hope she's okay."

"Hey look," Perry said kindly, "you got her story out there so wherever she is, at least these DeSaad bastards can't come after her."

"I hope so," Lois said glumly, "I really hope so."
Her throat was hoarse from screaming but Valerie had tried nonetheless.

However, the walls that surrounded her were of a substance she did not know and even though she'd unleashed the full torrent of her powers upon it, the walls had not tumbled. They remained standing in place, indifferent to her plight, maintaining their position as components of her prison cell. She thought she had known hell when Hank had delivered her to DeSaad but she was wrong. She had been so terribly wrong.

She thought of Clark's words and wept fresh tears. He'd begged her to stay and she had ignored him, despite everything he'd gone through for her, she'd ignored him and taken the hand of a stranger...again. Now she was in this place, thrown into this cell after she'd been forced through the portal. Every night the small slot in her door opened and food passed through. It was barely edible but Valerie was so hungry she didn't care. She ate it gratefully and prayed that more would come the next day.

There was no window in her cell so she had no idea of where she was, no sound seemed to penetrate the wall and she was left in pitch black darkness. For a moment, Valerie wondered if she was dead. But she couldn't be, she reasoned. Dead people didn't get hungry. Robbed of all senses, Valerie knew she'd go mad if she was forced to endure this any longer. Why were they doing this? She screamed and wept, fists pounding the walls so hard that she knew that they were bleeding.

And then one day, the door opened.

Light fell on the small space, illuminating her world with such bright intensity that she could neither see nor focus for a few seconds as someone walked in. It was hard to make out the shape and while Valerie should have been glad to have company at last, she was also terrified. Scrambling to the rear of the room, she hugged her knees to her chest and stared with wide eyed terror at her visitor.

"There, there, little one," a decided gruff voice spoke but it was also female.

Valerie blinked again, wiping the tears and looking up, reacting to the kindness.

"I know this is difficult," the woman's hand brushed her hair. "It always is in the beginning but its for your own good. You've got so many impurities in your system; we had to flush it out so that we could start fresh."

Valerie barely heard the words but she reacted to the soothing touch. "Why are you doing this to me?" She asked, lips quivering. "Where am I? What are you going to do with me?"

"Hush now," the older woman with wild white hair spoke, her blue eyes displaying an odd kind of tenderness that did not put Valerie at ease. "I'm going to take care of you now. I'll be your family. You can be my swan, my beautiful silver swan."

Valerie reached for her hand on her cheek, felt comforted by the warmth. "I...I want that."

"Of course you do," the woman smiled kissing her on the forehead. "Don't worry, I will take care of you now. Just trust Granny."

John Corben felt odd.

He didn't know how he felt odd, he just did.

The last things he remembered before waking up was the fact that he'd been barking at that dumb
ass Hank Cobb, who'd endangered them all by using a taser on Valerie Beaudry, making it problematic for John and his men to tranquilise her. It gave the girl the opportunity to use her scream and after that, things went to complete hell. He remembered the walls of the room being blown away, being borne off his feet, his arms flailing as he tried to grab something but there was nothing to grab. He felt like a piece of food disappearing down a drain hole.

The pain came from multiple places, things battered him from all angles, until the world became a vortex of swirling images where he couldn't focus. Then it mercifully went black.

When he woke up, he found himself staring at the bright lights overhead and immediately thought hospital. The ceiling above him had all the antiseptic charm of a hospital and powerful white lights made him wince but when he blinked, the lights seemed to dim and the illumination reduced to more tolerable levels. He must have been injured, John thought to himself but hell if he could figure out where. He didn't feel any kind of pain and considering what he had just gone through, that made him the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet.

Sitting up, a wave of disorientation hit him and for a moment, John felt oddly disconnected from his body, like his brain was trying to reconnect. It was a peculiar sensation devoid of the familiar aches and pulls that muscle made when forced into movement after a period of lethargy. In fact everything felt odd when he tried to move. For a moment, he was struck by the memory of parachuting from an airplane, when he was still doing it for King and Country. It felt like that now, like he was freefalling and couldn't make sense of anything.

"You shouldn't be up," a voice said next to him and John turned from where he was lying and saw one of the doctors from DeSaad….a scientist named Vale entering through the door on the far right of the room. John had seen him hovering about the facility though he'd never spoken to the man directly.

"Your systems aren't configured yet," Vale explained, a short man with thinning hair and round rim glasses, a squint in every sense of the word.

"What are you talking about?" John spoke and then felt silent, his voice sounded strange, like it was hearing it through a speaker.

"You have to understand," Vale's expression looked grave. "You were barely alive. We found as many of you as we could but your body suffered extensive injuries, more than was repairable."

"What do you mean?" John demanded, suddenly feeling his stomach contract but that too didn't feel right. He dropped his gaze to his hands and looked at his palms except it wasn't skin he was looking at.

It was metal.

His hands were made out steel and iron, servos working in the place of muscles. His fingers clicked as he moved them and gleamed under the harsh lighting in the room. Turning towards Vale he got out of the bed, the sheet fell away from his torso and he saw more machinery, more lengths of steel, he was...he was...what the fuck was he?

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO TO ME!" John demanded.

"Your body was almost destroyed!" Vale tried rapidly to answer, back pedalling out of the room, trying to make a strategic retreat if the fear John could see in his eyes was anything to go by. "We had no choice, we had to use radical treatment or else you'd be dead!"

John stood up and heard his feet clanging against the floor, his movements were smooth, too
calculated and he couldn't feel *anything*. He couldn't feel the floor underneath his feet or the cold air against his skin. He couldn't smell the antiseptic stench of hospital disinfectant. Something was wrong, really, really wrong.

He saw a mirror and made his way to it, despite Vale's attempt to talk him out of it.

"Mr Corben!" Vale shouted desperately wanting to stop this patient from seeing what he was convinced John Corben would not be able to handle right now without great shock. "Please give yourself time to get used to it. This is a chance of a new life. I realise it's not perfect but its *something*."

John ignored him and continued to approach the mirror, ignoring Vale's attempts to stop him and sickening sound of hard clanging against the tiled floor he knew was his footsteps. Daring not to breathe, though he couldn't bear it if he discovered he couldn't do it, John tried to stave off the raw edge of panic threatening to break his composure into a thousand fragments.

Until he reached the mirror and stared at his reflection and understood at least how totally fucked he was.

Where there had been a face, stubble, blue eyes and a strong jaw that had been called ruggedly handsome by more than one woman, was something inhuman. What stared back at him was an obscenity of machinery parodying a human face. He thought absurdly, that he looked like the cyborg in that movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger except that was a fantasy and this, this was a nightmare he couldn't wake up from. His flesh was metal, his features appeared skeletal his eyes, his eyes were camera lenses.

And when he started screaming, it wasn't even his voice.

"It's probably Bill Haydon." Bruce Wayne revealed to the room and immediately engendered a series of groans and complaints from the gallery that included Chloe, Clark and Lois.

"Really Bruce?" Lois grumbled, tossing a lone morsel of popcorn at the billionaire playboy's head from the bowl she was nursing on her lap as she cuddled up next to Clark on the leather sofa in what was loosely called the 'entertainment room' of Wayne Manor.

"I could be wrong," Bruce offered, unrepentant as he glanced at the screen at the movie currently playing on the huge television set hanging off the wall.

"Right," Chloe rolled her eyes and nudged him gently in the arm, showing him, that like Lois and Clark, she did not believe for one minute that he was wrong about the identity of the double agent in the spy movie they were watching. "When are you *ever* wrong about these things? You know, you keep this up, the next movie we're watching is the *Transformers*."

"Ouch," Clark winced.

Bruce made a face at the suggestion. "I can't help it is if its obvious," he said knowing full well it wasn't really.

Clark laughed. "Only to you," he said giving the screen another glance. "It's our fault anyway, we should have learnt our lesson when we watched the *Davinci Code*."

It had been a week since their final confrontation with the DeSaad Corporation and Michael Canto. Bruce had been mending privately at the manor with Chloe staying in Gotham during that time. Now that their relationship was in the public eye, it wasn't out of the ordinary that she remained at the manor for extended periods. While technically she was on leave from the Planet,
Chloe was considering making a move to Gotham in the near future. After almost losing him at DeSaad's hands, she wasn't eager to let him out of her sight again. She suspected Bruce needed someone close by to remind him that he wasn't infallible, to make him consider before he took dangerous risks with his life.

It was also the first time they'd been together since Valerie's disappearance and the destruction of the DeSaad facility. Without DeSaad was hunting them to get their hands on Clark and Valerie, they were able to return to some semblance of a normal life and with Canto gone, presumably back to wherever he had come from, it appeared that Clark's secret was safe for the time being. There continued to be no signs of John Corben resurfacing and Lois had ensured that the former henchman was connected to the illegal experiments perpetrated by the company in her articles for the Daily Planet.

With Canto gone and Cobb dead, Corben was the only one left that the authorities could prosecute for the atrocities committed by the company. If the man knew what was good for him, he'd stay hidden.

For now, it was nice to just share an evening where they could just hang out as friends and not have to worry about clandestine organisations, which they still knew little about other than its possibly extra-terrestrial origins, looking over their shoulder. Even if it was watching a movie like *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and Spy*, Chloe felt that Bruce needed normal more than person she ever knew.

"Well it was obvious," Bruce tried to defend himself. "And this thing," he gestured to the screen with the hand not wrapped around Chloe, "I mean the only reason that a guy this smart would sleep with a colleagues' wife is if he knows that's the man's weak spot."

"Okay, okay," Lois interjected. "Leave some of the mystery for those of us who like to be surprised…"

"Ha!" Chloe retorted, knowing that was Lois was the last person to let any mystery lie. She was almost as bad as Bruce. "I know for a fact that you're the one who just hast to read the last page of the book right?" She teased her cousin.

"No fair," Lois tossed more popcorn but at Chloe this time, "You're not meant to give up my secrets."

"Alright, alright, lay of the control freaks Chloe," Clark teased. "You can't blame these two if they have *issues.*" He winked at Lois and got jabbed in the ribs for his trouble.

"Says the man who has trouble with heights even though he flies." Bruce retorted smoothly.

Chloe burst out laughing and swore Clark turned a shade redder at that remark but then he broke into a grin and Chloe couldn't help smile at the corresponding smirk she saw on Bruce. They were good together, all four of them and for once, all was good in Chloe Sullivan' world.

She hoped it would always be this way.

**THE END**

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