

Title: Lab Tests

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Rating: NC-17

Category: Slash, Angst, Drama, Future Fic, First Time, AU

Pairing: Clark/Lex, Lex/Other

Season/Spoilers: Future/Assumes familiarity with canon through season 3, minor references throughout, more major references to 'Memoria'

Summary: After giving up on their friendship Clark and Lex want to try again.

There are, oh, one or two issues to deal with.

Notes: My obligatory future fic! In this universe Lois never goes to Smallville, and in fact there's no way to fix everything wrong with season 4, so we'll just consider this AU from the end of season 3. The name Joao is pronounced joe-Ah-o, the Portuguese equivalent to John. Muito obrigada to Lady Ra for the fine beta.

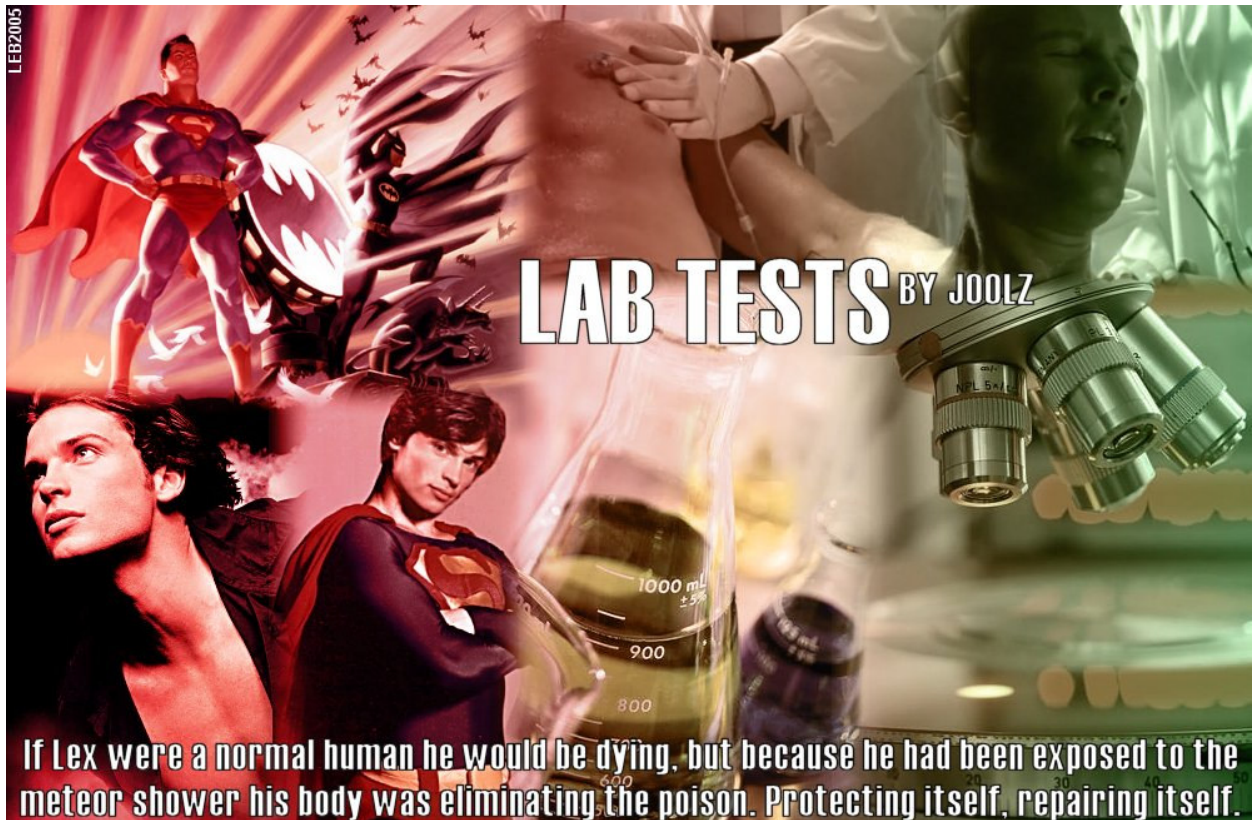
Thanks so much to Laura Beard for the stunning cover illo!!

Portuguese phrases are translated at the end of the story.

Warnings: m/m sex

Disclaimer: Not my lovely characters, just playing with them.

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Even though everything had been said that needed to be, Clark didn't walk away and Lex didn't close the door. The open portal hovered like a living thing between them, an impenetrable barrier, and they studied each other uneasily.

Then Clark noticed someone come into the room behind Lex. It was a handsome young man with a deep tan and hair hanging past his shoulders in loose brown curls. The unbuttoned jeans slung low on lean hips looked hastily pulled on.

The man looked between them and said, "Lex?"

Steel grey eyes tore themselves away from Clark and looked back into the room.

"Venho, Joao. Num minuto."

Clark had no illusions about what he had interrupted. He could tell without using super-vision that Lex wasn't wearing anything under the elegant black silk robe.

Joao gave Clark another curious look and retreated, presumably back to the bedroom.

Accepting that they couldn't stand there all night, Clark forced his voice to function again.

"I'm sorry to bother you, I just thought you'd want to know. You and Chloe used to be friends, sort of."

"Yes, thank you, Clark. And even though she hasn't asked and neither have you, I'll do everything I can for her."

Clark looked away. In so many ways Lex was exactly the same as when they had first met. He looked the same, except perhaps for being a bit more buff. His voice held the same familiar detached concern. His first impulse was still to personally solve everyone's problems. Being near him caused Clark pain that a gunshot point-blank couldn't.

His voice grated, "Good night."

"It was good seeing you, Clark."

Clark backed away and turned, striding blindly down the hall. The sound of the door closing behind him made him stumble. Instead of getting into the elevator he slumped into the corner, hidden in the deep shadow cast by a corniced pillar. He couldn't go yet.

After closing the door, Lex looked down at his hand on the ornate doorknob for several moments. Seeing Clark was still like a punch in the gut, even after all this time. Not that Lex hadn't 'seen' him. He kept track of what Clark was doing, though he was careful to never go too near. It was different to have him standing right there, face to face.

He took a deep breath and shook himself mentally. There was no point in thinking about it all again. Things stood as they were. This was one case in which he wouldn't keep pushing until he got what he wanted. That was how he'd lost Clark in the first place. Lex Luthor could own the entire world, but he couldn't have the

friendship of one farm-boy turned cub reporter. It was something he didn't deserve.

Walking back to the bedroom, he dropped the robe onto the floor and climbed in beside his Brazilian companion. He pushed Clark out of his mind and ran his hand down the flat belly to encircle a half-hard erection. "Did you miss me? Shall we pick up where we left off?"

Joao's hips jerked into Lex's hand, but the man's light brown eyes remained on Lex's face.

"Is that him, *meu amor*? Is he the cause of all your *saudade*, your sadness?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You are the cause of my engorgement, and that's all I'm interested in right now." He leaned in for a kiss, but his bed partner pulled back. Lex immediately drew his hand away, positioned a pillow against the headboard and lounged against it, dismissing Joao in his mind. He wasn't in the habit of having to convince anyone to respond to him.

"Ah, Lex, it isn't that easy. This is important to me. You are such a fine man." Finger tips began rubbing gentle circles in the center of his chest. "You are a remarkable man. Special. And yet you allow no one to love you. You cannot give your heart. I really want to understand why this is, because it is such a sad thing."

Lex didn't want to be moved, but he and Joao had known each other for several years. He was a friend, not a one night stand.

Chuckling acerbically, Lex said, "Five hundred dollar an hour psychiatrists have wanted the same thing. None of them have had any luck, so don't get your hopes up." He turned to look at the man next to him. "Joao, I do care for you."

"I know that you do. As I care for you. At one time I hoped for more, but I always felt that there was someone between us. Between you and everyone. When I saw you with the boy at the door, I knew that it was him. Tell me about him."



Lex shook his head. "I can only tell you that Clark was a piece of my destiny, an opportunity, that I let pass by. Until tonight we hadn't spoken for five years. And however young he may look, he isn't a boy. He's older now than I was when we first met."

"Why did he come here tonight?"

"A mutual friend is in trouble. She's sick and he wanted me to know. That's all."

"Is it? He could have told you over the phone. I could see great emotion in him as well. He is still attached to you."

"I hurt him. He trusted me and I let him down."

"And he hurt you. I would say that perceived betrayal is something neither of you can let go of easily."

"Joao, can you please let *this* go?" Lex leaned over and pushed the man down onto the mattress. He sucked a brown nipple into his mouth and bit. "I want to be with *you* tonight."

Strong hands cradled his head, holding him close.

"*Sim. Desejo você, sonho meu. Belo. Delicioso.*"

Lex captured his mouth in a brutal kiss. He needed to be touched. He needed to feel good. "Fuck me."

"Ah, Lex," his partner groaned. "Yes, I will fuck you. You will think only of me tonight."

Little preparation was needed and soon Lex was lying on his back with his knees pressed to his chest, rocking up into the deep thrusts. Joao's hair fell like a curtain around his face, rhythmically brushing his chest and shoulders. Pleasure lanced deeply into his body, where he could feel it burning away the emptiness. This man was beautiful and kind. He cared and he was here now. His warmth and strength surrounded Lex and made him feel safe. That the feeling would last only as long as the sex didn't matter. This had to be enough.

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Clark asked himself why he was standing there in the hall outside Lex's penthouse, but he knew the answer. There had never been anyone like Lex in his life and there never would be. The fact that they would never, could never recapture the easy friendship of the early years didn't change that. He had idealized Lex then, and probably did the same in memory, but no one had ever taken his place for Clark.

Knowing he shouldn't, he focused on the wall across from him. After filtering through several layers of rooms, he found them, first as skeletons, then clarifying into living flesh.

He heard Lex's friend say, *"And he hurt you. I would say that perceived betrayal is something neither of you can let go of easily."*

Lex growled, *"Joao, can you please let this go? I want to be with you tonight."*

Clark watched. He watched the passion grow. He watched Lex's face transform with ecstasy as the other man thrust into his body. He watched them both come, crying out together the shared pleasure. He watched the darker-skinned man hold Lex and rock him, whispering words of comfort as his pale lover shook with emotion. He watched until they stilled into sleep, bodies entwined in the most intimate of embraces. Only then did he leave.

It was a kind of self-punishment. What he had seen hadn't excited him, but rather made him nauseous with regret. That could have been him with Lex. Back in Smallville they had never touched each other that way, but Clark had always known he only had to say the word and Lex would have given him everything, even himself.

They could see the desire in each other's eyes, but the problem was that they could see other things, as well. He had lied to Lex. Lex had lied to him. In the end that was what had decided the course of their relationship. But he didn't know if it had absolutely *had* to be like that. Maybe at some point Clark could have made a different decision and their lives would have continued together instead of breaking apart. In fact, there were dozens of times when Clark could have told Lex a harmless truth without endangering his precious secret, but lying had

become habit. He had nobody to blame but himself if Lex was now in love with someone else.

Clark drove home and changed into his 'working' clothes. Dark pants, black turtle neck sweater, black knit cap, and sunglasses. He could see just as well at night with them on and they assisted in maintaining his anonymity.

His patrol that night was desultory. He broke up two muggings and an attempted rape without lingering to give the usual lecture. He pulled the alarm in a store that was being burglarized and disappeared without anyone having been aware of his presence. It was late when he finally got home, and in the morning the clock buzzed all too soon.

At the Planet, Lois eyed him suspiciously, showing more personal perceptivity than usual, but sent him to Krispy Kreme the same as always. When he got back, there was a discussion going on about whether the recent death of a LutherCorp executive had really been the accident it seemed.

Lois wasn't the only one suspicious of Lex. There was a whole stable of reporters who were happy to assume the worst about anything involving the Luthors. While he wasn't about to defend Lex, he did try to insist that they have solid proof before publishing anything, and solid proof was pretty hard to come by. Clark knew better than most people just how good Lex could be at covering his tracks when he wanted to, but he found it hard to believe that the young billionaire was as bad as everybody said.

Lionel, of course, was another matter. With his in-depth background knowledge of the Luthor father/son relationship, he hypothesized that the two of them had come to some sort of stalemate. There was clearly no love lost between them, but they had been running LutherCorp together for the last three years, with LexCorp as a business partner. Lex managed the research and development end, while Lionel handled corporate affairs. They seemed to each be playing to their own strengths and LutherCorp was bigger and more powerful than ever.

Clark had been working at the Daily Planet a few months, and that only because of his previous acquaintance with Perry White, so they didn't trust him with anything interesting or too challenging just yet. He plodded through his work day, distracted by what he had seen the night before. And by what he had felt. He

knew it was stupid to even think about Lex. There was no point in hoping that things would be resolved between them. Too much had happened to turn back the clock and he had more important things to focus on.

His mind didn't seem to care about those very valid points. He kept seeing Lex's sweat-slick body in the throes of passion or the lines of bone and muscle barely hidden beneath black silk.

The image that came to him most often, though, was the look on Lex's face when he had opened the door. For a moment there had been unguarded emotion, although someone who knew Lex less well might not have seen it. Just for a second, before the smooth recovery, Clark had thought he saw something like love. It was probably his imagination, he told himself. It couldn't be more obvious that Lex had moved on. He had a very sexy and, from what he had seen, probably very good man in his life now. Why would he even remember the kid who had hung around him during his exile to Smallville?

Of course it never was that simple between them, so he remained on edge. After work he found himself wandering toward the LexCorp tower, where his former friend had built his home. Clark was unendingly grateful that Lex didn't live in the LutherCorp tower, which was right outside his office window.

Loitering in the pleasant park across the street, Clark looked up to the penthouse. He watched Joao cook for a while before Lex came in. The other man seemed to come from money, too. His clothes were the highest quality, but more than that he wore them with the same grace that Lex did. That was something you had to be born into. He gave Lex a quick kiss and then they sat down to eat. Clark didn't tune in his hearing this time, just followed their movements and gestures. Lex seemed happy.

Clark didn't stay long that first night. He knew that what he was doing was an invasion of privacy, unforgivable spying, but what were super-powers for if you didn't use them for yourself once in a while? It wasn't like Lex had never watched him.

Subsequent visits were harder to justify. Sometimes at night he would float outside the bedroom window of the penthouse and watch the two of them together. A couple of times he followed them to a club, observing from the roof of

a building across the street. That was painful because they made such a striking couple; Clark's weren't the only eyes following them avidly when they went out in public. He never listened to what they talked about and was thus able to tell himself that he was protecting their privacy. Right, and the Pope shits in the woods.

This extra surveillance cut into his patrol time, but not his social life, because he didn't have one. That hadn't always been the case. People at college found him attractive in a way that kids in Smallville never had. There was no lack of willing lovers, men and women, and for a couple of years Clark had thrown himself into what could loosely be termed 'dating'. He'd enjoyed the sex, but didn't let anyone get too close. It wasn't fair when he couldn't share his secrets.

After he started acting as what The Inquisitor called 'The Guardian', he'd let that part of his life go. He needed the time to patrol and really didn't want to go back to constantly making excuses about why he had to leave suddenly or was late for a date. Crime fighting had taken all his energy, until he became sidetracked by his renewed interest in Lex.

He started to think of it as entertainment, a relaxing pursuit that he deserved, considering all that he did. Even though he was always apart, he didn't feel quite as alone.

One evening, they loaded some bags into the car. Intrigued, Clark flew along above them and was surprised to find them following the route to the airport. This time, he listened in.

After checking the bags at the first class counter, the pair walked slowly through the concourse.

"Look, Joao, you really don't have to go."

"Yes, *caro*, I do. As much as I enjoy being here with you, it can't go on forever. You will always be in my heart, but I deserve more. You know this is true."

Lex did know it. He liked Joao as much as he had liked anyone for a long time, but it was true that he couldn't commit fully. It actually meant a lot to Lex that this was so important to the other man. There had been enough people in his life who would have considered it a minor thing as long as they had access to his money and power. He thought that maybe Joao was truly a friend, something he hadn't been able to say about anyone since losing Clark.

He led his companion behind a potted palm and pulled him into his arms.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed. I will miss you."

Joao drew back and cupped Lex's face between both hands.

"Sweet Lex. I will visit again, and you must come to me in Recife. We will call and email. You will tell me that you have reunited with the one you love, and I will tell you of my search for the same. One day maybe I will have children that you can spoil."

Lex smiled sadly. "You paint a beautiful fantasy."

"If you and I cannot create reality from fantasy, then who can do so?"

"Good point."

They continued walking to the departure gate. Lex threw caution to the wind, took Joao's hands in his and kissed him on the lips.

"Goodbye, my friend."

"*Vá com deus*, beautiful Lex."

When the man was out of sight Lex had to sit down for a minute. This was going to be hard. Joao had been good for him. He had distracted Lex from all the feelings that had been coming up since Clark's impromptu visit. He had actively affirmed Lex's value as a human being at a time when left on his own he might well have slipped into self-destructive behaviors. But it wasn't, he decided, as though he didn't have work to do. He resolved to bury himself so far into his research that nothing else would matter.

He deserved more? What the hell? This guy had Lex and he wanted more? Clark was so incensed by that comment that he forgot to listen. Part of him was insulted on Lex's behalf that anyone could think him not good enough. Another part was viciously pleased to see the foreigner go. It can be hard to watch other people be happy when you yourself aren't.

He immediately felt guilty about thinking that when he caught up to them at the gate, watched their tender farewell and saw Lex's dejected posture afterwards. He berated himself for being a selfish, cold-hearted bastard.

"Clark?"

He looked up to see Lex standing in front of him.

"Oh, hi Lex."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Ah, no. I'm just meeting someone's plane. It's a work thing."

Luckily, he was standing far enough down the concourse that it wasn't obvious that he had been following Lex.

"So," Lex seemed almost as unnerved as Clark felt. "Have you spoken to Chloe recently?"

"A few days ago."

"I saw her in Gotham yesterday. She's doing reasonably well, but they want her to start chemo sooner than they'd thought. She might have to go in tomorrow or the next day."

The thought made Clark shudder. "God, Lex. Chemo. Is there anything worse?"

"Not much. The thing is, I've been talking to her doctors. I don't think chemotherapy or radiation or any of the normal treatments are going to help her. They haven't said it outright, but I think this cancer is the result of meteor exposure. Lord knows she was around enough of it in Smallville. It's a wonder everyone isn't sick."

Unbearable; Chloe was maybe dying because of the kryptonite. His fault.

He asked desperately, "There isn't anything they can do?"

"They'll do what they can, Clark, and so will I. I just don't know if it will be enough."

"I appreciate you looking into it."

"Don't thank me yet."

They fell silent, neither knowing what else to say.

Thinking escape, Clark said, "Uh, I should go. Don't want to miss this guy."

"Sure. I'll...see you?"

"Maybe."

He watched Lex walk away, slinky hips and all. He couldn't believe that they'd just stood there and had a conversation, almost like nothing had happened. Almost. It had felt good talking to him and it seemed like Lex had enjoyed it too, if you overlooked how awkward it had been for both of them. He would have to think about that. Nothing had really changed, but, well, maybe something had.

After that, Clark didn't give up 'checking in' with Lex, as he liked to term it, but there wasn't much to see. All Lex did was work, barely going back to the penthouse to sleep. Typically, he would exercise in his private gym, then spend the mornings in the LutherCorp offices and visit one of the laboratories in the afternoons, often staying until midnight or later. Clark couldn't see into any of the labs very well, which made it kind of pointless to hang around. He did watch Lex masturbate a

couple of times, listening in to see if a name was spoken along with the orgasm, but he was disappointed. And really, that was going a little far even for him.

Lex would take Sundays off from work and stay at home reading or watching movies. Those were Clark's favorite times to go to the park and check in. His former friend was so different when he was alone and not being watched. When he *thought* he wasn't being watched. Clark had laughed out loud one day when he caught Lex singing and dancing to a song on the stereo. He didn't care if the woman and child playing nearby thought he was weird, it made him happy to see Lex like that.

One Sunday evening, a couple of months after running into Lex at the airport, Clark stopped by to check in on his way home after spending the weekend with his parents in Smallville. Lex was listening to classical music and reading a magazine. He peered a little closer: *The New Yorker*. Only the best for Lex.

He was about to say a mental 'good night' and go change for patrol, when he spotted a dark figure swinging from the penthouse roof onto the balcony. The intruder opened the sliding glass door and swept in, causing Lex to look up in alarm.

Clark was too well disciplined in stealth to jump to the balcony himself, but he wasted no time speeding past security and up the emergency stairs to the top floor. Looking through the wall, he saw the large man seize a standing Lex by the arms only to be flipped to the floor by his not-so-helpless prey. The man jumped to his feet and moved forward menacingly and Clark simply walked through the front door, not even noticing it splinter around him.

Both men in the living room turned to look at him. Lex's eyes widened in surprise while the other man's narrowed in annoyance. The intruder wore a black, armored body suit, a black cape, and a mask with funny looking pointy ears. This must be Gotham's resident crime fighter.

"Back off, Batman," he commanded.

The Dark Knight glowered at him. "You're in over your head here, kid. If you can't stop this criminal, someone has to do it. That would be me."

Lex was looking back and forth between them with amazement. In his distraction he didn't defend himself when Batman reached out and grabbed him by the throat. Clark was there in an instant, his hand applying enough pressure to the gloved wrist to make it clear that snapping it like a twig was not out of the question.

"Let him go and explain yourself."

Released, Lex coughed a little and rubbed his throat, his eyes following Clark's movements avidly.

The dark figure straightened to his full height, somehow causing the cloak to billow out around him. Cool effect. He said, "Lex Luthor is guilty of crimes against humanity. He will be brought to justice."

Almost laughing, Clark asked, "Are you joking?"

"Deadly serious. You're just too amateur and too innocent to see what's going on right in front of you."

Lex spoke for the first time, and it was to defend Clark.

"At least our *Guardian* doesn't make a habit of breaking into the homes of private citizens, assaulting them and accusing them of non-existent crimes."

Clark stopped breathing in shock. Lex knew who he was. Had he known all along, or did he just figure it out?

Batman loomed threateningly. "You aren't going to talk yourself out of this, Luthor."

Recovering from his surprise, Clark asked irritably, "What exactly do you think he did?"

"In his laboratories at Cadmus, Luthor is developing biological weapons of mass destruction." Turning to Lex, he promised, "You will not be allowed to use them."

Now Lex laughed. "Biological warfare agents? What gave you that idea? It couldn't be farther from the truth."

"I have been supplied with evidence documenting your evil plan. Don't bother denying it."

Clark answered, "You've been misinformed. Lex is not building biological weapons."

"And how do you know that, boy?"

"Because I know Lex. I'll vouch for him and take full responsibility."

Batman insisted, "He's planning to use these weapons to blackmail the entire world into submitting to his control. Your word is not enough."

Chuckling, Lex dropped back onto the sofa. "Man, someone is really putting one over on you!"

Clark shook his head. "No, Batman, Lex isn't going for world domination by force."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"Because, look, he has a whole different strategy. It would be really expensive trying to maintain global control with that kind of threat. You couldn't actually use biological weapons for minor rebellions, so he would have to hire and equip his own army. Lex is much more subtle and efficient than that.

"There's a lot more long-term benefit to be achieved through integration into the international economy than there is in trying to control the whole world militarily. Free market economies with independent and competing governments are good for business, that's where the profit is to be made, and most of LutherCorp's products do well during peacetime, not wartime. It isn't part of the military industrial complex, except for a few dalliances of Lionel's. A bunch of cowed, frightened governments looking for ways to overthrow the evil dictator would tie up funds and seriously set back Lex's plans to dominate the world through corporate hegemony."

Lex was smiling at him in approval, clearly appreciating his analysis. Apparently those Political Economy classes had paid off.

Clark asked him, "LutherCorp isn't into armament production, is it?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I keep my eye out for that type of thing, but honestly, my father could have something going on the side that I don't know about. I can assure you that I am not developing anything of the kind, and certainly not at Cadmus."

Clark smirked. "See?" he asked the crime fighter, as though that settled everything.

Batman bristled. Taking a step forward he said, "Look, Kent..."

Clark stepped into his path. The well-muscled, well-armored figure hit Clark's chest and bounced back more than a foot.

"You look." Clark said seriously. "You *will* leave Lex alone. He's under my protection and my supervision. If you have a problem with him, come to me first. Superhero or not, you'll be very sorry if I find out you've threatened or harassed him."

The masked man glared at him. "I'll be watching him and I'll be watching you, too, Kent. If I find that you've been colluding with or enabling criminal activity, you will discover that you aren't as invincible as you seem to believe."

With that he swept out onto the balcony and disappeared over the railing.

Clark looked at Lex to find the man watching him curiously. The enormity of what had just happened hit him all at once.

"Um. Well," he stuttered.

Lex stood and strode toward the bar. "Can I offer you something to drink? I think that what we have to talk about may take some time."

Sinking into a chair, he answered resignedly, "Scotch. I finally developed a taste for it."

"Good choice."

As he prepared the drinks, Lex made a call on his cell phone arranging for someone to replace the front door. Then he handed Clark a glass and sat down facing him. "So, where shall we start?"

"Uh, how long have you known I was the *Guardian*?"

"Pretty much from the beginning."

He raised his eyebrows skeptically.

"Come on, Clark. Who else could it have been? First you're the small town hero on a mission to save everyone. At college, aside from being in the right place at the right time once in a while, you were pretty quiet. Then, soon after you graduate an anonymous man begins protecting the noble citizens of Metropolis from all manner of wrongdoer. We don't have many meteor mutants here, but regular humans get up to enough mischief to keep you entertained."

"Have you been watching me?" That pushed all kinds of buttons for Clark. It was what had come between them before and all the anger came flooding back. He stood, ready to walk away once again.

Lex waved his glass and said casually, "Like you haven't been watching me? I suppose it's a coincidence that the park across from my building has become your favorite place to meditate. I suppose you always wait for arriving passengers in the departure concourse. Sit down and let me explain."

Oh. Well, he did have a point. Clark sat.

Lex went on, "Yes, I have had you watched, but not closely, just enough to make sure that you're all right. When I figured out that you were the *Guardian*, I cancelled the observation all together. I didn't want to inadvertently tip anyone off to your identity. No one but the bad guys you thwart should have any reason to notice your abilities."

It was frightening to hear Lex say that, but he found he wasn't totally surprised. Lex always was perceptive.

"What is it you think you know about my abilities?"

"Speed. Strength. You can see through things and, I think, hear, too. Bullets, cars and Batmen don't harm you. Unless I miss my guess, you can fly or at least float really well."

Clark felt light headed. Lex wasn't missing much.

"How..?"

"Most of those things I've known since Smallville. As to the flying, I saw you one night outside my bedroom window. Aside from the disturbing peeping Tom aspect of that, I thought it was pretty cool. Might I ask, was your interest personal or professional?"

There was no use denying anything at that point.

"Personal."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Since the night I came here to tell you about Chloe, I've just needed to see you. I'm sorry, Lex. I knew it was wrong."

"That long?"

Clark nodded.

"Did you watch me with Joao?"

He nodded again, wishing the Earth could open up and swallow him whole. He'd never felt so stupid in his life, and that was saying something. He was an alien obsessive stalker freak.

Lex stood up and paced to the end of the room and back, thinking intently. When he spoke again, he changed the subject.

"Another question. You told Batman that I wasn't involved in criminal activities. Did you really believe what you said?"

"First of all, I didn't say you weren't involved in *any* criminal activities. I wouldn't make that kind of blanket statement. I did say I was sure you weren't building doomsday weapons. I know that's true."

"Do you know it, or do you hope it?"

That was a good question and Clark had to think about it for a minute. Eventually, he answered, "I'm sure. There are a lot of things you might do, for your own reasons, but I can't see you threatening to wipe out a good portion of the planet's population, much less carrying it out."

To his surprise, Lex came over and knelt on the floor in front of Clark.

"In that case, it may be time to reevaluate our estrangement. Do you think there is any possibility that things could be different now, between us? Do you think we might learn to trust one another again?"

He wanted that, most definitely he did. Did he believe it could happen?

"Lex, I..."

"Because I think so. We aren't the same people we were back in Smallville, but the connection between us hasn't changed. I still believe that we can have a destiny. You've given me more hope tonight than I've had in years."

"What, by confessing that I've been spying on you?"

"Oddly enough, yes. You wouldn't watch my most intimate moments if you didn't feel strongly about me. It may be weird, but it certainly isn't indifferent. And you've given me reason to suppose that it isn't because you hate or fear me, either. I think you care."

Clark dropped his face into his hands. He did care, of course he did. But he couldn't admit it, not in words. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Clark, would it surprise you to know that I care about you, too? I never stopped. We hid so much from each other before, but now I probably already know most of

your secrets and there aren't many I could keep from you even if I wanted to. I want to try again to have what we could have had before."

Clark looked closely at Lex and yes, he meant what he was saying.

"Lex, it's not that simple."

"Not quite, but close. Years ago I told you I didn't want to let anything interfere with our friendship, but I did. I allowed misunderstandings to come between us. I should have tried harder to set things right."

"I remember it being more than misunderstandings."

"That's the thing, Clark. It wasn't. Not really. I never intended any harm to you, and I don't think you meant to hurt me. That it happened was a mistake on both our parts. A misunderstanding."

Clark shook his head, but Lex continued. "Think about it. You saw some of the things I did and thought that I was trying to get at your secrets for my own benefit. I can understand why you thought that, but you misunderstood. It was never as much about you as it was about me. I tried to tell you that, but I didn't try hard enough."

Clark frowned. He still didn't get it.

Lex stood and began pacing as he explained. "I died the day we met. I died, Clark. It had a more profound impact on me than I could adequately articulate at the time. Apparently, it isn't unusual for people who've had near death experiences to feel their lives have changed, or to seek the meaning of that life. I, being me, went about it my own way. That means I got obsessive and was willing to do anything to get answers to my questions about why I was alive. Why I continued to escape death by a hair's breadth. So many things led back to you. I knew you had the answers, but you wouldn't give them to me. You held them out of my reach and pretended they weren't there. It just made me more determined."

"I don't know why you're alive, Lex. I don't even know why I'm alive. I never had any answers for you."

"I know. I know that now. I've since been able to let it go, because it's really more important how you live than why. I was too wrapped up in it at the time. But Clark, I never meant to endanger you in any way. I did endanger you, and anger you, and scare you, but I never meant to. I would have then and will now do anything I can to protect you. I just didn't understand that who you needed protection from was me. I misunderstood the situation and you misunderstood my intentions."

Lex continued earnestly, "That's not all. I don't think you understood how much your honesty and trust meant to me. I'd never let anyone as close as I let you. I laid my heart on the table time and again. I felt that if I would ever be able to show myself to anyone it would be you. I told you things, admitted things about myself and my actions, that scared me to death. I was afraid that when you really saw me, you would turn away. And eventually, you did."

Clark wanted to object, but didn't know exactly to what. What Lex said was true.

Lex went on, "You could only see our relationship in the context of your own experience. Honesty was a loaded issue for you, too, but it meant something different. You had the history of sharing everything with your parents, and talking openly about at least some things with your friends. I never had that. You were my one experiment in trust. I placed my whole sense of self in your hands and every time you lied to me or doubted me, it cut into my heart. I kept trying again, taking one more chance, but eventually my heart was shredded beyond endurance."

"Lex, I didn't know."

"It's all right, Clark. My emotional stability was too much to expect you to bare. Aside from anything else, you were just a teenager. And I know you didn't *mean* to hurt me, did you?"

"I didn't. Your friendship was so important to me. There were so many times that I wanted to tell you everything, but I couldn't. You didn't make it easy, but in the end I didn't tell you because of me, not you. I was afraid of what you would think of me, and yes, of what you would do, but I didn't want to put either of us in danger because I couldn't keep my big mouth shut. I hated deceiving you, but I felt like I had no choice. I never wanted to hurt you."

Lex sat down on the very edge of the sofa and leaned forward, elbows on his thighs and hands clasped between his knees. "We both actually wanted the best for each other, but we made mistakes in how we behaved. We misunderstood. Isn't it time we cleared that up?"

"I'd like that, Lex. But, um, what exactly are we talking about? Being friends, or something more?"

"I think we should start with being friends and see if something more develops. Nothing would make me happier if it did."

"What about Joao?"

"What about him?"

"You're in love with him."

"I'm...? I'm not in love with him. That's why he left."

Clark was surprised and it showed.

Lex smiled. "You watched us but you didn't listen, right?"

He nodded.

"If you had, you would know that we talked about you a lot. Only in general terms, but Joao was on a campaign to get us back together."

Clark blushed. "I thought...."

"You're making my point about misunderstandings for me. Joao is a good friend and he could tell that I still, that I was in love with someone else."

Clark's heart beat faster. "In love? With someone else?"

"I'm in love with you, Clark. I have been for a long time."

"I thought you hated me."

"I never hated you. I always wanted you in my life, I was just waiting for you to want the same thing." Lex leaned back and smirked at Clark. "Did your sharp reporter's mind ever wonder why you were allowed to walk right up to my door the first night you came here?"

No, his sharp reporter's mind hadn't wondered. It must have been a little too nervous at the time.

"Security should have stopped me, shouldn't they? They let me through and told me how to get the elevator to open at the penthouse."

Lex nodded. "That's right. All my staff- security, housekeepers, assistants, everybody- have always been instructed to allow two people to be put through to me in person, by phone, mail or email, at any time, no matter where I am or what I'm doing. Those two people are you and your mother."

Clark was stunned. Given how private and cautious Lex was, that showed an amazing degree of trust. "Me and my mother?"

"Yes. You, for obvious reasons. I've waited for years to find you at my door. Martha, because if you were ever in any trouble and needed help, I hoped that she would come to me. She always knew how I felt about you."

Clark thought of all the times he'd considered contacting Lex but hadn't, because he believed he wouldn't be welcome. He said, "I'm such an idiot."

"No more than I. Neither of us has shown conspicuous intelligence. I want to put it all behind us and start again. So how about it, Clark?"

Clark wanted everything to be clear. He wanted to happily throw himself into Lex's arms and ride off into the sunset. Unfortunately, he still felt conflicted.

"I want that, what you're suggesting. I don't want it to sound like I don't. But it can't be that easy."

"Why not?"

"Because you're who you are and I'm who I am. Talk about complicated."

"Who are we that's so irreconcilable?"

"You're Lex Luthor, billionaire capitalist with dreams of global corporate domination. You have a way of bending ethics to suit your needs and apologizing later. I'm Clark Kent, *Metropolis Guardian*, sworn protector of the weak and downtrodden, with dreams of becoming a brilliant investigative reporter and exposing shady business practices. Doesn't that seem just a little complicated to you?"

Lex laughed. "Complicated, yes. But doable, too. I fully expect you to call me on it if you think I've crossed too far into the shade. And my life experience might just be grounding for you, my young Icarus." He stood and crossed to Clark, once again kneeling at his feet. "Sure, there are details to work out, and I'm not saying it'll be easy, but I want to try. I'm doing that laying my heart on the table thing, Clark. Please say you'll try."

This time, having had it pointed out to him, he recognized what Lex was doing. After having been told five years previously that he wasn't wanted, after being doubted and demonized by Clark and just about everybody else in the world, Lex was making himself vulnerable one more time. He was asking to be accepted. Clark hated to think how it would feel to Lex if he were to be rejected again. It broke his heart to think of breaking Lex's.

He looked down into his old friend's face, saw the openness that was only there for him. Saw him waiting on a razor's edge for Clark's answer. Clark reached out and touched Lex's cheek with his fingertips. The other man closed his eyes and leaned into Clark's palm.

"Yes, Lex. I'd like to try. Life is less without you. Just... less. Please remember that if I hurt you, I don't mean to. You're so important to me."

Lex rose up on his knees and reached for Clark, who opened his legs and pulled him to his chest. They held each other, chins resting on one another's shoulders, and it felt right, calming, grounding.

His voice shaking slightly, Lex murmured, "I've missed you so much, Clark."

Tightening his arms, Clark replied, "Me too. Every day."

After a minute they pulled apart, both equally embarrassed by the emotion between them. Lex stood, wiping his eyes, and retrieved his drink from the coffee table.

Trying for casual, Lex said, "So, I don't think I thanked you properly for rescuing me from Batman earlier. That was some entrance, by the way."

Clark cleared his tight throat. "Um, yeah, that. Sorry about your door."

"Don't worry about it. It was definitely worth it to see you put that giant flying rodent into his place."

"Well, I may have gone a bit overboard. And Lex, I don't think I properly apologized for spying on you. I'm not entirely immune from bending my ethics and apologizing later. These last few months haven't really been my best. It's no excuse, but pretending to be close to you helped me cope."

Clark stood up and went to look out the window. When he felt Lex at his shoulder, he went on, "I want to be honest with you. I really do. It's hard to break a lifetime's training in keeping secrets, but ask me and I'll try to tell you everything I can."

"There's no hurry. That you're willing, alone, means a lot to me. Feel free to ask me whatever you need to as well."

"Well, I was wondering, what it is you're *really* doing at Cadmus? Besides building weapons of mass destruction, of course." He smiled to make it clear he was kidding.

"It's really pretty interesting, Clark. Why don't I show you instead of telling you?"

No, that wasn't a good idea.

"Ah, I'm sure that won't be necessary. You can just tell me."

Lex narrowed his eyes and scrutinized Clark's face.

Clark grew more nervous by the second. He asked, "Why can't I see into the labs?"

"You've tried to look?"

"Just to see where you were. But there's a lot of lead, and that blocks my vision."

"Many of our labs work with radioactive substances in one form or another. The lead shielding is for everyone's protection."

"Do you experiment with meteor rocks?"

"Yes."

Clark turned away and walked across the room. His hands were shaking.

Lex went on, "Rest assured that I don't use meteor rocks in the profligate way my father did, with no respect for human life. I've seen enough of what they can do and how unpredictable the effects can be to base any large projects on them. They do, however, have interesting properties that can be useful in research done under highly controlled conditions. Clark, what meteor rocks I have are carefully stored in lead-lined safes. They are no danger to you."

Clark looked at him with some alarm.

"Yes, I know that they weaken you. It's one of the first things I observed about you. I have never used that knowledge, have I?"

Feeling ill at ease, Clark shook his head.

Lex's face fell into sadness. "You don't trust me."

"I didn't say that. I do trust you, Lex. I just have a thing about labs and experiments. We don't need to go there for you to explain your projects to me." Clark began to pace, fidgeting.

Lex stood and watched him without moving. "I think maybe we do. I can see how much this conversation is upsetting you, but the bottom line is that if you don't trust my labs then you don't trust me. I think we do need to go there."

Clark's anger flared. "Why? Why are you pushing this? It's not a big deal. Is this some kind of a test?"

"Yes, in a way I guess it is. I know it's only been a few minutes since we decided to try to be together again, but if there's no chance I'd rather know now than get my hopes up. You say you trust me, but if deep down that isn't the case, then there's little prospect of working things out. I can't put myself through that."

Clark challenged, "So it's all or nothing, right now?"

"I'd rather we not look at it that way. This is one thing I'm asking of you, so that I can trust you. Is it worth it to you to make the effort?"

Clark felt pissed off. Lex was forcing him to do something he didn't want to do. It was manipulative and he didn't want to give in to it, but there was so much on the line. He decided that for another chance with Lex he would do pretty much anything.

He said, "All right. I don't like it but I'll do it if that's what you need. When do we go?"

"How about tomorrow? Would your boss give you the afternoon to get an exclusive on one of Lex Luthor's secret laboratories? Not that you could write about everything, you'll see what I mean, but it would be enough to make it worth while."

Clark's heart sank. "So soon? Yes. Okay. Tomorrow is fine. The hard part will be getting out without Lois, but I know a few moves." He forced a smile.

Lex's answering smile was also a little strained. "It'll be all right, Clark. After tomorrow we'll really be able to start again. Another drink?"

"Uh, no. I should go. I still have to, you know, do rounds."

Lex moved closer and put one hand on Clark's shoulder. He said softly, "Thank you for coming here tonight. For a lot of reasons. I promise you won't regret it."

Being that close to Lex it was all Clark could do to not grab him and burrow into his heat. "And I'll try not to make you sorry, either. I promise I'll try."

Lex's eyes held so much warmth and affection. "We're good, then."

Yeah. Good. Maybe better than good. Maybe less. Time would tell.

~

Lex looked at his watch again. 2:15. Clark was fifteen minutes late now and Lex was fifteen minutes more nervous. He hadn't gotten a lot of sleep last night. He'd lain in bed replaying his conversation with Clark over and over again, just to convince himself that it had really happened. After all this time it was hard to believe that Clark had really agreed to try again. In fact, it was hard to believe that he hadn't changed his mind and bolted. Only seeing him walk through the front doors of Cadmus would convince him it was all true.

Clark's little demonstration of powers had given him a lot to think about, too. While he hadn't come right out and admitted to anything, at least the younger man hadn't hidden his actions or made up flimsy excuses about them. The prospect of finding out more about those abilities and their intriguing potential would, in itself, have been enough to keep Lex awake all night. The lack of dissimulation was the biggest sign to Lex that Clark really was ready to start again, without secrets this time. It was more than Lex had dared hope for.

Now if Clark would just come! Lex was anxious to get the tour underway. There was a lot to explain and the staff was about to have heart attacks, never having seen the boss loiter in their foyer before. The receptionist and the security guards kept giving each other alarmed looks, no doubt wishing that Lex would get back into the bowels of the lab where he belonged and stop throwing off the routine.

Lex was all for that. There was no one else he would hang around idly waiting for but Clark. If, when, Clark made it to the door, Lex didn't want him to have any excuse to back out.

2:17. He didn't know what he would do if his recently restored friend had changed his mind. Go back to his work, he guessed, and resign himself to being alone. It worried him to realize how much he was investing in the response of this one man.

Relief flooded through him as the door opened and Clark stepped in. Wearing an ill-fitting suit and wind-blown brown hair, he paused just inside the entrance, frowning, until he saw Lex. Clark's face relaxed into a slightly edgy smile. He looked pale, but he was there, which was just beautiful.

~

Clark walked toward Lex, his mind peripherally aware that the other man looked nearly as anxious as he, himself, felt. He was light headed and his heart was beating much too fast. Wondering if it was possible for him to faint without the presence of kryptonite, he said nervously, "Sorry I'm late. I had to wait for Lois to get tied up on a phone interview before I could sneak away. She's going to kill me when she finds out."

Lex brushed it off. "No problem. I already have you signed in, so we're ready to go down." He attached a visitor's pass to the lapel of Clark's suit coat. It felt for a moment like the other man was pinning a corsage to him as a prom date, an illusion possibly caused by excess oxygen. Or possibly it was because Lex seemed younger, as young as he'd been when they first met, not the poised business tycoon he was most of the time now. Lex was nervous too.

Lex started walking toward the elevator at the back of the lobby and suddenly Clark was way beyond nervous. He stayed where he was and looked at the elevator. He'd avoided thinking about it until now, but this was the moment of truth. If he stepped through those doors, he would be walking into a Luthor laboratory. The occasional experiments that Lionel and Lex had carried out at the Smallville plant were nothing compared to what could be going on here. They knew no restraint. They were willing to do anything, he'd seen that. He shuddered to think of what they could do to him.

The slim, smooth headed figure stopped and turned, looking at Clark quizzically. Clark couldn't bring himself to take a step forward.

All his parents' warnings flashed through his mind. 'You have to be careful.' 'People will want to use you.' 'You have a gift, but it comes with a price.' 'You can never let your guard down.' He remembered the utter helplessness of being exposed to kryptonite. Anyone could do anything to him with just a little of the alien rock. Lex had admitted that they used it here.

Clark was no longer seeing the foyer, Lex, or the light of day. His mind wound itself up with fear and blocked out everything else. What if it was all a trap? What if Lex was just trying to get him into the lab? He was a good manipulator. He would know what buttons to push to get Clark to walk in of his own free will. Once there, Clark could completely disappear. Lex knew his weakness and would be able to control him easily. What if Lionel was waiting to begin the torture? The Luthors had the power to divert any investigation into his disappearance; he would belong to them.

Pressure on his arm made Clark jump. He forced his eyes to focus and found Lex standing in front of him looking deeply concerned. His mouth was moving and he was pulling Clark sideways. Clark's feet wouldn't obey him and he felt himself drifting until they reached a shiny marble slab bench and Lex pushed him to sit. His eyes on Lex's face, he had to use super-hearing to make out the words over the pounding of his own heart.

"Clark, I'm so sorry. I should never have insisted on this. I should never have tried to make you prove yourself to me. You've done that a hundred times over. I didn't realize it was so bad. We can go over to my office at LexCorp and I can explain everything to you there. I have diagrams and reports on most of the projects; we don't have to go into the lab at all. Please forgive me, and let's just forget about this. Clark?"

Clark blinked and the paralysis started to recede. Lex was saying they didn't have to go in? The tightness in his chest loosened some more.

Lex touched Clark's forehead, turned to someone and barked an order. "Bring me a glass of water. Now." Then the worried blue eyes were on him again. "It's okay, just breathe slowly. Everything's fine."

Clearing his throat, Clark managed to squeak, "Lex?"

"It's all right, Clark. You just had a panic attack. It's over now." Graceful fingers carded through Clark's hair. "Rest for a minute."

A glass was placed into his hand and Clark drank. It was strange to feel himself coming back to the here and now when he hadn't even been aware of going elsewhere. Bright mid-afternoon sun was flooding the elegant space and the woman at the desk was watching Clark with wide eyes. "I had a panic attack?"

Lex chuckled softly. "Yes. I've had enough of them over the years to recognize one when I see it. I'm so sorry. It was my fault. I shouldn't have pushed you like that."

The man sitting next to him was Lex. He was Clark's friend. They'd saved each other's lives on several occasions. He was no evil monster, he was just Lex, and Clark cared for him deeply. That's why he was here in the first place, because he wanted to be with Lex again more than anything. Not minding who saw, he put his hand on Lex's thigh just above the knee and felt warm, firm muscle through the fabric. Just Lex.

Clark raised his eyes to his friend's face. "I'm sorry. I guess I just got a little overwhelmed." He grimaced. "I have issues."

Lex's lips quirked briefly. "You want to tell me about it?"

Swallowing, Clark looked around. No one was close enough to hear. He decided he did want to tell Lex. They had agreed to try honesty, and this was a good place to start.

"It's, you know, how I'm different. When I was little I didn't understand. My parents had to make sure I didn't expose myself accidentally, and that's hard to explain to a four year old. They told me that if anybody saw what I could do, someone might take me away from them. I didn't really understand, but it scared

me. The first nightmares I remember having were about faceless men putting me into a car and driving away and my parents watching me go."

Lex nodded solemnly. "I can imagine how frightening that must have been."

"As I got older they explained that people would want to study me to find out why I was different. At first I thought that meant studying like reading books, but when I started watching TV it began to clarify into men in white lab coats with long needles. That image stayed in my mind for years. It wasn't until just after we met that I began to realize how really unusual I was and the lengths people would go to in order to use me. For all my abilities, the fear of being taken away is just as strong as it ever was." Clark tried to smile. "I know it isn't rational."

Shaking his head, Lex responded, "No, it's very rational. You're right to be careful. I can see how both my father and I might have fed that anxiety, and I apologize for that. I wouldn't want you to live in fear, but don't ever go anywhere you don't feel safe, Clark. Not for any reason."

Clark squeezed Lex's thigh. "Thanks. I, I feel stupid."

"Don't. It's a normal reaction. Why don't we go back to my office now and we can talk some more?"

"No."

Lex's eyebrows jumped. "No?"

"No. I want to go in." Lex started to protest and Clark held up a hand. "I can't freeze up like that. If nothing else, it isn't safe. I need to face this fear, and what better time to do it than here, now, with you? I do trust you, Lex. I'd like you to show me your labs."

Lex looked at him skeptically. "We can do it another day. There's no need to take on too much at once."

"It's okay. I can do this. With your help, I can do this. Will you help me? I promise not to lose it and break anything."

Lex sat up straight. "I hadn't thought you would."

Great, Clark had just given him something else to worry about. He didn't honestly know how he would react, but he wanted to try.

The other man probed, "Are you sure? You really don't have to."

Clark sat the empty glass down on the bench and stood up. "I'm okay now. I'm ready."

Lex smiled at him reassuringly and they started toward the elevator once again. Lex explained, "The administrative offices are here on the ground floor. We'll go to the first floor down and I'll introduce you to some of my research staff." As he pushed the elevator call button he looked at Clark. "Some of them have white lab coats, but there shouldn't be much in the way of big needles."

Lex's grin was meant to relax Clark, but he was already starting to feel off again. Staring at the door, his senses began to dampen as his heart rate sped up.

His friend called his name. "Clark. Clark! Focus on me when you get nervous. I'll be right there with you the whole time. Can you listen to my stomach digest lunch or something, to get your mind off it?"

Being aware of Lex did help, but, "Eww, Lex. I don't want to listen to your stomach."

"I'd say you could listen to my hair grow, but that would be a challenge even for you. How about my heart then, or my lungs?" The elevator doors opened and they stepped in.

Clark grimaced. "I'd rather not. How about I check out your skeleton. I've done that loads of times. It'll feel familiar." The door closed and they began to descend.

Lex's eyebrows lifted. "My skeleton?"

"Yeah, ex-ray vision and all that."

The elevator door opened again and they stepped out into a clean, hospital-like hallway. A middle aged woman with short, graying hair and a white lab coat approached them.

She smiled at Clark. "You must be Lex's friend. I'm Dr. Pointer, Chief of Staff. Lex has been looking forward to your visit. He's admonished everyone to be on their best behavior. No practical jokes or loud rock music allowed today."

Glancing at Lex, Clark saw him smile back at the woman. "Nancy, it defeats the purpose if you tell him that."

She shook her head. "The young man's a reporter. I'm sure he would have sniffed out the truth of our reprobate behavior." Turning to Clark, she offered, "Let me show you around."

As they followed her down the hall, Clark leaned close to Lex and said, "Nice going, back there. Distracting me with bodily functions."

Lex answered smoothly, "Any time, Clark. Any time at all."

They visited one work area after another and Clark was introduced to everyone and had each project explained to him. A lot of it was over his head, but he dutifully asked questions and took notes on a small pad of paper. He was too busy to worry, but every once in a while something would rattle him and he'd flash a look at Lex's skeleton. Lex caught him doing it and winked. It was amazing to be able to share this with someone. That it was Lex made it even better.

He was even going to come out of this with a good story. The projects were all cutting edge medical research, on things ranging from pharmaceuticals to imaging equipment. Clark was already thinking about how to write it up without giving away proprietary information.

After covering most of the area, Lex said, "There's more like this on the second level. We can visit there another day, if you like. What I really want to show you is my own personal lab. It's on the third floor down. Level Three. Ironic, huh?"

As they walked back toward the elevator Clark quipped, "I really hope there won't be any need for dramatic rescues this time."

"Since I was the one who almost died a horrible death before, I very much agree with you."

Level Three looked like what he had already seen, but there wasn't anybody around. Lex explained, "There's just one project at the moment and I like to do a lot of the work myself, so there's a smaller staff here. I gave everyone the afternoon off so I could show it to you alone. This is the part I'll ask you to keep off the record."

The first two rooms were filled with equipment. Lex showed off elaborate machines and supplies for blood culture analysis, extracellular matrix protein extraction, microbacterial testing, molecular diagnostics, DNA sequencing and other equally mysterious activities. Clark didn't bother to take notes.

The next room housed an array of monitoring equipment and computers. Lex led the way through to the following chamber. Clark tagged along and then stopped cold. In front of him was something out of his nightmares. It was a large stainless steel table with restraints positioned so that they could only be intended to secure a person's head, arms and legs. Lex was saying something, but Clark couldn't hear. His blood was rushing in his ears and he wanted his legs to super-speed him out of there but they were too heavy. All he could see was a vision of himself strapped down screaming in agony.

Something touched him and this time he jerked away. With the movement he got some control back and glared at Lex. He challenged loudly, "That's to restrain a man. Who's it meant for, Lex, who?"

Lex looked confusedly between Clark and the table, then his eyes widened. He took a step back, straightened his spine, and seemed to draw in on himself.

He said coolly, "You thought that was for you? I suppose I should have known it might set you off, but the restraints aren't for you, Clark. They're for me."

Clark stared at him, his mouth falling open. He'd heard what Lex said, but it didn't make any sense. "For you?"

"Yes. This is the project I wanted to tell you about. You aren't the only mutant, Clark. I'm one too. I told you that. My mutation seems to be a natural immunity to

all illness and accelerated healing abilities. I have every reason to believe that it was the result of exposure to meteor rocks during the Smallville meteor shower. I'm trying to find a cure for meteor induced illnesses, such as Chloe's cancer, using myself as source material and subject. If I succeed, it may be possible to widen the application to other illnesses. I'm trying not to even contemplate the possibility of immortality."

Lex was experimenting on himself? Clark's mouth flapped a couple of times and then he clamped it shut, keeping it from bleating 'For you?' again.

The scientist went on, "You may be asking yourself why, if this was possible, have I waited so long? If I'd started sooner there might already be a cure for Chloe. I understand your fear better than you might imagine, Clark. I didn't do it sooner because I was afraid. You aren't the only one with laboratory issues.

"Soon after the meteor shower I realized that I was unusually healthy. As the years passed, it became clear that it was even more than that. I started to be afraid that my father would realize what I was and that he would imprison me in a laboratory and extract the secret from my body. On top of the other power games we played, I always had an underlying fear that one day Dad would turn me into a lab animal.

"I finally decided to take control back and turn myself into a lab animal under conditions of my choosing. It's a small price to pay for the good it could do the world." Lex shrugged self-deprecatingly. "And in the interest of honesty, if this takes LexCorp to the top of the Fortune 500, that would be gratifying, too."

Clark continued to stare mutely as Lex went on, wandering around the room as he spoke.

"I still don't know why my father never pursued it. He must have noticed my difference. It's a mystery to me because I know it wasn't love for his son that stayed his hand. Anyhow, it was part of my questions about the meaning of my life, what I meant when I said it was about me, not you. I'm hoping that here I'll find some more answers.

"The table," he ran his hand over the smooth metal surface, "is because several of the experiments we've designed are very delicate and some of them are unpleasant.

I need to be able to hold still so that I won't disturb the sensors with involuntary movements. That's why I had it built, though really, it isn't needed all that often."

Clark felt sick. Guilt pooled in his belly and almost drowned him. All the time wasted suspecting Lex and his motives. All the accusations and mistrust. He'd been spectacularly wrong. Lex had the courage and strength of character to overcome his own fears and sacrifice himself for others.

Now he saw a nightmare vision of Lex strapped down screaming in agony. It had happened for real at Belle Reve but Lex had been able to overcome it. Clark had always thought of himself first. He'd always hidden away the biological traits that could have saved lives. Lex was doing what he wasn't brave enough to do.

The other man continued to talk, seemingly unaware of Clark's distress.

"That's why some of the experiments require the use of meteor rock, because those are the effects we're trying to combat. Believe me, I use it very sparingly. This mutation I have is an unusually beneficial one, but I've seen what meteor rock can do to other people and I don't want an accident to turn me or my staff into psychotic criminals."

Clark opened his mouth and said, "Kryptonite."

Lex looked at him, puzzled. "What?"

"Kryptonite." He spoke, but felt oddly numb. "The meteor rock is called kryptonite and it's from the planet Krypton. So am I. I'm not a meteor mutant, Lex. I'm an alien from the planet Krypton who arrived with the meteor shower. Everything that happened to you and all those other people was my fault."

Stunned, Lex managed to say, "An alien? That's... farfetched."

Clark laughed ruefully. "Tell me about it. I've had some difficulty wrapping my own mind around the concept, and I'm the fucking alien. And don't ask me why I look perfectly human. I can't explain how I can be exactly the same in so many ways. Right down to the placement and function of the prostate, Lex! Explain that!" Now he was babbling.

"But I'm not the same," he continued. "There are some important genetic differences. You'll have to study me, too. You remember Adam and the experiments your father did on reanimation of the dead? It was my blood he used to create that serum, though he didn't know it. Reanimation of the dead, Lex. Imagine what you could create using my DNA."

Suddenly, Lex leapt forward and slapped his hand over Clark's mouth. He ordered tightly, "Stop. Talking. Don't say another word." He looked around cautiously. "This area should be secure, but you have to be careful. Never talk about this anywhere you aren't completely sure of. Come with me."

He grabbed Clark's hand and pulled him through the next doorway into what looked like an ordinary hospital room with three beds. He motioned for Clark to sit on the middle bed, pulled the curtain closed around them, and joined Clark. He asked, "Can you check for surveillance equipment?"

Clark nodded and did so. The only monitors he found were turned off. "It's clear."

Lex leaned into him and started whispering excitedly. "You're an alien! That explains so much. For one thing, I always thought you were too beautiful to be human, but personally, my money was on you being some kind of angel." He grinned teasingly. "This is so great! I just thought you'd hit the motherload of meteor mutations and possibly had some metaphysical connection to the Kowatche Indians, but this is even better. I want to hear everything!"

"But, Lex, can you use me in your research?"

Shaking his head decisively, Lex asserted, "No way. Nobody is going to know this but us. Besides, I think it would be wrong to try to use alien DNA in medical applications. I may be mutated, but I'm still basically human. We have no idea what could happen if we started playing with your DNA. Remember how the whole thing worked out for Adam? No, we're not going there. Not now, anyway."

Clark felt guilty about how relieved he was.

Lex talked on. "No wonder you were so afraid of being found out. Clark, your parents are even more amazing than I thought. They lived with you, protected you and managed to raise you to be an outstanding man. Okay, so maybe you have a few

neuroses, but then who doesn't? This is fantastic! Start at the beginning and tell me everything."

Just the thought of it made Clark feel even more exhausted than he already was. It had been one hell of a day.

He begged off, "Can the whole story wait? It'll take hours and I think we'll need a couple of bottles of your finest Scotch to wash it down."

Clark could practically see Lex's brain spinning around in his skull, but the scientist assented. "You're right. We should get out of here." They stood and retraced their steps back into the room with the table. Lex paused a moment. "You *can* help with the project. Next week we have to do a particularly nasty procedure, and I'd love it if you could be here with me. I'd feel safer with you watching out for me."

His stomach roiled but there was no way he could turn down Lex's request. He could understand that Lex's fears weren't completely gone. His own weren't either, but he would do everything he could to get them both through this.

~

Lex could feel his whole body thrumming. It was like hitting the jackpot, winning the lottery and Christmas morning rolled into one. Clark was finally sharing his secrets and it was more astonishing than Lex had ever imagined. A spaceship, invulnerability, mythical predictions, a hostile AI of some kind in an old cave that was actually Clark's birth father, Dr. Swann, red kryptonite. It was unbelievable and yet made everything he had observed fit together for the first time. He hadn't been a delusional, eccentric crank after all. It all made sense now and there was nothing Lex liked better than for things to make sense.

Except maybe for Clark Kent. He liked Clark Kent the best of all, and that wasn't the forty year-old Scotch talking. Knowing all this about Clark just made his awe of the younger man grow. Not only was he the sexiest thing to ever walk the Earth, but despite everything he had managed to retain a vestige of innocence and naiveté. Lex had on occasion prided himself on being able to choose a relatively 'good' path despite the temptations that money and power put in his way. If he had

virtually unrivalled physical superiority, he didn't know if he would have the character to resist using it for his own ends.

They were in Clark's apartment sprawled on the old sofa. Clark had had difficulty getting started talking about his life, but Lex's enthusiasm had been infectious and after a while he had gotten into answering questions and looking at things from different angles. He had never been able to talk this openly about what he'd been through with anyone, ever, and it was clearly a relief.

They had been at it for three evenings in a row now, while they went through their daily routines as though everything were normal. Lex wondered if anything would ever really seem normal again; if he would get used to it like, 'Oh, yeah. Clark's an alien. Whatever.' Every once in a while he would think those words, 'Clark is an alien,' and his brain would seize up until he managed to calm down. Lex had the best, shiniest toy ever in the history of the planet.

It worried Lex how much it all weighed on his friend, though. He was more committed than ever to protecting Clark, and it was beginning to look like that might include protecting him from the exigencies of his own extraordinary life. When the conversation turned to his current lifestyle, the energy would drain out of Clark and his shoulders would sag. That bothered Lex a lot.

Clark had his arms stretched out along the back of the couch talking, at Lex's prompting, about his life.

"I love my job at the paper. I'm learning a lot hanging around with the other reporters and Lois is great." He stopped hesitantly.

Lex prodded, "But?"

"But it isn't really engaging me the way I expected. They don't let me do anything very challenging. Lois sees me as some kind of helpless bumpkin that she has to take care of. That was kind of nice for about the first week, but we've been working together for months and she seems to still think of me as an incompetent tag along. It's frustrating.

"Perry still sees me as the seventeen year old kid he met in Smallville." He looked at Lex with a teasing smile. "I don't know what you said to him back then, but he

has no use for you at all. He admits that you're news, but he'd rather see your name in the police log than on the business or society pages."

Lex grimaced. "That's not entirely surprising. I might have to find a way to make it up to him. I should remind him I was just looking out for my friend."

Clark smiled at him warmly. "*I* remember, anyway."

Lex steered the conversation back to Clark. "So they don't let you work on the big stories?"

"No. I know that everyone has to pay their dues carrying coffee at first, and that if I stick it out it's bound to get better. It's just frustrating. I'm ready for more."

"I guess that's pretty standard in any field," Lex agreed. "Even I had to pay my dues when I started out in business, but for me that meant a crap factory in Smallville." Of course, in his case it was also a punishment from his father, sending him back to the site of one of his most traumatic experiences. "Sometimes the best things can be found where you least expect them."

There were sparks in the glance that they exchanged. That had been happening more and more, and it seemed to Lex that not only had they recaptured and improved on their easy friendship but the flirtation had escalated and their sexual awareness of each other was almost constant. He thought that it was only a matter of time until they took the next step, and maybe not much time at that.

Clark went on, "Part of the problem is my patrol thing. I don't get physically tired very easily, but it's still draining. It just seems so pointless sometimes." He frowned and went silent. Lex thought that this was harder for Clark to talk about than summers spent high in the big city because it was happening now with no benefit of hindsight. After a moment he continued, "I feel like I have to do it. If I don't use my powers to help people then what purpose do they serve? I cost the people of this planet a lot when I arrived here and I need to pay it back."

Again, Lex prompted, "But?"

Clark sighed. "It's just that no matter how many muggers I stop, they're replaced by twice as many. I may carry one child out of a burning building, but there's another one down the street being beaten by their father. I can't be everywhere, and even if I could it wouldn't make a real difference. When I stop a robbery, for example, the criminals might go free because I can't stay there and wait until the police come. Half the time the victims run away rather than get involved. When it does go to trial, they get off because it's the robber's word against the victim's. I can't appear as a witness to corroborate the story.

"A lot of energy goes into hiding my identity. If anyone realizes that the Guardian is the Daily Planet reporter Clark Kent, I'm so screwed, but it's bound to happen sooner or later. What if I get sent to cover an incident and someone recognizes me? There's only so much I can do to hide who I am. It feels like there's a time bomb waiting to go off and my life is the target."

Lex could see the problem. As he thought about it he turned to recline on the couch, placing his head on Clark's thigh. Clark dropped his hand to lie flat on Lex's chest.

Lex said, "Maybe you need to approach this from a whole different angle."

"How so?"

"You're still trying to do the same thing you did in high school; blend into the background and hope nobody notices you're even there. Maybe you should try hiding in plain sight."

Clark gave Lex an amused look. "Okay, you want to explain that?"

"You need to construct a persona. Trust me, I know the power of creating a perception of who you are to cover the reality. You can make the public's willingness to believe work for you."

"Construct a persona?"

"It may be time for the Guardian to disappear. Soon there'll be a new superhero on the streets of Metropolis. One who can fly, has super strength, super speed, super vision, etc. One who can hand a criminal over to the police with a flourish and pithy

moral lesson. One who doesn't just put one bad guy away, but sets an example and provides a warning for the citizenry at large. Someone who'll be quoted regularly in the papers, who the children can look up to. You're a journalist, Clark. You understand the potential of mass communication. Make it work for you."

Clark laughed ruefully. "Right. Lex, I'm not a superhero. I'm a farm boy who happens to be originally from another planet. I can't exactly see myself flying around giving speeches on truth, justice and the American way."

"That's exactly what you should do. Don't sell yourself short. Of course you're a superhero. You use your super powers to protect people and keep bad things from happening. What else would you call it? You yourself put the word 'super' in front of your abilities when you talk about them."

Clark took a breath, looking somewhat embarrassed. "Yeah, I use that word, but not in the superhero sense. It's... okay." He grimaced. "You know how at McDonald's if you want a larger drink you 'super-size' it? That's all I mean. Everyone has strength. Everyone has vision. Mine is just a little bigger. It's super-sized, not superhero sized."

Lex grinned, reached up and pulled Clark's head down as he leaned up a bit, until their lips touched briefly. Relaxing again, pleased at the successful escalation of physical contact between them, he said, "You're wonderful, Clark. I love the way you think and how humbly you see yourself. I'm just saying that a different tactic, a different publicity angle, could achieve your goals more effectively without the strain of having to hide. You need to be able to appear openly in public. You need to be able to testify in court. You're not a kid anymore. Even though change is hard, it's time to take a grown up approach."

"Are you saying I have to give up being Clark Kent and become Warrior Angel?"

"Not at all. You'll have dual identities. Clark Kent will continue to be his mild-mannered self and no one will suspect that he's also this flashy, larger than life figure.

"And if there are cameras on me and I'm testifying in court how, exactly, will nobody notice how much I look like Clark Kent?"

"Slight of hand and misdirection. You already dress for invisibility- if we get you some thick glasses no one will give Clark Kent a second look. The other you, we could call you Kal-El, will have a fancy suit and puff his chest out. We can work out the details, but mostly, if you say you're two different people nobody will question it. Especially when it's known that Kal-El is from another planet."

Clark paled. "You mean tell everything?"

"Not everything, just what people need to know to believe in the persona. Clark Kent will have to keep the secrets, but Kal-El will *be* the part of you you've had to hide all these years. Openly and proudly who you are, just not all of you in one package."

"I don't know, Lex. It sounds even more complicated than what I'm doing now."

"In a way, yes, but in the long run it will be safer. Anyhow, we can get advice from someone who's doing it already. We'll ask Batman."

Clark's eyes widened in disbelief. "Ask Batman?"

"Yes. You don't think he's Batman 24/7, do you? He's a man, and he has another life. I'd bet anything on it. People are probably so distracted by his funny costume that they don't think about who's really behind it."

Clark thought about it for a minute. "You may be right about him having two identities. He already knew that I'm Clark Kent and the *Guardian*, and it didn't seem like a big deal to him."

Lex nodded. "Exactly. And if he could figure it out then someone else could, too. Despite your disagreement over me, you're both on the same side. He might be willing to show you the superhero ropes."

Lex had another reason for wanting to approach Batman. He hadn't forgotten the caped figure's threat that Clark wasn't as invulnerable as he thought. Lex wanted to find out just how much the man knew about Clark and that was best done by keeping him close. If it turned out he was a danger, Lex would take steps.

Smirking up at Clark, he kidded, "So, what kind of costume should you wear? I'm partial to lavender spandex, myself."

Clark groaned. "Aw, Lex, forget it. I'm not a comic book character."

"No, but that's the effect we're going for. It definitely has to be spandex, for aerodynamic reasons if nothing else, but it could be any color."

Clark blushed. "I..."

Lex sat up and peered at Clark intently. "You what?"

The younger man looked deathly embarrassed. "Well, I have a costume. My mother made it for me as a joke when I started doing the *Guardian* stuff. The design is taken from the Smallville High Crows mascot. It's a joke."

Lex chuckled. "You dressed up as a Crow? This I have to see. Try it on."

"No way! It's a stupid outfit. It's spandex for real! There's no way I'm putting it on."

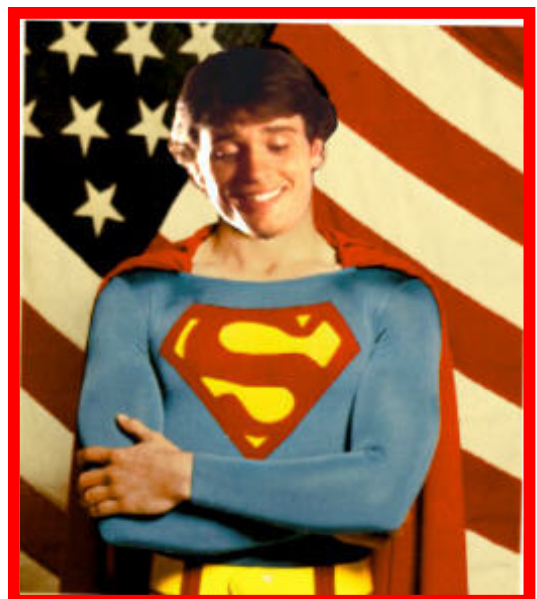
"Hey, I promise I won't laugh. It'll give us something to work from."

Protesting all the while, Clark was soon headed to his room to dig the costume out of the closet. Lex had to bite the inside of his cheek when Clark came back out and struck a dramatic pose- feet apart, fists on his hips, head thrown back as though gazing into the sky. It was gaudy, tacky, corny, and perfect.

"Oh, Clark, I must once again bow to your mother's wisdom. That couldn't be better."

Clark relaxed his pose and rolled his eyes. "Oh, right."

"Seriously!" He inspected the bright blue body suit with a stylized S in a diamond-



shaped shield on the chest, the red briefs, boots and cape. "Believe me, nobody will be looking at your face when you have this on." He had a moment of doubt about whether he wanted everybody ogling Clark's flawless body, but supposed the sacrifice might be worth it for the sake of deception. "They're even bright, patriotic colors. You'll have the good citizens of Kansas eating out of your hand."

"Lex, you can't be serious."

"But I am. I'll get a truckload of material and we'll get it to your mother. Making your suits may be her new full-time job. You'll need lots because you'll have to look your best at all times."

Clark was starting to look worried. "I'm not wearing this."

Lex stood up and moved closer. Placing his hand high on Clark's chest he ran it lightly over the slick material and felt a nipple harden under his palm. "It's so sensual, Clark. If you catch a construction worker falling off a high tower he'll want to feel you up."

Clark scoffed, "You're not convincing me. I don't want to get felt up by construction workers."

Lex shifted subtly closer. "How about just me, then?" His hand drifted slowly across the center of Clark's chest. Looking down between them, he liked very much how Clark couldn't hide his body's reaction in this suit. His hand moved steadily lower as he lifted his eyes to the taller man's face.

Gasping, Clark's cheeks were flushed and his eyes dilated. He looked back at Lex hungrily. "Oh, Lex."

His hand brushed over the spandex covered bulge at Clark's groin and Lex felt a sudden strong grip on his arms as he was pulled to Clark's body. Full lips, lips that Lex had dreamed about for years, captured his own in an eager kiss. He wasted no time before exploring the smooth, hot, muscular body pressed to his and was rewarded with Clark grinding his hardness against him.

Lex was panting when he finally tore his mouth away from Clark's and ogled the familiar face, now transformed with arousal.

The younger man whispered, his voice low and raw, "So you like the suit, do you?"

He answered in kind, "Yeah, Clark, I like it. I might like it even better if it were off you right now."

"Are we going to make love?"

"I'd say so. That's my plan anyway."

"I'm glad we're finally on the same page because I want you so much it hurts."

"It's time, Clark."

"Oh, god, Lex. Now."

Clark took Lex's hand and dragged him the few steps into the bedroom. One second he was looking at Clark in full superhero garb and the next second the cape, boots and briefs were gone. Reaching behind himself Clark unzipped the blue body suit at the back and slowly peeled it off, rolling it down to reveal his shoulders, chest and arms as Lex stared, his mouth open with desire. When the material bunched at his waist, Clark paused to catch Lex's eye suggestively, then continued pushing it down over his hips. A gorgeous, full, thick, rosy cock sprung free and Lex forgot to watch the unveiling of the long, muscular legs.

Suddenly realizing that he still had his clothes on, Lex proceeded to strip himself with more haste than style. He then tackled Clark, aware that the super powered alien was allowing himself to be tumbled back onto the bed. Inches from Clark's smiling face, he purred, "So, Mr. Kent, are you sure your prostate works exactly like a human's?"

Clark's eyes sparkled. "Yes, I'm fairly sure."

"Because you know what an inquisitive scientist I am. Perhaps I should investigate more thoroughly just to be certain."

"Well, I always say that knowledge is good."

"You always say that, do you?"

The wide, sensual mouth grinned invitingly. "Mmm hmm."

Overcome with emotion, Lex said simply, "I love you, Clark."

Green eyes blinked and softened. "Me too." A long arm stretched to the bedside table and then handed Lex a tube. "Here. You can't hurt me, Lex, but it'll be better for you."

"I will never, ever hurt you again. Not in any way."

"I know."

Lex took the tube but didn't immediately open it. He spent time kissing Clark- his lips, his neck, his chest, his nipples- all the while reveling in the sensation of Clark's fingers caressing his own skin. Every inch of Clark was as beautiful as he'd known it would be. When he reached Clark's cock, he used his mouth to play with it, teasing and nipping, as his lover began to undulate beneath him. Only then did he squirt lubricant onto his fingers and brush the puckered opening. So far he looked and responded exactly like a human, albeit an exceptionally lovely one.

Clark moaned and bent his knees, pulling them closer to his chest, opening himself to Lex. Sucking the head of Clark's cock into his mouth, Lex slipped a finger inside then stroked in and out, plunging deeper each time. He changed to two fingers but there seemed to be no resistance to the intrusion. Clark was able to relax to accommodate whatever was offered.

The younger man arched his back as fingers found and rubbed the small gland that was right where it would be expected. He cried, "Oh! Oh! Oh! Lex, inside me now! In!"

Lex shifted to lean his chest on Clark's shins, looking down into his face. "I thought you'd never ask." He lined his own aching cock up to the tempting hole and pushed. Again there was no resistance. Clark fit around him like a fine Italian leather driving glove. Like he had been designed specifically for Lex. The heat was astounding. Lex watched his lover's face intently so that he would know every second that he was with Clark. Finally with Clark. He drove in deeper.

Pleasure and need like he'd never felt before washed through Lex. Need felt and need fulfilled. The sensation rising from where their bodies joined threatened to overwhelm him. Nothing existed in life except loving Clark; making love to Clark.

As they thrust and rocked together, his lover took Lex's face between trembling hands and held his eyes. He said huskily, "You've always wanted this, haven't you Lex? From the first day. You've wanted me."

"God, Clark, yes. It's like I was born wanting you but didn't know it. Like I was broken without you. I need you."

Clark smiled adoringly. "I like the way you talk."

Lex had never meant anything more. Sliding in and out of Clark, watching his love quake at the massage to his prostate, he was exquisitely happy. The pain and fear and anguish that he'd known most of his life faded away and, with Clark, he thought it just might stay away.

Feeling himself drawn toward orgasm, Lex thrust in harder and deeper. He wrapped his hand around Clark's erection and pulled once, twice, and Clark was coming in white streams all over both their chests. The sight, the smell, the pulsing heat around his cock brought Lex over the edge and he flooded into Clark, crying out his name in blind rapture.

As he recovered, Lex found himself lying on Clark's chest between his open legs, with strong arms wrapped around him. No, life didn't get any better than this.

Feeling sticky, he reluctantly rolled off the accommodating body and snatched some tissues from the side table. He cleaned them both then flopped onto his back, smiling at the ceiling. Clark's hand found his and linked their fingers together.

Lex was floating pleasantly in the afterglow of their lovemaking when he felt Clark looking at him. Flopping his head to the side he grinned at his lover, then woke up a bit when he noticed the intensity, the sharpness in the other man's eyes. Lex rolled onto his side and traced Clark's cheek with his fingertips.

"Clark, baby, are you all right?"

"Lex?" His voice was tight. "I need to make love to you."

"Now?" He looked down to see that Clark's cock was completely hard again. He chuckled. "It seems that we may have discovered yet another super power. Super-resurgence. This may be the best one yet."

Clark wasn't smiling. "Please, Lex."

"Love, I'm yours to do with as you like."

Clark scrambled for the lube and coated his fingers. Without preamble he flipped Lex onto his stomach and began stretching his anus. His hand was shaking and he was digging into Lex almost desperately. Looking back over his shoulder at Clark's frowning face, Lex cautioned, "Hey, Clark, take it easy."

His eyes wide with alarm, the young man exclaimed, "I can't! I need you now!" and burrowed another finger into Lex.

A chill passed through Lex. This isn't how he'd imagined it would be. Clark didn't seem to be in control of himself, and that scared him.

Clark turned him onto his back again and knelt between Lex's legs looking down at him. His eyes were wild, but he was clearly trying to hold back. He appeared to be failing. Lex tried to calm him, saying, "It's all right. Do whatever you need to do. I trust you, Clark."

Clark threw his head back and groaned, "Oh, god. Lex! Lex!" Then he grasped Lex's hips and pulled them onto his lap, pushing Lex's legs up with his arms. Angling the head of his weeping cock to Lex's opening, he pushed directly in.

Lex was relaxed from his own orgasm, but not prepared enough and it hurt. The pain and the force of Clark's entry notched up his fear. Clark was so strong, the most powerful man on Earth, and Lex knew he wouldn't be able to physically protect himself if he needed to. He could only lay there and take whatever was going to happen.

In one stroke Clark drove all the way in, then leaned forward and grabbed Lex's hands, pinning them to the bed beside his head. Other than that he barely seemed aware of Lex's presence. He bowed his head and gasped repeatedly, "Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god," as he began to thrust.

It hurt. Lex wasn't opposed to rough sex, but that's not what this was. This didn't feel right. It somehow didn't feel like Clark. Clark wouldn't ignore his whimpers of pain or the stiffness of his body as it protested being fucked like that. Clark's hands tightened around his wrists and that hurt too. Lex tried to relax and ride it out, but he was finding it hard to breathe.

It was like Clark was striving, straining, to get as far into him as possible. Farther, even, than was possible. His eyes finally met Lex's, and Lex could have sworn that he saw red flicker in the green irises. He growled down at Lex, forcing the words out through clenched teeth, "No one else, ever. No one else. Only me."

Like Lex was going to disagree at this point. He gasped, "No one else, Clark. That's right."

Clark thrust harder and Lex could feel skin tear. "No one else! Lex! Do you understand! No one!"

He responded desperately, "I promise! Only you, Clark. No one but you!"

Clark rode him hard, forcing himself in over and over again while Lex, his own penis completely limp, tried to stay calm. This wasn't rape, but it wasn't love making either. It was something he had no experience with. He could only hope that the Clark he knew had enough control to not hurt him seriously.

Though it seemed like forever, it was barely another minute before Clark's torso arched, his head fell back, and he roared loud enough to rattle the windows, "Mine!"

Lex could feel hot liquid pulsing inside of him, farther inside than he ever had before. Now something stirred sexually for him, too, and he gasped as the pleasure/pain overwhelmed him. Yes, this was more than love making. He felt, he knew, that he had been irreversibly claimed. He did belong to Clark. Maybe he always had, but now he knew it to the core of his being.

He called, "Clark! Yes!"

His lover collapsed on top of him heavily and didn't move. Lex was sore, some places more than others, and slightly dazed. It was kind of like after one of those near-death experiences where an upside down world was suddenly, shockingly, set right. The world looked different. He felt different.

When after several minutes Clark had shown no sign of moving, Lex tipped him to the side onto the mattress. He gingerly climbed out of bed and limped to the bathroom for a quick shower. Of course Clark didn't have any soothing analgesic cream in his medicine cabinet. Why would he need it? Lex hadn't expected to be glad for his fast healing ability in quite this setting.

Returning to the bed he found Clark exactly where he'd left him, but he once again looked like an angel. Perfect skin, tousled hair, long eyelashes, sculpted muscles, face relaxed in sleep. Lex shook his head. A more contradictory person he'd never known. Full of surprises? An understatement.

Lex crawled back onto the bed and curled up next to Clark. He brushed a lock of hair away from Clark's temple and planted a kiss there.

"Never a dull moment, eh, Clark?"

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The first light of dawn was finding its way through the window when Clark awoke. He felt a deep, peaceful lassitude and tightened his arm around the warm body at his side.

A warm body. Lex. The night before all came back to him in a rush. Lex had made love to him, totally blowing his mind, and then Clark had, what? Lost his mind? He wasn't sure what exactly had happened, but he knew that he'd hurt Lex.

His eyes sprang open and he found Lex watching his face calmly. Clark didn't know what to say.

"Lex?"

"Clark. How are you feeling?"

"I think I'm, well, myself again. Lex, I'm so sorry."

Lex buried his fingers in Clark's hair and stroked his scalp, a habit that Clark was coming to enjoy very much. The older man asked quietly, "So, Clark, was that, er, normal for you?"

Clark shook his head. "God, no. Nothing like that has ever happened before. It was horrible."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"It was like I was seeing myself doing that from outside my body. On one hand I was aware of a driving compulsion, almost painful, to do what I did. There was a part of me, though, that was fighting it to keep from going too far. I didn't want to hurt you but I couldn't stop myself. How can you stand to be near me?"

Lex thought about it for a minute. "Do you want to hear my theory?"

Clark nodded.

"I think it was some alien mate-bonding thing."

"I've had lovers before, Lex. Nothing ever came close to that."

The other man looked almost smug. "Ah, but they weren't me, were they? I think it's our destiny again. We were meant to be together. Now we will be, for the rest of our lives."

"I can't ask you to make that kind of promise. We've only just gotten together."

"It's an easy promise to make. I can feel it. I don't have any doubts. There'll never be anyone else for me but you."

A thrill of heat rippled through Clark's body. Somehow he knew it was true. Lex was his. Then he had a troubling thought.

"Lex, you don't think that will happen every time we have sex, do you?"

"I don't know. We'll just have to test it and see." His mouth quirked into a wry grin. "Maybe not right this moment, though. You wore me out."

Clark knew it was more than that. He turned his attention to Lex's body and found livid bruises on his wrists and hips. Before he could descend into guilt he was distracted by Lex's skin. His chest was so smooth, with firm muscle definition and small, brown nipples. Beautiful.

The night before he hadn't had the chance to really appreciate the body he'd dreamed of for so long, and decided to make up for it. He skimmed his finger tips across the expanse of silky skin and watched goose bumps spring up and nipples tighten in response. Clark nuzzled into Lex's neck and murmured, "You're so perfect. I want to worship you. I want to treat you with the care that you deserve."

Lex sighed contentedly.

Clark caressed lower, tracing the lines of muscle across the flat abdomen. He noticed the long, slim phallus stirring in its nest of auburn curls.

"You're so beautiful. Every inch of you. Flawless."

He shifted lower to kiss the indentation next to Lex's hip bone. His lover smelled clean and fresh like the air in a forest, with the same undertone of fertile earth. He ran his hand down Lex's leg and back up the soft inner thigh. Lex's legs fell open trustingly. Clark took the hardening cock into his hand and stroked it gently.

Lex's fingers found their way into Clark's hair again.

"Oh, Clark. I love that. You feel so good."

He wanted to make Lex feel even better and began to kiss the erection, starting from the base and working his way up slowly. Lex's hips jumped responsively and Clark briefly closed his mouth around the head of his penis in encouragement.

Shifting to kneel between Lex's legs, Clark sank down and easily opened his throat to take all of Lex in. His lover groaned wordlessly, his pleasure evident. He swallowed around the organ, tasting the deliciously bitter tang, as he ran his hands up Lex's chest and down his flanks, touching every bit of skin he could reach.

Lex moaned and his hips twitched in tiny thrusts as Clark licked and sucked the erection swelling in his mouth. Then, with a small, pained cry, Lex came long and hard, with Clark drinking down every drop. When the organ had softened Clark let it slip from his mouth and kissed it affectionately. Then he climbed back up next to Lex and kissed his mouth.

Clark said, "I'm sorry about last night. I want to start over and never make you anything but happy."

Barely awake, Lex petted his arm and breathed, "Yes. Yes."

Clark couldn't believe how lucky he was. The man he had loved for so long loved him back and apparently accepted him completely, weird alien traits and everything. He gathered Lex into his arms and held him close, savoring the new-found connection.

~

The pair had spent the following Sunday in Lex's opulent bed, and much to Clark's relief the cave man hadn't put in any more appearances. Lex continued to insist that they were bound to each other, and that it was okay with him. He was, Clark thought, taking the whole thing remarkably well. It seemed like there was nothing that could disrupt his lover's composure for more than a few minutes.

Clark was just glad that no more weird things had happened. The strangeness of having Lex Luthor know everything about him was enough for him to handle. It was great, in a way, but it was an unavoidable sign that his life was taking a new direction, and he didn't know where it was leading.

He had cut back on his Guardian activities though he hadn't agreed to the whole superhero thing yet. Lex said there was no hurry, but Clark knew that once his old friend/new lover had decided on a course of action it was all but inevitable. He would chip away at Clark's resistance until he caved. Maybe Lex was right about

taking a more public approach but Clark drew the line at wearing that stupid suit. Absolutely no way.

Lois was giving him shit about having gotten the Cadmus scoop without telling her. It was actually okay, though, because there was a new respect in her eyes when she chewed him out. Apparently she was proud of him for showing that he had it in him to be devious and underhanded. If she only knew!

Clark had accompanied Lex to Cadmus another time but hadn't stayed long. He didn't understand much of what they were doing and without going back to school for another degree he wasn't going to. It wasn't the type of place he was likely to hang out in just for the fun of it, regardless of Lex's enthusiasm.

They were back in the laboratory now, though, for the test Lex had told him about. Clark was glad that nothing more than moral support was required of him. The whole thing still made him want to bolt.

Lex insisted on explaining everything to him, anyway.

"You see, Clark, if we want to understand how my body fights off foreign substances we have to introduce them and observe the results carefully." Lex casually dropped his terrycloth robe and climbed onto the warm metal table naked. "What we're doing today is administering a Malay poison made from *Datura fastuosa*. It contains daturine, consisting of the alkaloids laevoscyamine, hyoscyne and scopolamine along with traces of atropine."

Clark blanched as Dr. Pointer slid a catheter into Lex's penis and set an empty urine collection bag next to his hip. Lex went on as though he hadn't noticed.

"It has a number of different effects, including confusion, hallucinations, seizures, and respiratory and cardiovascular distress. Death is usually a result of respiratory failure." Lex lay back on the table, resting his head on a thin cushion, and the doctor began inserting needles into his left arm, followed by tubing. Clark watched blood work its way rhythmically toward a machine sitting on a cart beside the table. Another tube connected the machine to Lex's right arm, where the blood returned to his body.

The whole thing was horrifying Clark. "Lex, this poison is fatal? How do you know, I mean, what if you use too much?"

Leads were attached to Lex's temples, chest, abdomen, groin and ankles by a man in a white coat.

Lex assured him, "Don't worry. I don't think this can kill me. We're using a perfectly safe dosage."

Dr. Pointer glared at Lex in a way that let Clark know this was a point they'd been over before. "There's no such thing as a perfectly safe dosage." Then she turned to Clark and explained more confidently, "We've done extensive testing on Lex. His resistance to toxins and various biological agents is really extraordinary. While what we're going to administer to him today might kill you or me, I don't believe it's enough to permanently harm Lex. It's the maximum dosage that I'm willing to risk." She frowned at Lex again. "I would have been happier to start with a lower quantity. We have antidotes standing by just in case."

As the woman covered Lex's groin with a sheet, leaving the rest of him exposed, Lex explained, "If we don't get the results we need at a lower dose, we would just have to do it again, which I'd rather not. This isn't going to be pleasant, Clark. I want you to be prepared for that."

As the doctor moved away to adjust a piece of equipment, Lex caught Clark's eyes. "I really appreciate you being here. This is going to put me out for longer than anything we've done before, and I feel better knowing you're near. It's a lot to ask, though, given your own feelings about this kind of thing, so I want you to know that it's all right with me if you need to leave."

Clark had no problem stepping in front of a moving vehicle, but what Lex was doing took a kind of courage he couldn't comprehend. "I'll stay. I won't leave you alone." He stroked Lex's forehead. "I just wish you weren't doing it at all."

Lex smiled at him reassuringly. "You know why I'm doing it. It'll be all right."

Clark still had doubts. "Lex, is this all standard research procedure?" Dr. Pointer looked away.

Lex answered, "No, it isn't. It's a private project done in my own personal lab and it's still somewhat over the line as far as what is considered ethical, if not actually illegal. To get official approval or to do the tests in a major research facility would take years. I'm just bypassing some of the bureaucratic obstacles."

"Lex..."

His stubborn lover turned his head to the doctor. "Nancy, would you explain to Clark what's going to happen?"

She faced Clark apologetically. "First of all, let me assure you that we're taking every precaution. The solution will be injected through this IV line. We'll be monitoring Lex's vital signs as well as the action of individual organs. We've taken a baseline PET scan and will do another one after the procedure to compare. During the experiment his blood will be passing through this machine, where it will be analyzed for minute chemical changes. We'll be able to observe exactly how the cells of his body are reacting to the poison. From past experience we estimate that it will take at least two to three hours for his body to neutralize the majority of the toxin, and then he will need to sleep for some time to recover fully."

An assistant began closing the restraints around Lex's arms and legs. The doctor went on, "He will experience some discomfort." She frowned disparagingly. "That's how he likes to put it. If he doesn't remain more or less immobile the whole time it could throw off the results. I agree with him that we only want to do this once." Her eyes softened and she confided in Clark, "I'm glad you're here. Lex likes to pretend that nothing gets to him, but he's still human like the rest of us. It'll be good for him to have a friend."

Clark could only nod. He couldn't help having a bad feeling about this.

As they secured the last strap around his forehead, Lex asked, "Clark, are you sure you're all right?"

Clark leaned down so that his face was inches from Lex's. "Hey. Don't be worrying about me. Think about yourself for once."

Lex tried to raise his eyebrows but the strap was in the way. "Don't assume that it's some kind of saintly altruism. Worrying about you keeps me from thinking about myself, which will help me go through with this."

Smiling at his lover fondly, Clark answered, "Worry about me all you want, then. But if you change your mind, just say the word and we're out of here. There are definitely more fun ways to spend an evening."

Lex rolled his eyes. "Don't tempt me."

As the doctor approached with a syringe, Clark moved back. He watched her inject the fluid into the IV line and then the bustle of activity calmed. Now they just waited.

In an apparent attempt to get Clark to quit hovering, Lex suggested, "Why don't you pull up a chair and make yourself comfortable?"

Comfort was not likely to be on the agenda, but he did as asked and sat stiffly in a high-tech chair. He was on his feet again within a couple of minutes when he heard Lex gasp. His lover's face was pale and pinched. Even though he was supposed to be the supportive one, he needed reassurance. "Lex?"

"It's all right, Clark. It's going to get worse. There's nothing you can do about it. Remember that." Lex's voice was tight. "It won't be as bad as it looks."

That didn't make him feel better. In fact, Clark couldn't figure out why he'd agreed to this in the first place. Lex was in pain!

Lex gasped again and squeezed his eyes shut. Clark looked at the doctor and pleaded, "Can I touch him?"

Her eyes fixed on a read-out screen, she nodded. "Just don't touch the sensors. He's doing fine, by the way."

These people had a strange definition of fine. Clark stroked the crown of Lex's head and murmured, "I'm here, Lex. I won't leave you. Not now, not ever. Just hold on to that."

Lex made a small whimpering noise and Clark could see the muscles in his body tightening and releasing in small jerks, though he was held in place by the restraints. Clark kept brushing his fingers over the smooth scalp, feeling helpless.

After several minutes Lex's eyes opened and began to dart around the room. Clark tried to speak to him, but it didn't seem like Lex knew he was there. His breath was coming in short, shallow gulps. Clark hadn't thought Lex could look any paler, but he was nearly white as a sheet.

Clark called, "Dr. Pointer? He's having trouble breathing."

She was wheeling an oxygen tank and mask nearer to the table. "That was expected." She patted the tank. "This is just in case it's needed. The poison is stressing his body and causing it to activate mechanisms to combat the illness. He's going to be fine."

A voice boomed from the doorway, "Of course he is."

Clark looked up in alarm. Lionel. The last person he wanted to see at that moment. He challenged, "What are you doing here?"

The doctor echoed, "How did you get in here?"

The elder Luther still wore his hair in a wild mane, but it was now liberally streaked with gray. He chose to answer the woman's question first. "I simply identified myself at the desk and they let me pass. As they should. And Mr. Kent," he raised his eyebrows at Clark, "I heard that you'd managed to rekindle my son's interest in you. I did think you had gone into the muckraking profession, however, not biomedical research."

Clark stood straighter. "I'm here as Lex's friend. Why are you here?"

Lex made several small, agitated noises, his eyes again closed.

Lionel glided into the room, eyeing his son's form with a shark's smile. "Oh, I just came by to see how the little experiment was going." He said to Dr. Pointer, who was glaring at him in annoyance, "You won't get any useful results with the concoction you've given him. You have to at least double the potency."

Affronted, she demanded, "And how, pray tell, did you come to that conclusion, Mr. Luthor?"

The man showed more teeth. "Experience, dear lady. Lex's body will only give up its secrets in the event of a near catastrophic systemic collapse. Timid, harmless little trials are a waste of time."

Clark's blood ran cold. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, Clark, that Lex and I have been down this road before. Oh, he doesn't remember it, of course. It's easy enough to slip a sedative into a child's hot cocoa or a teenager's Coke. The compounds we used were much like this *Datura fastuosa*; they tended to cause short term memory loss. Purely by chance, of course. Lex provided me with valuable data for years without ever realizing it."



The images that had haunted Clark as long as he could remember returned, this time with Lex as the protagonist; the child, the adolescent, strapped down, helpless, under Lionel Luther's control. As Clark struggled to rein in his urge to tear the man's head off, Lionel approached the table, cocked his head and pursed his lips, looking down at Lex speculatively.

He said, "Lex has had too many watchers around him in recent years. I must say, I miss seeing him like this." Lex was trembling and moaning softly. Lionel reached out and brushed his fingers down the bare chest, passing between sensor wires.

Before Lionel could blink Clark was around the table, pushing between father and son. Clark spat, "I think you've seen him like this all you need to. What, wasn't Belle Reve enough for you? Drugging and electrocuting him and getting away with it wasn't fully satisfying? Too bad. You'll never touch Lex again."

Lionel's eyes widened with insincere innocence. "Why, Clark, do you think I enjoy seeing my son in pain? Of course not. I'm just glad that he's finally taking

advantage of his remarkable physiology. It's a shame to let a resource go to waste. I'm only here to help. I wouldn't want him to be disappointed in the results of the experiment, especially after all he's going through. What he's been given isn't potent enough. Luckily I'm prepared to remedy that."

He pulled a small case out of his coat pocket, opened it and withdrew a hypodermic filled with yellowish fluid. Holding it out to the doctor, he said, "Administer this now. You can still salvage something from this little fiasco."

Dr. Pointer's face was cold and hard. "I will not. In fact, I'll have to ask you to leave. If you don't, security will see to it."

Lionel merely looked disappointed in her. "Madam, need I remind you that this is a LutherCorp facility and, oh yes, I am the CEO of LutherCorp? You work for me, doctor, and you'll do as I say."

Far from intimidated, the woman stepped closer and spoke into Lionel's face. "You can try to remind me of that, but it won't do any good. Apparently, while spying on our activities here you failed to notice the fine print of the ownership arrangement. Cadmus is wholly and entirely owned by LexCorp, not LutherCorp. I don't work for you, Mr. Luthor, nobody here does, though they clearly need that fact reinforced."

Lionel actually looked surprised. He objected, "LutherCorp owns this laboratory."

Dr. Pointer smiled coldly. "No, it doesn't. It doesn't own the products or patents generated by Cadmus, either."

"Since when?"

"You'll have to take that up with your son, Mr. Luthor."

Clark couldn't help but grin. "Lionel, you must be slipping. I think you should leave before Lex's loyal staff has you arrested for trespassing."

Angry, Lionel narrowed his eyes at Clark. "You stay out of this, Kent. You have no business here."

"Oh, yes I do. Lex is very much my business now, and you'd better get used to that. If you ever try anything like this again you'll find out exactly how seriously I take that commitment. Stay away from Lex."

After a final sneer, Lionel's attitude changed to the face saving it-doesn't-matter-anyway. "Fine." He put the hypo away and turned to the door. Halfway there he stopped and looked back. "You tell Lex what I said. When he finds out what he has to do to get results he'll be back here going through this all over again and blaming you. One thing I can say for my son is that his ambition knows no limits. The ends justify the means, even if he's the one inconvenienced. It's a quality I can be proud of."

Clark stood in the doorway and watched, with normal vision and super-vision, until Lionel stepped into the elevator. Then he turned around to find Dr. Pointer leaning against the wall with her hand on her chest. She looked up.

"Is he gone?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I've just never had to go up against Lionel Luther before."

Clark smiled at her warmly. "You did great! Thank you for defending Lex."

Just then Lex moaned. The doctor returned to the monitor and Clark took up his post by his lover's side. It was clear that Lex was still struggling. His chest was rising and falling rapidly and he was trying to move his head side to side, his face grimacing with strain.

Clark watched, worried and amazed. If Lex were a normal human he would be dying, but because he had been exposed to the meteor shower his body was eliminating the poison. Protecting itself, repairing itself. So many people had had their lives devastated by kryptonite while this one man had received a miracle. The one man in the world Clark needed more than any other. He marveled at how intricately woven their destinies had become, and how closely he was bound to Lex, literally from day one.

He was so focused on watching Lex that he found his vision moving past the skin. When he ignored the ubiquitous skeleton he could see, or perhaps sense would be a better word, the blood rushing through the veins. It whirled and flew like Lex's fancy cars on a race track, careening off on tangents only to return inexorably to the starting line, the beating heart.

Looking deeper he began to see points of light, tiny explosions at what seemed to be the cellular level. Clark wasn't sure what he was looking at, but it was as if when the poison damaged a cell it would immediately flash with an inner light and be whole again. The tiny bursts of energy were happening throughout Lex's body, but seemed to be concentrated in the lungs and brain.

When he looked too closely one of the small detonations nearly blinded him with its intensity and he stepped back, his vision suddenly returning to normal. Before him was Lex, the familiar exterior that hid so much inner depth. Clark resumed stroking the top of his head.

Dr. Pointer said, "Everything seems to be going as expected. I think Lex is already starting to overcome the toxin. He should be feeling noticeably better soon."

Clark was relieved. "That's good." After a moment he asked, "Do you think we should tell him? I mean about what Lionel said?"

She looked at him quizzically. "Why wouldn't we?"

"It's just that he was right. I know Lex, and if he thinks he can get more information by nearly killing himself he'll probably do it. He doesn't give up. Not ever."

The doctor thought about it for a moment. "I'll leave it up to you whether you tell Lex what Mr. Luthor said about what was done to him before. That's horrifying and intensely personal. I think we do need to tell him about the surprise visit and what his father tried to do today. He has to know that for his own safety." She smiled at Clark. "And between you and me, we should be able to curb the worst of his overzealous impulses. After all, I get the feeling that he has recently acquired a new reason to live, hasn't he?"

Clark really liked this woman. He gave her a wide smile that made her blink and she went back to her machinery with a slight blush.

Settling in to wait, Clark watched Lex's breathing slowly return to normal and his body relax. Over an hour later the research assistants began to disconnect the sensors. Dr. Pointer removed the tubing, the catheter and IV and they rolled a gurney next to the Lex. The doctor explained that they would take him to the PET scanner and then let him rest.

Clark insisted, "I'll take him." He gathered the naked man into his arms and cradled him against his chest. Clark carried him gently into another room, laid him down on the large machine's examination platform and waited while it pulled Lex inside to make its detailed image of every part of his body. Clark then transferred him to the hospital-type room they'd been in before and tucked him into a soft, inviting bed.

Clark sat next to him, holding Lex's hand and watching him sleep. He looked so fragile and vulnerable that it was hard to believe this was the same fiercely strong man Clark had been contending with for so long. Strong, brave, invaluable, and to Clark, irreplaceable.

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In his own bed, sitting between Clark's legs, leaning back against a solid chest with strong arms around him, Lex shivered. Inside, there was a part of him that wanted to scream and cry and kick, but it was well segregated. The calm, controlled front that he worked so hard to present to the world was very much to the fore. The shiver was the only indication of inner turmoil.

Of course Clark noticed it anyway. Lex supposed that he was in hyper-alert mode, and who could blame him? It wasn't every day you had to tell your best friend and lover that his father had been conducting laboratory experiments on him since childhood. A part of Lex's mind shrieked at the thought.

Clark kissed him tenderly behind the ear. "I'm so sorry, Lex. I've always known your father was bad, but he really is a monster. I swear he'll never get near you again."

Having been silent through Clark's account of Lionel's intrusion at Cadmus, Lex grounded himself in his intellect and spoke for the first time.

"I'll go talk to him."

Clark choked out incredulously, "What?"

"If he conducted radical experiments on my physiology then he should still have the results. I'd rather get them from him than have to replicate any of them."

"Lex, do you really think your father will give them to you, just like that?"

"He may want to bargain for a share in the eventual profits, but I don't believe he deserves any reward for what he's done. I plan to allow him to buy my forgiveness with the research data."

Clark didn't say anything, no doubt shocked by Lex's cool. It wasn't fair to shut Clark out; they'd promised honesty and it was something Lex had to work at every second of the day.

He slumped a bit in his lover's embrace and admitted, "I can't believe he did that to me." He snorted humorlessly. "Well, I can believe it. I guess I'm mostly surprised that I don't remember."

"Maybe you did at some level, since it was something you were actively afraid of. I wondered about that, though. If your body heals so well, why wouldn't you get your memory back?"

Lex considered the question. "It may be a combination of physical trauma and the desire not to remember. I know of at least one other occasion when I suppressed a memory instead of confronting it." He turned his head to look at Clark briefly. "I'll tell you about what happened to Julian, just not right now, okay?"

"Okay." Lex could tell that Clark was curious. "I don't understand how he could do it, though," the young man added. "And why didn't anyone try to stop him?"

"There was never anyone who could stand up to Dad. I suppose my mother knew. I wonder if it was one of the reasons she...." He couldn't talk about Julian. "She didn't have very many options."

Clark's arms tightened around him. Voice tense with anger, he said, "But you do. I swear to god, Lex, if he ever touches you again I'll kill him."

Lex could imagine how hard this was for Clark, with his protective instincts. If Lex found out that Jonathan or anyone had hurt Clark, especially as a child, that person's life expectancy would be very short. He hated knowing that his father had always and would always have the power to hurt him.

Thinking of all the times his father had physically and emotionally wounded him, and how he'd had to get past it alone, he wished Clark had been there for him before. He had to let that resentment go, though, and think about the present. Rubbing the arms wrapped around his chest, Lex said, "You were here when I needed you this time. Thank you."

Troubled, Clark said, "I always had to worry about what strangers might do to me, but it's so much worse when it's your own family. You deserve so much better than this. You should be proud of yourself for not becoming like your father. I'm amazed that you could turn out to be such a good man after everything that's happened to you."

Lex shook his head. "To the limited extent that that's true, a lot of it is because of you. I wanted to be good enough for you. It's in me, though, Clark. You should remember that. I have to turn away from the darkness every single day. It's just part of who I am."

"How can you be taking this so well? Aren't you angry?"

Lex took a deep breath. Talking was something he was going to have to get used to now that he *wasn't* alone.

"I am angry." He felt himself shaking inside. "I can't express it. Even knowing him as I do, it hurts to admit that my father could do that to me."

Clark breathed his name softly and Lex turned around so he could curl up his body, slip his arms around Clark's chest and cuddle. This was also what it meant to not be alone. He could draw on Clark's strength to supplement his own, hold onto the body of someone who cared about him. It made it harder to hide the feelings away from himself, but somehow they didn't hurt quite as much. It was difficult to trust that this wouldn't be taken from him too, but he was trying.

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In the aftermath of the Cadmus ordeal Clark spent a lot of time with Lex, his need to 'check in' increasing to about once an hour. His super-speed came in handy, since he could say that he was going to the rest room and be back within a minute having reassured himself as to Lex's health and mental well-being. His evenings were occupied pampering his bemused lover.

As usual, Lex moved on to other things almost immediately. He was busy analyzing the results of the test which, as Lionel predicted, weren't as comprehensive as he had hoped. Lex hadn't allowed Clark to accompany him to talk to Lionel and had come home distressed. With the data.

Moreover, he was still intent on helping Clark figure out how best to put his abilities to use effectively and safely. He put some mysterious message out through what he said were 'the proper channels' indicating that he wanted to speak to Batman, and was sure his summons would be answered.

And it was. Clark and Lex were making out on the sofa at the penthouse when the dark figure entered through the balcony with a whoosh, his cape billowing around him. Clark was glad they hadn't gotten to the naked part yet.

Lex climbed to his feet, wiped the moisture from his bruised lips, and faced their visitor with the same poise he maintained in the boardroom.

"Ah, Batman. So kind of you to join us."

Batman snorted. "Sorry to have interrupted such an important meeting. Now I understand the boy's insistence that you're above suspicion."

Clark stood as well, his arousal fading fast. "I'm not a boy and I said Lex was innocent because he is. Of what you accused him of, anyway."

"I have yet to see proof of that."

Lex poured himself a drink and offered one to Clark and Batman, both of whom declined. Then he said, "Let's not rehash that. I asked you here so that we could move beyond distrust into more productive areas. We have a proposal for you."

Batman crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Oh?"

"Yes." Lex went on, "You're already aware that Clark is the *Metropolis Guardian*. I am of the opinion, and Clark agrees with me, that this isn't the best way for him to make use of his talents. Since he refuses to utilize them to help me conquer the world," he flashed a sardonic glance at Clark, "he might as well use them for good."

"The bottom line," Lex faced Batman seriously, "is that he needs to be able to act without his true identity being discovered. He needs to be able to move about openly and work with the authorities without exposing himself. You, obviously experienced in this type of secrecy and subterfuge, could give him guidance on that. In return, he would coordinate crime-fighting efforts here in *Metropolis*."

Clark could just see the eyebrows raising behind the mask. "Now it must be you who are joking. Why would I help him? For all I know he's nothing but a nefarious tool of *LutherCorp*."

Lex humphed. "Your skepticism is an act. If you've watched him closely enough to find out his real name, then you know what he does. He protects the innocent and saves lives. That's no pretense; it's who he is. You must also have observed at least some of *how* he does it. Clark has exceptional abilities. You can't afford to pass up the opportunity to work with him."



Batman bristled. "Is that a threat?"

"On the contrary," Lex answered coolly. "Clark is entirely focused on the same type of do-gooding that you appear to be. It is true, however, that you would be better off with him on your side than in opposition. For example, in the interests of creating an atmosphere of trust, I'll tell you that one of his powers is to see through solid objects. If he so wished, he could have looked through that mask and discovered your true identity at any time. He hasn't, and won't, because that would be wrong." Lex turned to him with an ironic grin. "Isn't that right, Clark?"

Clark felt a little out of his league, but knew it was time for him to step up to the plate anyway. It was his life they were talking about.

He said, "I'm not perfect and neither is Lex. But believe it or not, Batman, we both want to help people in our own way. I know that I'm not realizing my potential as the Guardian, and Lex believes that this superhero thing is the way to go. I'm not convinced that I can be Clark Kent, reporter, and some comic book hero flying around saving the day at the same time."

To his credit, Batman did no more than straighten up slightly at the mention of flying.

Clark continued as Lex wandered away, giving him the floor, "I don't know how it would work, but I'm willing to try something different. I think I would have a better chance pulling it off with your support, but if you can't believe that I want to help people, then I'll do it on my own with Lex's assistance."

After considering his words for a moment, Batman replied, "Actually, I've looked into your past and am prepared to accept that you are what you say. I'm not convinced, however, that you haven't been duped by Luthor. You may be thinking with your dick. He lies to you about what's going on in his lab and you write it up for the paper like a good little lap dog."

Clark insisted, "I've been to Cadmus myself. I've seen what they're doing. You couldn't be more wrong."

Batman tightened his arms over his chest imperiously. "And what exactly is it you think you've seen?"

From his position by the fireplace Lex spoke. "You don't need to know the details."

He could understand Lex's reluctance to share personal and potentially valuable information with a stranger, but it was something Clark had thought a lot about. He faced his lover and said, "Lex, I think we should tell him everything. After what he knows about me already, we had better be able to trust him. And besides, I think it would be a good idea if someone else knew what was going on besides just the two of us. It would be safer. I mean, about your father."

Lex observed him evenly, consideringly. His eyes flicked to the masked stranger and back to Clark. After several moments he nodded his head once and turned his back to the room.

Having gotten permission, Clark didn't know where to start. He began by explaining the purpose of the research and the tests Lex had done on himself. Then he haltingly told Batman what Lionel had said about his experiments on Lex in the past, keeping an eye on Lex's reaction to hearing it spoken out loud.

He concluded, "I wanted you to know all that because, well, not that you could probably do anything, but it's that if Lionel.... He could be dangerous."

Lex turned, his whole body shrouded in shadow by the firelight behind him, and said, "What Clark is trying so hard not to say is that he's afraid my father will try to overpower us both in order to reap the benefits of my research and my unique makeup. If we should suddenly disappear it could be very bad for us and for other people. In the right hands my research could alleviate a lot of suffering in the world. In the wrong hands, my father's hands, it could be used to blackmail and control the world. How much would people pay for a cure to cancer? There's no limit."

Lex stepped forward and raised his eyebrows. "Oh. There's an idea. It may have been my father who gave you the false information about biological weapons development at Cadmus. He may have been trying to impede my work so that he could move in. It's definitely something he would do."

Clark nodded. "You know he won't just give up, Lex. And we're not sure how much he knows about me. We have to be careful."

Blue-grey eyes narrowing, Lex answered, "Dad will find me harder to take down than he expects. I've had a lot of years to prepare for him. If he pushes this, he'll end up being sorry he took me on."

"Us," Clark asserted.

A small smile played briefly over Lex's lips and his eyes warmed again. He conceded affectionately, "Yes, us."

Clark suddenly remembered that Batman had been standing there silently the whole time and hadn't said a word. He turned toward the enigmatic man and waited for a response.

At first Batman just watched them, looking back and forth between Clark and Lex thoughtfully. Then he took several steps to bring himself closer to where Lex stood.

Speaking to Lex, he asked, "So you can recover from any injury or disease, can you?"

"Yes, so far, though I wouldn't want to test the loss of a limb. I've been drowned, burned, shot, knifed, poisoned, drugged, had concussions and broken bones, electroshock therapy. I've recovered from all of them without scars or aftereffects."

"How is that possible?"

"Well," Lex's sarcasm started to show through, "that's what we're trying to find out."

Batman pressed, "But you have an idea, don't you? What is it? Epimorphosis?"

Lex responded, "Exact cellular replication. It doesn't have a name yet. When a cell is damaged or destroyed it is somehow replaced by a precise duplicate, with no division or degradation of any kind."

The two men faced off, engaged in some kind of scientific challenge Clark didn't fully understand.

Batman nodded. "No cellular senescence. The cells don't age. You don't age."

"In theory. The 'somehow' part is where we're having difficulties. If I can't figure out how the duplication happens then I can't develop a regenerative treatment for others."

Clark was catching the gist of this. He interrupted, "Lex, do you mean that you won't age? Not ever? Is that what you're saying?"

Lex cocked his head at Clark and shrugged. "Maybe. We don't really know. I may never age like a normal person. I could reach the age of eighty and my body could suddenly make up for lost time. There's never been anyone like me before to provide a model."

Clark frowned, "But you have aged. The exposure to kryptonite happened when you were a child and you grew up to be a man."

"That was normal production of new cells as part of the maturation process. Once I reached my adult stature it appears that there was no additional cell division. No more are added, but none are lost or degraded, either. As near as I can tell that happened some time in my twenty-second year."

"Lex, why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to get your hopes up."

Get his hopes up? Lex had no idea! Clark was so excited he could hardly breathe.

He enthused, ignoring the taciturn observer, "You have no idea what this means to me! I don't think I will age either, not the way humans do. There was this guy, a mutant in Smallville, who could touch people and see when they would die. He said I would just go on forever. Most people would be glad about that, but it scared me to death. I don't want to live when everyone I love is dead. I don't want to lose you after such a short time. Oh, Lex, I can't believe it! You're going to stay with me!"

Clark rushed over and pulled Lex into a crushing hug that stopped just short of causing pain. The thought of living forever suddenly wasn't so horrible after all.

Lex held him and stroked his hair and sighed into his neck. "This is why I didn't want to say anything. We don't know if it will happen that way or not."

Clark paid him no heed. "Can you imagine what it would be like to watch everyone you know grow old and die over and over again? Can you imagine being alone as the world becomes unrecognizable around you? Having everything you believe become outdated and obsolete?"

"Yes, Clark, I can imagine it. I have imagined it. Until you told me about yourself it's what I envisioned as a possible future for me." Lex pushed him away so that they were face to face. "I wish I could promise to be with you as long as you need me, but I can't. I just don't know what will happen. And while I may be safe from disease and most injuries, I can be killed. I'm fairly sure of that. There's no guarantee."

Clark begged, "Please stay, Lex. Please stay."

Lex's face softened with love and sadness. He wanted to promise but couldn't.

The clearing of a throat behind him brought Clark back to the present. Neither of them had intended to share quite this much with Batman. Lex looked over Clark's shoulder and challenged, with just a hint of threat, "I expect you to keep all of this to yourself."

Clark turned to look just as Batman nodded. The masked man asked, his voice oddly softer than his previous belligerent tone, "So Luther, if you don't scar then what happened to your lip?"

Lex touched the imperfection with his fingertips. "This happened before the meteor shower, when I was a child."

Batman said casually, "You were hit in the face with a cricket bat."

Confused and slightly suspicious, Lex asked, "How did you know that?"

The other man popped a snap that held the mask in place and lifted it away. "Because I was holding the bat."

Lex paled and Clark put an arm around him when he swayed. Lex whispered, "Bruce." Then after a moment of shock he began to laugh. "You're better at camouflage than I thought. I never guessed."

Clark recognized the man's face from pictures in the newspaper. Bruce Wayne, Gotham industrialist and billionaire philanthropist.

"I take it you two know each other."

Lex answered, "We went to school together."

This was too much of a coincidence. Clark asked incredulously, "You're friends?"

Wayne smiled humorlessly. "I wouldn't go that far. It would be more accurate to say that we were frequently forced together by circumstances."

Lex agreed, "Yes, as the two most ostracized boys amongst our classmates. Bruce was dour and unfriendly. Nobody liked him."

"And Lex was too idiosyncratic, and ultimately odd looking, to fit in."

"We were the two that nobody wanted to be lab partners with or pair up with in physical education, which meant we ended up together by default." Then Lex's eyes hardened. "So is this your way of getting revenge for all the people who slighted you, or were you attacking me out of nostalgia?"

The other man glowered in response. "I was provided with convincing information. And let's face it, Lex, you never would have been awarded a prize for model citizenship or stability."

"Ah, yes." Lex's frown deepened. "You were there for the little meltdown after my brother died. I can only guess what rumors went around then."

Wayne nodded. "And then you were discreetly moved to a school in Europe. None of it inspired confidence."

Clark asked, "Then why did you tell us who you are now?"

The costumed man's posture relaxed and he smiled at Clark and Lex wistfully. "I suppose that you've convinced me of your sincerity. At the very least if we're working together I'll be able to keep a closer eye on you."

Seeing the sly gleam appear in Lex's eyes, Clark got the idea that his lover had been thinking something similar. "Then you'll help us?" Clark clarified?

"I'll help you adjust to maintaining dual identities and show you the ropes with regard to interacting with the legal system. There are some others you should meet, as well. We're all going to want to know more about exactly who you are and what you can do."

Lex rolled his eyes and snorted. "You aren't even going to believe it." Then he suggested. "It might be prudent for LexCorp and Wayne Industries to enter into some business dealings. That would make it easier for us to communicate without drawing attention. The Bat Copter can't be seen permanently parked on my roof."

Wayne smirked, "And it would bring LexCorp some small profit, naturally."

"Naturally." Lex smiled back.

The two seemed to understand each other and Clark was feeling a little left out. Well, he had something in common with Batman, too. He proposed, "Maybe you can start by helping me choose a disguise."

"Yes," the man in the bat suit answered sarcastically, "the ninja look is so last year."

Lex teased, "He has a wonderful costume. He's just reluctant to wear it."

Clark objected, "It's horrible." Then he paused thoughtfully. "Although, if you could teach me that trick with the cape...."

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Lex was exhausted. The last couple of weeks had been intense and despite how happy he was to be with Clark it was all a little much. It was Friday evening and his lover had just shaken him awake where he was slumped over this home office computer keyboard. He blinked into the face smiling down at him fondly.

Clark said, "Hey there, Lexy. It's time for little Luthors to stop working and have play-time."

Narrowing his eyes, Lex groused, "I have a lot to do and if you call me Lexy again I'll have to hurt you."

Full, sexy lips pouted at him. "You wouldn't hurt your cuddle bunny." He nuzzled Lex's neck sweetly. "Come give me some good lovin'."

Lex's gritted his teeth. "What do I have to do, Clark, to get you to stop this gibberish?"

Dropping the teasing, Clark answered, "Come home with me for the weekend." Before Lex could protest he went on, "Seriously. You've been working too hard and need a rest. Besides, how long has it been since you've seen my parents?"

Lex admitted, "Too long."

"That settles it, then. We'll drive over tonight and spend a couple of days in Smallville. It'll do us both a lot of good."

It was tempting. The last time he'd seen the Kents they'd been pleasant to him, but a lot had changed since then. It was probably time to bite the bullet and face the in-laws. If he thought of it as a task to be performed he could almost justify the time.

"All right. You talked me into it."

The joyous smile on Clark's face moved the whole thing into completely justified territory. Anything that could make Clark look like that would be a priority from now on.

Lex threw some casual clothes into a bag and forced himself to leave his laptop at home. His PDA would have to do for two days. Clark sped home and was back with his things within two minutes.

As they were leaving the apartment Lex stopped, grinning. He said to Clark, "Fly me."

"What?"

"Fly me there. It'll take like ninety seconds, right? That would be so much fun. Come on, Clark. Fly me."

Shaking his head apologetically, Clark replied, "I will some time. It's just that it's hard to explain how I got there with no visible means of transport. And we can get away from the house if we have our own car. That could be a very good thing."

"Okay, I can see your point." Sleeping under the Kents' roof with Clark, Lex wasn't going to be getting a lot of action.

They ended up taking the Land Cruiser, which was comfortable for Clark's long legs and less ostentatious in the farming community. Lex was supposed to be a serious adult now, though he didn't feel much like one.

Clark drove and chatted the entire way, telling Lex the news and gossip about friends and acquaintances from Smallville. Lana, not surprisingly, was married and raising two sets of twins, poor girl. Pete was selling sports cars in Omaha. Lex decided to see that Lana Perkins won an all expense paid trip to Florida for the whole family and to find out if Pete was selling anything Lex could stand to buy.

Clark grew sober when he mentioned Chloe. Their friend was still very sick, though the treatments had put her cancer into temporary remission. Lex didn't know if he or anybody else would come up with a cure soon enough to save her. He was afraid not and worried how her death would affect Clark. They had roped Bruce into looking out for her in their absence and the two had hit it off surprisingly well. Wayne Industries had recently opened a new medical research division in collaboration with LexCorp. Maybe between the them something would be achieved in time.

When they pulled up in front of the unchanged yellow farmhouse all the lights were off. Lex asked, "Will we disturb them if we go in? We could always go to a hotel for the night."

Clark waved it off. "Nah. They're used to me arriving at odd hours. If they hear us at all they won't think anything about it."

The pair snuck into the darkened house and Lex found that he remembered exactly where everything was. It was weird how much it felt like home. Lex felt more relaxed already.

They tip-toed upstairs and into Clark's old room with a minimum of noise, dropped their clothes on the floor and climbed into the inviting bed. The next thing Lex knew the sun was shining in the window directly onto his face, warming one cheek while Clark's shoulder warmed the other. He drowsed contentedly.

Lex wasn't quite awake yet when the door opened and Jonathan Kent said, "Clark, where did you...?"

The older man took in the two of them lying there in such an intimate position, met Lex's eyes, opened his mouth, and bellowed, "Martha!"

Clark stirred in Lex's arms and Lex didn't say anything during the few seconds it took the woman to appear beside her husband. Martha Kent, hair disordered and wearing an old, raggedy bath robe looked them over and put her hand on Jonathan's arm. She said evenly, "Well, this is a nice surprise."

Their son had the grace to not panic. He murmured sleepily, "Look who I brought home with me."

Lex greeted them, "Mrs. Kent, Mr. Kent."

Jonathan's mouth was still hanging open, but Martha's face brightened almost, but not quite, naturally. She said, "We'll just go get breakfast started. You boys come down when you're ready." With that she pushed her husband into the hall and shut the bedroom door.

Clark grinned at him. "That went well."

"I take it, cuddle bunny, that you haven't told your parents about us."

"Well," Clark blushed, "some. Not much. Actually, no."

"I see."

"We've just been so busy lately, I haven't been home. It's not like it could be a real surprise to them."

"Your father seemed surprised."

"Yeah, well, you know."

Lex kissed Clark thoroughly. "Okay, then. Let's go so I can establish my claim on you formally."

Though the Kent parents were somewhat stunned, breakfast was an amiable affair, with very few baffled and bewildered looks exchanged. After awkwardly trading updates with Lex, Jonathan and Martha all fell silent and looked at Clark to account for the unexpected turn of events.

The young man took a deep breath. "Mom, Dad. Lex and I are together. I mean really together, like for the rest of our lives. Which might be a very long time. And I'm really happy."

Martha's face melted and her eyes glistened. "Oh, Clark, I'm so glad. I'm so glad you worked through your differences." She stood up and kissed Clark on the cheek and then did the same to Lex. "And Lex, I'm glad that Clark's special someone turned out to be you. I had a feeling about you boys all along."

Lex's face quirked into an ironic smile. "So you didn't think it would be Lana?"

She shrugged. "Clark seemed awfully focused on her for a while, but no, I didn't think it would work out. I just didn't want Clark hurt. I know you won't do that."

"I promise you I'll take care of him until the day I die."

Jonathan, who had been very quiet, cleared his throat. "Clark, congratulations, son. I'm happy for you." He turned to Lex and said, "And Lex, son, welcome to the family." He extended his hand and Lex slipped his own into it. "We've come a long way to get to this point, but somehow it seems like it was inevitable. I've never seen Clark have a connection with anyone like he had with you, even when I tried to interfere. I'm glad it worked out."

Lex couldn't quite take it all in. Not only did he have Clark, but he had a family as well. A real family. The specific family he'd wanted for years. It seemed too good to be true.

Jonathan must have seen the emotion on his face and pulled him into a quick hug complete with manly back slap. He said briskly, "So, let's get the chores done so we can spend some time together."

Over the course of the day they told the Kents everything. There was laughter over the superhero costume dispute, in which Martha took Lex's side in favor of the Smallville Crows replica. There was admiration for the research Lex was trying to do and concern that Lex not put himself too much at risk. Martha cried when she found out what Lionel had done to Lex and Jonathan's face grew red with anger.

All that openness and sincerity was disconcerting. Lex knew that it was real; these were the people who raised Clark. It was still hard to accept that he could be part of it. That he could return those qualities in kind. It was another thing he was going to have to practice, but the effort would be worth it.

After dinner, while Clark helped his mother with the dishes, Lex wandered outside and leaned against the fence next to Jonathan. The older man's face, more deeply wrinkled than the last time Lex had seen him, was turned upward to the stars.

Lex asked tentatively, "Mr. Kent? Are you really all right with this? With Clark and me being together?"

Watching the sky, he replied, "Yes, I am. I was a little shell-shocked at first. I admit that. You aren't exactly who we expected Clark to bring home. But I've know Clark was bisexual for a long time. It's just that a father never quite gives up hope

for grandchildren, not that we've ever known if Clark could even have children on Earth."

Lex nodded. "I don't want to experiment on Clark, but a few simple tests could tell us if that's even possible. If it is, and Clark wants it, I'll see that it happens some day, one way or another."

Jonathan turned to look at him. "You would do anything for Clark, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. I always have."

"You know, it's funny how things work out. I fought tooth and nail to dislike you and I even succeeded for a while. Now I'm grateful that you came into Clark's life. I've been afraid, both Martha and I, that he would always be alone. Who would be there for him when the two of us are gone? Clark's been afraid of that, too. Now it turns out that you're the one person in the whole world who can see that that doesn't happen. I know you'll take care of Clark, Lex. Just be sure to take care of yourself, too. You aren't on your own anymore."

Swallowing a lump, Lex nodded. "I know. It seems like a miracle from where I'm standing, too. Clark is amazing. Not just his origins or abilities, but who he is. Thank you for that. You were the ones who raised him to be someone who could love me. And trust me, that's no small achievement. We're learning how to take care of each other. I think we'll be okay."

Lex's father in law slapped him on the back again, this time leaving his hand there. They turned to look at the stars together and Lex sent a quick thanks out to the universe as well. The only person for him was born on another planet, but he'd ended up right where he needed to be for Lex to find him. If that wasn't cosmic destiny, he didn't know what was.

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Clark flopped down on the couch next to Lex and eavesdropped shamelessly on his phone conversation.

"I'm telling you, Joao, you were right all along. It all happened just as you said it would."

"Lex, que notícia boa! You see, you should always listen to me. I know what is right."

Lex laughed, "So you tell me. Well, you did in this case. Clark gives me what I was lacking." He smiled warmly at Clark, who grinned back. "I want to thank you for being here when I needed you. Without your coaching it might not have gone so well."

"You can thank me by bringing your young man to visit. Iremos à praia and I will give you a hat so that your fair skin will not burn."

Lex smiled teasingly, "*Eu não sei sobre isso.* What if you two fall madly in love with each other? I will just waste away from sadness."

Clark planted sloppy kisses on Lex's cheek while the Brazilian answered, "*I promise to keep my hands away from both of you.*"

Clark nodded, "Good."

"And you must come. Your happiness will bring me luck."

"In that case we will." Lex paused and blushed a little, glancing at Clark. "I want all my family to be together."

Both Clark and Joao sighed simultaneously.

Clark loved Lex just the way he was, but the softer, more sentimental side that had been showing itself lately was wonderful. It meant that Lex finally felt safe enough to trust his feelings and show them without fear. They both were learning to do that. True, sometimes those feelings were actually quite biting, but even that was good. They were strong enough to love each other and Clark knew that they would stand the test of time. A long, long time.

End

FEEDBACK would be very much appreciated: joolz4me@hotmail.com

Portuguese Translations:

"*Venho, Joao. Num minuto.*" = "I'm coming, Joao. In a minute."

Meu amor = My love

Saudade = There's no direct translation of this into English. It means a pervading sadness or melancholy you feel because of someone or someplace that you love and are parted from.

"*Sim. Desejo você, sonho meu. Belo. Delicioso.*" Roughly = "Yes. I want you, my love. Beautiful. Delicious."

Vá com deus = Go with God

Que notícia boa = What good news

Iremos à praia = We will go to the beach

Eu não sei sobre isso. = I don't know about that.