

The Smallville Connection

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Summary: There's a 'super' man flying around Metropolis. So what's his connection to General Straker and SHADO?

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Colonel Alec Freeman sat at the commissary table drinking his coffee and watching General Edward Straker eating breakfast and reading the Daily Planet. Freeman had already read the headline article – Miraculous Launch of Prometheus Station Colonists. The photo of the event was indistinct, a tiny blob barely visible on the underside of the launch vehicle. The second photo was more telling – a flying man carrying a dark-haired woman into the fifth floor newsroom of the said Daily Planet.

The first article described the attempted sabotage against the Prometheus Station passenger module. Following the destruction of the Messenger Space Shuttle, the Extra-Planetary Research and Development (EPRAD) arm of NASA determined that the passenger module was in danger from sabotage as well. But despite attempts to safeguard the craft, a bomb had been planted on it. The bomb was subsequently discovered and dealt with by a mysterious figure in blue and red that not only took care of the bomb, but launched the module into Earth orbit by, literally, lifting it there.

The second article appeared to be a fluff piece about the 'hero' himself. The story was long on speculation and short on substance.

"Any clue what it is?" Freeman asked his long-time friend and superior officer.

Straker gave an uncharacteristic chuckle. "Well, whoever it is has a well developed sense of the theatric." His expression turned more serious. "Initial analysis indicates he's probably Kryptonian. The planet was destroyed due to some sort of core instability. There was one surviving colony and it doesn't have a lot of contact with the outside."

"So, what's he doing in Metropolis?"

Straker seemed to ignore the question. "I'm told the symbol on his chest belongs to the House of El, a very old and extremely well respected family of scientists and government officials."

"You didn't answer my question," Freeman pointed out. "What is he doing in Metropolis?"

"According to Lois Lane, he's been rescuing people."

Freeman snorted. "And how did he get through our defenses to get to Metropolis?"

Straker finally folded the paper over to look at his old friend. "Well, SHADO's only been fully operational for thirteen years. He looks a little older than that."

"Ed..."

"Alec, SHADO was formed to defend the planet from a hostile invasion from space."

"I don't need a history lesson. I was there, remember?"

Straker ignored the comment. "And ten years ago, not only did we succeed in our primary mission objectives, but our

mission was then altered to include tracking and policing the aliens living on Earth. In exchange for allowing them to emigrate to Earth, we were granted access to some extremely advanced technologies which we have found very useful."

"We became the Men In Black," Freeman grouched. The films had caused no end of embarrassment for SHADO when they were released – not to mention how close the filmmakers were to the truth in some places. There were aliens living on Earth.

"But nowhere in what we got was anything that would let a man do what he's doing," Freeman added.

"No, there wasn't," Straker agreed amiably.

"So, what are we supposed to do about this?" Freeman demanded. "What if he goes rogue? What if he's the first of an invasion?"

"And what if he isn't?"

Freeman just sat back and stared at him. "Standard protocols require we bring him in for evaluation at least. And this public display is just... Whatever happened to aliens keeping a low profile?"

"You have to admit it's brilliant. Straight out of the comic books."

Straker actually seemed amused and that sent alarms through Freeman. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Remember all those strange reports about a miracle man over the past few years?" Straker asked.

"Impossible rescues, buildings built or repaired literally overnight? Yeah, I remember. I remember our people chasing a ghost." It was still one of SHADO's mandates to investigate reports of Unidentified Flying Objects and other strange, possibly otherworldly – read 'extraterrestrial' – events. The 'miracle man' had been one of them and had led SHADO's field teams on a merry chase all over the world.

"What has been the one common denominator in all those events?" Straker asked.

Freeman frowned. As far as the reports that had crossed his desk were concerned, there had been no common denominator aside from the fact that the events happened in out-of-the-way places where there was little or no media coverage. Then it came to him – media. A reporter. At the time they assumed he was following them. "Male, possibly Caucasian, probably American. About two meters tall, black hair, brown eyes."

Straker was smiling again and it made Freeman nervous. Freeman went on. "Kent. Clark Kent. We even interviewed him a couple times. Freelance journalist. He was flagged as a person-of-interest but he came up clean. It is him, isn't it? The 'miracle man'?"

"You tell me."

Freeman growled under his breath. He hated it when Straker got all mysterious. It usually meant he was planning something devious and underhanded, if not downright sneaky and unethical. Freeman hated being played like that. Then Freeman realized that Straker wasn't planning anything.

"You've been protecting him," Freeman said flatly. "You've known about him all along and you've been protecting him. Who is he? What is he?"

"Walk with me," Straker ordered as he pushed himself from the table and grabbed his briefcase. He headed for the door without looking to see if Freeman was following. With a sigh, Freeman hurried after him.

Straker didn't speak again until they were well away from the government building that housed Straker's current offices.

Straker and Freeman had both retired from day-to-day SHADO operations some years before. But they were still involved with the organization, acting as liaisons to other government entities around the globe. Security and secrecy had always been two of SHADO's watchwords. It was true for Straker and Freeman as well.

“According to Aurisan intelligence, his birth name is Kal-El,” Straker said. “And except for the colony of New Krypton, he’s the last survivor of that race. He’s the son of Krypton’s preeminent scientist and was sent to Earth as an infant. Why Earth, instead of New Krypton, is still a little vague but it appears it may have been due to some political issues regarding the colony.”

“He flies,” Freeman pointed out. “Apparently without instrumentality. He may be immune to anything we’re capable of throwing at him. But you’re not worried.”

Straker led the way to a bench beside one of the park’s water fountains and indicated Freeman should sit as well. He opened the briefcase and handed over a slim file. Freeman noted the file label: ‘Smallville, 1966’.

He opened and skimmed the report inside: An anomalous meteorite strike just outside the town of Smallville, Kansas, May 16, 1966. Anomalous, because a meteorite large enough not to disintegrate in Earth’s atmosphere would have left evidence of a high temperature object hitting the ground. That hadn’t occurred, but something had streaked across the sky that night and something had caused an explosion large enough to be picked up by seismometers in Kansas City.

The name of the person who made the report was at the top of the sheet: Edward Straker, USAF.

“This was a couple years before SHADO was put together. You weren’t even involved with Henderson’s project then,” Freeman said.

“But I did know that General Henderson was collecting UFO reports so I sent it along to him.”

“But a sighting like this wouldn’t even be flagged by SHADO for investigation unless there was a missing person report or a mutilation in the area,” Freeman said.

“Very true. And, in fact, what did happen was, apparently, quite the opposite.”

Freeman waited.

Straker took a deep breath as though he was organizing his thoughts. “I was on leave just before I was to ship out to Thailand...”

It had been a long drive and Ed Straker wasn’t even sure what the name of the town was where he stopped for a bite to eat and to ask directions.

“This is Smallville, Hon’,” the waitress told him with a smile, before she gave him directions on how to get back to the main highway and headed for Kansas City.

Smallville. The name sounded familiar but he couldn’t quite place it. It was probably nothing. He’d been through so many small towns in his life.

The diner’s front door opened and a man in a khaki sheriff’s uniform walked in. He looked around a moment, spotting the people he was looking for. “Jonny, Martha, glad I caught you,” he began.

The couple in the booth next to Straker’s returned the sheriff’s greeting.

“There were some city folk here this afternoon asking about you,” the sheriff said.

“They came out to the farm,” the man, Jonny, said. “Odd pair. Asked some funny questions but they seemed harmless enough.”

“I think the man wasn’t feeling too well,” the woman added.

“Did you notice which way they went after they left your place?” the sheriff asked.

“I assumed they came back into town,” Jonny told him.

Jonny. Smallville. The names finally clicked in. Straker had a cousin Jonny in the Midwest. In a little Kansas town called Smallville. It had been years since Straker had been in Smallville to visit his mother’s sister, her husband and their children – before his mother died, in fact. Straker recalled not liking his

Uncle Eben very much. Aunt Sarah had been sweet and seemed to like small-town living, even though she’d been raised in Boston. His three cousins, Jerome, Jonathan, and Minerva, had all been older than Straker, but he recalled them as being pleasant enough. Jonny especially had gone out of his way to be nice to his little cousin.

Straker had just gathered his courage to address the couple in the next booth when they got up to leave. The waitress waved them out with a cheery goodbye.

“Was that Jonny Kent?” Straker asked the waitress.

She seemed surprised by the question but told him it was. She gave him directions to the Kent farm – five miles west of town on route eight, three miles past Simpson Quarry.

Straker wasn’t sure why he had the sudden urge to see his cousin after all this time. But he had a strong hunch it was important.

The Kents were driving an old pickup truck and Straker could see their taillights no more than a quarter mile ahead of him. Then the night sky lit up as a fireball sped overhead. It seemed to be heading due north. The fireball disappeared behind a copse of trees and the ground shook, while the sky lit up again, this time from an explosion.

Straker was a test pilot and was familiar with everything the U.S. had, as well as the Russians. What had passed overhead hadn’t been a plane or a missile, experimental or otherwise. He knew what it wasn’t. But he didn’t know what it was. It could have been a de-orbiting satellite or a meteorite; but the pattern felt wrong for either of those. That left only an Unidentified Flying Object, and he wasn’t sure he believed in those, although he knew that General Henderson and others did.

Ahead on the road, the pickup had stopped and he could make out Jonny and his wife crossing the field, heading toward the trees. Straker assumed they thought it was a plane that had come down. If so, then there may have been a pilot in trouble.

Curious, Straker parked his car away from the truck and followed them across the field at a discrete distance.

“It’s a baby!” he heard Martha say.

“Who would put a baby in a contraption like that?” Jonny asked.

“Well, whoever they are, they don’t deserve to get him back,” Martha said.

Jonny and Martha didn’t see Straker as they headed back to their truck. The Moon was in its last quarter; but the stars and Jonny’s flashlight gave enough light for Straker to see that Martha had a dark-haired baby in her arms.

A baby?

Straker hid in the darkness, waiting as they got into their truck with the infant and drove away. He went to his own car, got out a flashlight and hurried back to where Jonny and Martha had been.

The crater was far smaller than Straker had anticipated. And inside the crater was an object the likes of which he had never seen – it was the size of a Renault Dauphine and roughly the shape of a fat arrowhead. It was garishly colored with an ‘S’ symbol inscribed on the surface. Just inside what was probably the passenger compartment – it was padded and just large enough for a baby – was a small sphere. It was glowing softly red and had darker markings on the surface.

He reached out and touched it. “Krypton,” the globe whispered to him.

“You’re saying he came to Earth as a baby in 1966?” Freeman asked. He’d heard some wild stories from Straker before, but this one took the cake.

“I’m saying something came to Earth that night and my cousin found an abandoned baby that night,” Straker said. “It could have been coincidence.”

“You don’t believe in coincidence,” Freeman reminded him. Straker chuckled drily. “No, I don’t. Nevertheless, I called in my report to General Henderson’s office. I didn’t mention there was a baby or other witnesses. Nor did I specify exactly where the object would have landed. Two days later I was in Thailand and you know what happened then.”

Freeman did know. Straker got shot down over South Vietnam, spent a year in a Vietnamese prison camp. After his rescue and physical recovery, Straker ended up on General James Henderson’s staff. The rest, as they say, was history.

“So you think this ‘Superman’ is…” Freeman prompted.

“A month after finding an infant abandoned in a field, and following the due diligence of the local sheriff, my cousin Jonny and his wife adopted a baby boy.”

So that was how he was playing it. “And the landing craft? What happened to it?”

Straker shrugged. “The sighting didn’t fit what Henderson was looking into, so the report was handed over to General Newcomb’s group to look into when and if they had time,” Straker said. “I was surprised to find out later that they took it seriously enough to investigate it. More than once.”

The past few months had been hard, but finally SHADO’s underground headquarters was finished. Straker’s son, Jonny, was thriving despite his early arrival. Mary, his wife, had calmed down – with the construction complete Straker was able to spend more time at home being a husband and father. But he knew it was only a lull. Soon he would be back to putting in long arduous hours as SHADO girded itself for the upcoming fight with hostile aliens.

He sighed. Another shipment of boxed up files had come in from one of the other UFO investigation groups in the U.S. – Bureau 39, headed by General Burton Newcomb. Straker recalled meeting Newcomb and his team when SHADO was in the process of selecting its first recruits. Newcomb’s group had been looking into UFO sightings since 1947. It had been some of their first reports that had convinced James Henderson that the threat from outer space was real.

But something about Newcomb’s people had warned Straker away from them. SHADO’s mandate was to protect the population of Planet Earth from a group of alien marauders. The job required a high level of commitment and a certain level of open-mindedness – they were dealing with concepts and possible technologies that went beyond the fantastic. And inherent in SHADO’s mandate was the need to minimize harm to humans. What good were they if they fought off the aliens but hurt civilians?

Some of Newcomb’s people didn’t see it that way. According to some of the younger men in the group, especially the ones under the command of Jason Trask, the only good alien was a dead alien; and ‘collaborators’ were no better than aliens.

Straker wasn’t convinced that was true. Granted, SHADO was being formed to fight off a group of beings that seemed to think that humans were no better than cattle. But one group of aliens coming to Earth implied there were more out there. Surely not all of them were evil and intent on Earth’s rape and destruction.

Trask’s people didn’t seem to understand that simple truth; or if they did they chose to ignore it. SHADO had no need of fools.

Bureau 39 had been instructed to turn over copies of all their files and to turn over any ‘alien’ material they’d collected in the twenty-five years of their existence. The files were coming in but Straker had yet to see any of the alien artifacts Newcomb claimed they had. Straker wasn’t sure if Newcomb was lying about having the artifacts or simply dragging his feet about turning them over to SHADO.

“Commander,” one of the clerks going through the files

called out. “There’s a report here with your name on it.”

Curious, Straker took the file and looked at it. ‘Smallville, 1966’ the folder label read. The first sheet of the report did have his name on it. May 16, 1966. The fireball.

He skimmed the first sheet. The report correctly detailed what he had reported that night. But there were additional sheets in the folder. The first one was dated May 18, 1966 and told of Trask’s team searching the small farming community for what they were describing as a de-orbited satellite.

Trask had not been very complimentary of the local citizenry in his report. Straker read between the lines – Trask and his team had tried bullying some of the locals into admitting they’d seen something they hadn’t. He’d been stymied when the town closed ranks against him. There was a notation at the bottom of Trask’s report – a list of people who warranted additional investigation. Jonathan and Martha Kent were at the top of his list.

Straker handed the file back to the clerk. “This report has a list of names Bureau 39 was interested in. See if you can find those reports, would you?”

“Certainly, Commander.”

“And what was in those reports?” Freeman asked.

“Nothing too surprising,” Straker said. “My cousin, Jonny, hails from a long line of social activists. His great-grandfather was murdered for being an abolitionist newspaperman. The other people on Trask’s list had similar backgrounds, similar ‘liberal’ leanings, except for one. Trask had a report on Jonny’s little boy – school records, medical records. He also knew I was Jonny’s cousin.”

“It got ugly, didn’t it?”

“It wasn’t pretty.”

Sometimes honesty really was the best policy, Straker mused. He had flown from London to Washington D.C. a few days earlier to talk to Burton Newcomb about Bureau 39.

The conversation was cordial until Jason Trask’s name came up. “He’s a good man. Just a little overzealous at times,” Newcomb insisted.

“He’s been targeting civilians and he knows it,” Straker told the other officer.

“I’ll talk to him,” Newcomb promised.

Straker didn’t believe him.

The flight to Kansas City was uneventful and it wasn’t all that long a drive to Smallville. The last time he’d worn civvies. This time it was dress blues even though he hadn’t actually worn his USAF uniform since being assigned as SHADO’s commanding officer. It actually felt a little odd to be in military uniform instead of a business suit.

His first stop in Smallville was the sheriff’s office. The report Straker had on Will Beatty was that the man was an honest, hard-working cop who took his job and his position in the community very seriously. He was also one of Jonny Kent’s closest friends.

Straker introduced himself. The other man was suitably impressed with Straker’s ribbon array and badges. Most people were. Straker asked his questions about strange people in town asking strange questions and Beatty answered honestly, until the questions came to the Kents. Then Beatty shut down.

“Jonathan Kent is my cousin,” Straker said. “Call him if you don’t believe me. But I’m trying to get to the bottom of why military intelligence is interested in a Kansas farmer and a wide place in the road.”

Beatty relaxed a little. “I believe you. Jonny’s mentioned you once or twice. The people who came in never identified themselves as military. The first time they claimed to be looking for a piece of space debris that came down. They said it was radioactive, but I figure if it was as dangerous as they claimed, they should have been able to find it with a Geiger counter or

something. But all anybody around here saw was a flash in the sky. Then a couple guys claiming they were from the FAA showed up looking for an airplane that supposedly went down.”

“And you didn’t believe them either?” Straker’s estimation of the sheriff’s competence was going up.

Beatty shrugged. “When I called the Kansas City FAA office to ask them about it, they didn’t have anybody out here and they had no planes missing. What they did have was a radar trace of what they figured was a meteorite. Kansas U might have been interested, but they’d be the only ones.”

“You said ‘the first time’ they were here?” Straker prompted. “There was more than one time?”

“Yeah,” Beatty said, pouring himself a cup of coffee and offering Straker one. Straker accepted it and Beatty continued. “A couple months ago they were back, this time claiming they were INS. I guess they didn’t figure anybody around here would recognize them.”

Straker made a mental note to make sure that SHADO’s investigators took better care than Bureau 39 did at creating cover stories and covering their backsides.

“What happened?” he asked.

Beatty was silent for a long moment. Straker let the silence hang.

Beatty finally continued as Straker knew he would. “You have to understand that the Kent boy’s adoption is perfectly legal. We did our due diligence. We don’t know how he came to be where Jonathan and Martha found him, but we do know that he wasn’t listed as missing anywhere in this country and his birth wasn’t registered in a hospital. He was a healthy, obviously well cared for, infant which left out a lot of other possibilities. But the bottom line is, we did our job and anybody coming in now claiming to be that kid’s parents had better be able to prove it and they’d better have a damn good reason for leaving a helpless baby where they did.”

“So Trask’s people were trying to lay claim to Jonny’s boy?”

“Is that what his name is? Trask?” Beatty asked.

Straker nodded.

“He is some piece of work,” Beatty grouched. “Clark wasn’t the only one they were interested in. They were after all the kids born between January and May of 1966. It’s like they thought the Midwich Cuckoos was real and happened in Smallville.”

“Doesn’t exactly sound like an INS investigation,” Straker commented. “Unless the ‘illegals’ they were looking for were from outer space.”

Beatty chuckled. “I won’t deny we have our share of field hands who’ve overstayed their legal welcome in this country,” he said. “And I figure the only reason they’re here instead of closer to home is there isn’t any work closer to home. I don’t know what the solution is. I don’t know if there is a solution besides the obvious. But I do know this. I need probable cause to ask somebody for their papers and so long as I don’t have that, I’ve got no need to hassle anybody. And I know Chief Parker feels the same way. We were both glad when that bunch left town.”

Straker asked a few more questions, but he already had the answers he needed. Trask and Bureau 39 were actively pursuing investigations that they knew SHADO would not authorize spending man-hours on. And the investigation in Smallville had begun after Straker had opted not to bring Trask and his people into SHADO’s fold. Straker didn’t believe the timing was a coincidence. He knew there were people who had disagreed with his appointment to SHADO’s command. Some of those people were in very high and dangerous places. He suspected Burton Newcomb was among them.

But for the moment, Straker just hoped he could defuse the situation with Jonny and Martha before it got completely out of hand.

“Why didn’t we demand that Bureau 39 be disbanded back then?” Freeman wondered.

“Politics,” Straker answered. “Henderson and Newcomb had different ideas on how the aliens, ‘our’ aliens, should be dealt with, how Earth’s defense should be organized. Henderson won. The Bureau was a bone for Newcomb and the more conservative U.S. administrations. It made them feel that they hadn’t lost all control of the situation within their own borders. And so long as they didn’t actively interfere with our operations, it didn’t much matter. They took a lot of flak for us after we became operational.”

“So, what happened with your cousin?”

Straker chuckled. “I’m damn lucky his wife didn’t kill me.”

Straker knocked on the screen door to the Kent farm house and looked out over the corn fields as he waited for a response. ‘Knee high by the Fourth of July’ came to mind. It looked like the crops were well on their way to that. Not that he knew anything about farming. Straker was strictly a city boy.

A pleasant looking woman with light brown hair and glasses came to the door. She eyed the uniform worriedly.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“You must be Martha,” Straker said. “I’m Ed, Ed Straker. Jonny’s cousin.”

The worry didn’t leave her eyes but she turned to someone inside the house and said, “Clark, your dad’s up in the north field. Would you find him and tell him his cousin’s here?”

“Sure, Mom,” a young voice said. Martha positioned herself between Straker and the boy as the youngster hurried past her. The boy was six or seven, medium build with black hair and brown eyes. He eyed Straker curiously but headed out without saying anything more. Once off the porch the boy broke into a run.

“Fine looking boy,” Straker commented. Clark was a good looking child, obviously not Jonny and Martha’s natural child but, equally obviously, healthy and well loved.

“Why don’t you come in?” Martha said, holding the door for him. “I have iced tea, or if you’d rather have some coffee I...”

“Iced tea sounds just fine,” he assured her. He looked around the house. It was smaller than he remembered, but then he hadn’t been all that much older than Clark the last time he’d been there. The kitchen was bright and cheery and smelled of fresh bread and cookies. The refrigerator door was covered with the traditional detritus of a household with a child – grade sheets and photos, doctor appointment cards, and kid drawings. Clark Kent appeared to be a straight-A student.

Straker waited as Martha poured two glasses of tea.

“Why are you here, Colonel?” she asked.

Straker tried to hide his surprise. Most civilians had little familiarity with rank markings. “I’m not allowed to come visit my favorite cousin?” he managed to get out.

Martha watched him carefully. “A couple months ago we had men claiming to be federal agents nosing around, asking questions. But they weren’t what they claimed to be.”

“And what were they?”

“I overheard one of them address the man in charge as ‘major’. That would imply military, wouldn’t it?”

“There are fire and police departments that use the rank. But considering the circumstances, I’ve no doubt you’re right.”

“So, why was the military here asking questions and lying about it and why, after all this time, are you here?”

“Martha...”

Straker looked over to see Jonathan Kent standing in the door. Little Clark was standing behind him, peering around his leg. Straker weighed his options. SHADO’s security made the CIA look like summer camp, but, sometimes, the best security was found in trust and honesty.

“Hello, Jonny...”

The other man simply nodded and gave his wife a worried look. The phone rang and Martha hurried to answer it. Straker couldn't hear the conversation but he guessed it was the sheriff getting back to her about him.

He waited until she hung up the phone. “I think the three of you want to sit down.”

He followed them into the living room and sat down opposite them, leaning forward earnestly. “That would have been Sheriff Beatty letting you know what he's been able to find out about me so far.”

Martha nodded.

Straker smiled. “He's a good man. So let's see. He told you I was with military intelligence but they wouldn't tell him what unit, and that I was on a permanent off-base assignment overseas in London, England and on the staff of one General James L. Henderson.”

“Exactly,” Martha confirmed for him.

Straker nodded and took a deep breath. “What he told you is true, as far as it goes. What I'm about to tell you now does not leave this room. In fact, it will be worth your lives if any of this gets out.”

Martha actually paled. Jonny pulled Clark to him and said, “I want you to go to your room until we say it's okay to come down, understand?”

The boy nodded, staring wide-eyed at Straker. After a moment he disappeared up the stairs. Straker heard a door shut.

“He's a good boy,” Jonny said. “He doesn't need to know about... whatever.”

“He probably understands more than you suspect. I remember being his age,” Straker said. “He's probably listening. I know I would have been.” Straker paused, suddenly unsure as to how to proceed. The truth, but how much?

Martha decided for him. “Did you know what those men were doing here?” she demanded. “Have you any idea? They were threatening to take away our children!”

Jonny grabbed her hand and she calmed enough to sit down again.

“Did you know anything about it?” Jonny asked.

“I didn't find out about their investigation until a few days ago, but I do know what they claimed they were doing,” Straker admitted. “They were investigating an Unidentified Flying Object sighting that occurred six years go.”

“I thought Project Blue Book decided there was no such thing,” Jonny said.

“Actually, the final report said that, assuming they did exist, they did not appear to present a threat to the United States,” Straker said. “The published report was not exactly truthful and the group that Major Trask is with was one of those originally given the responsibility to investigate sightings within the U.S.”

“So, why were they investigating it again now, and why not just tell us the truth?” Jonny asked. “Why were they scaring half the town?”

“Officially the United States military is not currently in the flying saucer business,” Straker answered. “Officially any information concerning such things is to be sent to an international investigative group based in London.”

“Your group?” Martha asked.

Straker didn't comment.

“But, why come back? Nothing happened back in '66 and nothing's changed since,” Jonny pointed out.

“A couple things have changed actually,” Straker said. “One, the international group I mentioned became operational and that... Well, let's just say it's put a crimp in Trask's boss's ambitions; and two, based on the questions his people were asking, Trask believes that an alien incursion did take place six years ago. I have no idea what proof he has or if he has any proof

at all.”

“Why are you telling us this, Eddie?” Jonny asked. “It's not like we've been exactly close. And if what you're telling us really is top secret...”

“I don't know if there was an alien incursion that night,” Straker said. “I've seen no evidence that the ones I'm worried about have been around here. But I do know this – just because a war's been declared doesn't give a soldier or anyone else the right to deliberately target noncombatants, especially children.”

Straker pulled one of his business cards out and handed it to his cousin. “If Trask or any of his bunch show up here again, or if you find you have reason to believe there really was a hostile alien incursion, let me know.”

“Did they get in touch with you after that?” Freeman asked.

“Christmas cards, that sort of thing,” Straker said. “Their son was in London just before Kate and I got married. I had lunch with him, showed him around up-top. Nice kid. Wanted to become a journalist. Asked way more questions than I wanted to answer.”

“Did he?”

“Did he what?”

Freeman glared at his friend and Straker chuckled, pointing to the byline on the front page article – Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

“You're lucky our security people didn't find out how much you told them,” Freeman stated.

“It wasn't all that much and I really did need to smooth over at least some of the damage Bureau 39 did. SHADO's mandate never included threatening civilians, especially not children.”

“Was the landing craft ever recovered?”

“If it was I never heard anything about it,” Straker admitted. “But we both know Bureau 39 kept a lot of things from us. Newcomb is retired now, along with most of the old-timers. I've heard tell they're thinking of finally disbanding the unit. I'm having lunch with George Thompson next Monday. I'll find out more then.”

A sonic boom rattled nearby windows. Freeman looked up to see a blue and red streak crossing the sky. He could see the distinctive silhouettes of the Daily Planet Building and LexTower across the park. His and Straker's offices were behind them, three floors up from the local NIA and FBI offices.

“He's in a big hurry,” Freeman commented. It was going to take some getting used to – a man flying without wings.

“Must be a fire.”

“What are we going to do if he goes rogue?” Freeman asked.

“I seriously doubt it will ever happen. But if it does, then SHADO will deal with him,” Straker said. “It's what we do.”

THE END