

After Nightfall: The Return of Superman

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Summary: This sequel to “When the Sky Falls” continues the story of Lois and Clark in the post-Nightfall world. Some old friends reappear, and we discover that more has changed in this world than Lois or Clark had realized.

Disclaimer: This is a fanfic based on the television show, *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. I have no claim on the pre-existing characters whatsoever, nor am I profiting by their use. The new story elements are mine. No infringement is intended by this work.

This is a continuation of *When the Sky Falls*. Reading that work first will prove helpful, but much of Chapter 1 in this work is intended serve as an overview/refreshers of that earlier story, so it should be possible to enjoy this story even without prior knowledge of WtSF.

Chapter 1: Reunion

Lois loved the smell of Clark’s cooking. When she’d first seen him in Perry’s office all those months ago, she’d made a series of judgments based on nothing more than his appearance. In some ways those judgments had been perfectly correct, but in others they had been amazingly wrong. She’d been correct in that he was fundamentally a “country boy.” He’d been raised in a small town and had the manners to prove it. However, that first day she would have never guessed that he was an experienced world traveler and skilled chef.

“Honey, would you get the fennel seed?” Clark asked from across the kitchen.

“Sure,” she replied. This was her primary duty in the kitchen. Clark cooked and she helped. In many ways it mirrored their relationship at work. There, she generally took the lead and Clark assisted her. Although, she had to admit that Clark was far more capable in the office than she was in the kitchen. She delivered the spice and collected a kiss from her husband in return. “Thank you,” he said before he turned back to the skillet.

As she sat back down on the bar stool near the edge of the kitchen counter, she thought about how quickly things had changed these months. Although the widespread devastation wrought by the shattered Nightfall asteroid had been the most striking change for most of the world, she’d had her own set of more personal changes. Those all started with the appearance of Clark — and his alter ego Superman — in her life. It seemed almost funny now to look back at her initial negative and dismissive reaction to the man — the real version of the man — who had become so critical to her happiness and well-being.

A knock on the door interrupted her muse. “I’ll get it,” she said as she stood and headed for the front door. When she opened the door, she was glad that she had a good grip on the doorknob. Standing just outside the door were Clark’s parents. His supposedly dead parents.

“Lois, it’s so good to see you. May we come in?” she heard in a slightly surprised, but friendly voice.

Lois stood in the doorway to her and Clark’s apartment in stunned silence. Martha and Jonathan really were standing in

front of her. They were alive!

“Martha, Jonathan, what are you doing alive?”

After a second or so, the shock wore off and Lois realized that they had no way to respond to her odd — and probably rude — question. She stepped forward and hugged Martha. “I’m so happy that you’re OK,” she said joyfully as she squeezed Martha to her.

After a few seconds, Lois sensed a certain level of discomfort — or possibly confusion — from her mother-in-law. She released the older woman, stepped back and glanced at Jonathan. “I’m glad to see you too, Jonathan.” Then Lois took a second to gather herself. “After the Nightfall fragment destroyed Smallville, and then we didn’t hear anything from you, we thought you were... well, dead.”

They were both clearly confused and Lois realized that they were probably surprised at both her presence and the nature of her greeting. Martha seemed about to say something when she suddenly glanced over Lois’ shoulder. “Clark?” Then Martha rushed past Lois and threw her arms around her son.

For a second or two Clark just stood there stiffly. Then he slowly lifted his arms and somewhat hesitantly returned Martha’s embrace. Lois could see that Clark was very uncomfortable.

Martha finally seemed to realize that her son was acting oddly. She pulled back and looked up at Clark. “Clark, what’s wrong?”

He just stared back at her blankly for a moment before turning to Lois for help.

She moved quickly to his side and took his hand in hers before turning to Martha. “Martha, I know this is going to be confusing, but Clark doesn’t remember you.”

As Martha’s gaze jerked back to her son, Clark spoke to his mother for the first time. “That’s not exactly correct,” he explained. “I remember your face and I’ve looked at your pictures.” Then his expression turned solemn. “I just don’t remember anything about you.”

Lois turned back to Jonathan who was still standing outside the door. “Please come in and we’ll try to fill you in on the details,” she said.

“Just a minute,” Jonathan said. He looked past Lois to Clark. “Son, can we stay with you? From what we saw of the city, I think we’ll have a hard time finding a hotel room.”

Clark didn’t hesitate at all this time. “Of course you can stay here. Things are better in Metropolis than they were right after Nightfall, but it’s still nearly impossible to find a place to stay.”

“Okay,” Jonathan replied. “I need to get our luggage and tell Charlie that he can go.”

“Charlie?” Clark asked.

“Charlie Irig. He’s one of Wayne’s nephews. That’s where we’ve been all this time.” Jonathan paused for a moment. “It’s a long story. I’d like to let Charlie be on his way. He has about another hour’s drive back to where he’s going to stay the night. I have a feeling that the four of us are going to be spending a lot of time exchanging stories.”

“You’re probably right,” Lois replied. “Do you think Charlie would like to come in for a few minutes?”

“I’ll ask,” Jonathan answered as he turned away from the door. “But he seemed pretty anxious to get back on the road. Son, can you give me a hand?” he asked Clark.

Clark hurried after his father. As the door closed, Lois remembered the partially prepared meal in the kitchen. “Excuse me for a second,” she said to Martha as she headed for the kitchen. “Clark was making us dinner when you arrived. Let me make sure that he turned everything off.”

Lois had expected Martha to follow her into the kitchen, but when she looked back she saw that Martha had remained standing in the doorway. A few seconds later, Martha opened the door as wide as it would go and held it as the men came in. Clark

was loaded down with two large suitcases and Jonathan had two smaller ones.

“Charlie wouldn’t stay?” Martha asked Jonathan.

“No. He was glad that Clark was okay but... well, you know how fidgety Charlie is. He was on his way practically as soon as the truck door was closed.”

As they set the luggage aside, Lois returned from the kitchen. “That should keep for a while now,” she said, looking at Clark. Then she turned toward the older couple. “Have you two eaten yet?”

“No. Not since lunch,” Jonathan replied quickly. “We were anxious to get here.”

“We had only started enough dinner for Clark and me,” Lois said, waving her left hand in the general direction of the small kitchen. “But I’m sure Clark can come up with enough for all of us.”

Lois turned back to find Martha staring at her outstretched arm. Martha’s hand was covering her mouth. “Is something wrong?” Lois asked.

“You’re wearing a wedding ring,” Martha replied breathlessly.

Clark moved quickly to her side and put his arm around Lois’s shoulders. “Lois and I have been married for a nearly a month.”

“I’m sorry that we surprised you this way,” Lois added.

Lois looked back and forth between Clark’s parents. It was clear that this information stunned them. She wished she could tell if their reaction was positive or negative. After another second of silence, Lois decided to defend her position. “A lot has happened in the last few months,” she said, squaring her shoulders. “I was really hoping we’d have your blessing.”

Now it was Martha’s turn to sweep forward and pull Lois into a hug. “Of course you do,” she said elatedly. Martha held her for several long seconds before stepping back. There were tears running down the older woman’s cheeks. And based on the crooked smile on Martha’s lips, it was easy to see that they were tears of joy. “I’m so happy. I. I was just so surprised. Clark has been... Well, from the first day he came to Metropolis, you were practically all he could talk about. I just didn’t expect anything like this to happen so quickly.”

Lois moved toward her and pulled the suddenly frail-feeling woman into another hug. This time there wasn’t any discomfort at all. “I’m the lucky one,” Lois said, feeling her own tears of joy starting to flow. “Clark is... He’s better than I deserve. I love him so much.”

They stood like that for several long seconds. Lois had never felt so much a part of a family as she did that moment. Martha’s approval had meant a lot to her. But now Lois knew that even better than Martha’s approval was her welcoming acceptance of her into their wonderful family.

When they finally separated, Lois found the men just standing quietly nearby. “Let’s all sit down,” she said as she reached out for Clark’s hand to lead him into the living room. “We’ll talk for a few minutes and then we can worry about some food. Will that be okay?” she asked, looking at Clark’s parents.

Martha and Jonathan both nodded in reply.

“Clark, can you please bring us some water?” Lois requested.

“Speaking of water,” Jonathan cut in, suddenly looking fidgety, “I need to use your bathroom.”

As the men headed in opposite directions, Lois and Martha went to the living room. Lois sat on the couch and Martha sat in a chair right across from her. “I really am happy about you and Clark,” she confided. “I had a feeling the first time we met in Smallville that you two had something special. I was afraid that because of Clark’s—” Martha stopped suddenly.

To Lois, Martha suddenly looked afraid. It was as if she’d accidentally revealed some great secret. Then it hit her. Martha

had to have been worried that Clark’s secret would stand in the way. She decided to get that out of the way right now. “You were worried that Clark’s secret — the fact that he was Superman — would be a problem?”

Martha’s expression relaxed into a smile. “I’m so relieved that you know. I was half afraid that he might decide to do something crazy like proposing — maybe even getting married — without telling you.”

“There’s more truth in that than you know,” Lois said with a cryptic smile.

“There’s more truth in what?” Clark asked as he returned from the kitchen with four glasses of water.

“Your mom was worried that you might have proposed without telling me about Superman.”

Clark smiled at the memory. “Well, my memory problems made that a little complicated.”

At this point Jonathan returned. “What was complicated?” he asked.

“Dad, why don’t you sit down and we can get down to the business of telling our stories,” Clark suggested.

As Jonathan took the chair nearest Martha, Clark began. “How much do you know about what has happened since Nightfall?”

Martha glanced briefly at Jonathan before starting. “Not really very much. We’ve been isolated for all this time. There was a radio, but the only news we’ve heard was very general. We know that Lex Luthor was involved in trying to kill Superman.”

“But you know about what supposedly happened to Superman?” Clark asked.

“You mean that Superman is supposed to be dead because of Luthor’s Kryptonite gas trap?” Martha asked.

Clark nodded in reply.

“Of course,” Martha replied solemnly. “At first we were scared to death that you really were dead. But then we heard the story of how Lois Lane and Clark Kent had found the evidence that exposed Luthor. By the way, did anyone ever catch Luthor?”

Lois shook her head. “No. Lex disappeared the night we discovered the evidence against him, and there’s been no sign of him since.”

Jonathan started to say something but checked himself. After a second Martha continued. “Anyway, we knew that Clark was alive but for some reason Superman remained dead.”

“Well, I made it back from Nightfall, but Luthor’s gas nearly did its job. It didn’t kill me, but it took away my powers and destroyed most of my memories.”

“That extra air supply didn’t help?” Jonathan asked.

That got Lois’s attention. “What extra air supply?”

Jonathan turned to Lois. “A few hours before he left on the Nightfall mission, Clark stopped at our place to tell us what he was going to do.” Then he turned to Clark. “Son, you were nervous about the air and you wanted to have your own backup plan. You got this —” He concentrated for a second. “— rebreather device from a scientist you knew. You were going to carry that along in case something went wrong with your air supply.”

Clark and Lois looked at each other for a minute. “That must be how you made it back,” Lois offered.

“What do you mean?” Martha asked.

Lois turned to her mother-in-law. “When we first found him after the Nightfall mission, Clark didn’t have his powers and couldn’t remember being Superman,” Lois explained. “He really didn’t remember much about being Clark either. But he did retain enough of his general memory and reporting skills to help in the investigation into Superman’s fate. Working together, we discovered that Luthor had booby-trapped the air supply in Superman’s mission pack. When we started investigating Superman’s disappearance, we found the official mission survival

pack in the building where Clark turned up injured.”

Lois stopped to take a sip of water, so Clark picked up the story. “At first we thought that I — meaning Clark — had been injured by leftover gas when Superman’s support pack hit an abandoned building where I had been waiting to meet him. The scientists who analyzed the gas said that there was no way Superman could have survived the gas long enough for the flight back from Nightfall. All the evidence fit. Superman was dead and whatever knowledge I had about him was lost along with the rest of my memories.”

“But if both your powers and memories are gone, how did you find out that you’re Superman?”

“It’s a long story,” Clark replied. “The short version is that for a long time I — we — didn’t know. I guess that it’s clear that major memory loss is a side effect of the gas that Luthor used. I simply had no recollection of anything to do with Superman. In many ways, the Clark Kent that existed before Nightfall really did die in Luthor’s attack.”

“That’s not true!” Lois interjected strongly, as she reached to Clark and took his hand in hers. “You’re still the same person you were before. The Clark that I was starting to fall in love with is the same person who’s sitting beside me now.” After another second, she turned to Martha and Jonathan. “Clark’s memories are mostly gone, but somehow he’s still the same person. All those qualities that made Clark the special person you raised are still there.”

Martha couldn’t help but smile at the intensity of the feelings that Lois had showed for Clark in his moment of doubt. It was clear that a lot had happened in the short time since Nightfall. “If we keep interrupting, this will take forever. Why don’t you give us the condensed version of what happened and we’ll try to hold questions to the end,” Martha suggested.

“That’s probably for the best,” Lois replied. “I’m sure we’ll be filling you in on the details for a long time. So let me give you the super-brief version of what happened.” She thought for a minute and then started. “Okay, we told you that after the Nightfall mission, Clark had almost total amnesia. He didn’t even remember his own name, but somehow he did remember mine. The odd part of this amnesia is that even though his memories are gone, his feelings — especially strong ones — are intact. Right after the Nightfall mission, it quickly became clear to me that Clark had been falling for me even faster than I had been falling for him.”

She paused as Martha seemed about to say something, but ended up just nodding quietly.

“We tried to reach you before Nightfall hit, but we couldn’t get through to Smallville,” Lois continued. “Clark didn’t want to stay home alone in his apartment, so he helped me at work. I certainly needed the help, and figured that it would help stimulate his memory. Then my apartment was destroyed the night Nightfall hit. With so much of Metropolis devastated, everyone was looking for a place to stay.”

Lois paused to compose herself for this next part. “Well, Clark invited me to stay with him,” she said. “It was all very proper,” she added quickly. “Clark even built a wall that isolated the sleeping space into a separate room for me, so that this place was like a small two-bedroom apartment.” Lois had been watching for some sign of rebuke from either of Clark’s parents, but they seemed to take these living arrangements in stride. “We lived like that for a few weeks. We were investigating Superman’s fate and getting to know each other even better than we had before. Then one night Clark asked me to marry him. At first I was in shock, but it didn’t take me long to realize that he was the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I also admitted to myself that I was as in love with him as he was with me. We got married the next day, and I’ve never been happier.”

Clark’s parents were now holding hands. It seemed clear that

they had been touched by the story of their romance. After another few seconds Martha asked, “So if Clark lost all his powers, how and when did you find out about his... other job?”

“That’s why it was funny that you thought Clark might ask me to marry him without telling me about that part of his life. In truth that’s exactly what happened. We got married still thinking that Superman had died trying to make it back from Nightfall. We’d been married nearly a week when Clark’s special abilities started coming back. Our guess was that whatever gives him his powers had to heal from the exposure to Luthor’s Kryptonite gas.”

“That must have been something of a shock,” Jonathan said in a wry tone. “I mean discovering that you were married to Superman.”

Lois paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. “From the first moment Superman saved me in the space transport and then flew me back to the Daily Planet, I knew that there was something between us. Now I know why. Of course, I’m not married to Superman, I’m married to Clark.” Lois leaned over and kissed her husband.

Then she turned back to them. “The one piece that didn’t fit was how Clark had been able to make it back from Nightfall. We knew that the gas had been triggered just as he reached the asteroid. As I said, several good scientists have analyzed the gas and there was simply no way that Superman could have made it back without either suffocating or breathing enough of that gas to kill him. He clearly did make it back, but until now, we couldn’t understand how.”

“Clark, you must have switched to your backup air supply as soon as you realized you were being poisoned,” Martha said.

“I guess that must be right,” he said doubtfully. “I just don’t remember. I know that I — as Superman — went on the Nightfall mission, but I have no recollection of it at all.”

“At least that clears up one thing we didn’t understand,” Lois continued. “And I think that covers the most basic elements of how Clark and I ended up where we are. He lost his memory, but not his feelings or personality as a result of the Nightfall mission. The disruption after Nightfall threw us together more than ever before, and we came to realize how great we were for each other. It was only after we got married, when his powers started to return, that we discovered that Clark had been Superman.”

“So, do we get to hear your Nightfall survival story?” Clark asked his parents.

Martha and Jonathan glanced at each other. Very quickly, Jonathan nodded at Martha in a way that clearly meant, “You go first.”

Martha turned to the younger couple. “We started getting ready to head this way right after Clark left our house the day of the Nightfall mission. We weren’t sure what was going to happen, but we wanted to be here in case he needed us. It took a few hours to get the farm ready to leave, and by the time we were done we had already seen the official announcement about the Nightfall mission. We had planned to stop by Wayne’s place and ask him to keep an eye on our farm while we were gone.” Then Martha turned to her husband. “Why don’t you pick it up from here?”

“When I got to Wayne’s place,” Jonathan continued, “I found that he was also getting ready to leave. Clark, do you remember Wayne at all?”

“No,” Clark replied. “I know who he is because of the article that Lois wrote when Bureau 39 took over his farm. I read everything that I could to try to recover my memories. I don’t remember him, but I know what Lois wrote.”

“Well, Wayne’s family comes from West Virginia. Much of his family is very clannish, and in times of crisis they tend to all come together. One of the elders of the family had a premonition that Nightfall was going to go badly and put out a call for the

family to come home.”

“Home?” Lois asked.

“They have these family rules,” Martha answered. “When one of the senior elders calls the family together, they all gather at the traditional family lands. They own a whole valley in eastern West Virginia. It’s very isolated and the people that live in the area all have roots going back several generations. It’s always been the place that their family pulls back to in times of crisis. Anyway, since Wayne was heading east, we decided to drive most of the way together. We figured that we might run into a situation where help would come in handy.”

Jonathan picked up the story again. “It was a good thing that we did, because just east of Columbus, Ohio, we got hit by a car. It was after dark and we were just minding our own business when this car came flying up behind us. We were on a divided highway and I kept expecting the car to change lanes. Well, the driver must have been even drowsier than us, because they didn’t even try to change lanes until the last possible second. By then it was too late and they clipped the rear of the truck. The impact knocked us into a spin and we ended up on the side of the road. It was a good thing that Wayne was with us. The other car kept going, but Wayne stayed with us until a tow truck came by. We ended up at a garage and, well, our truck wasn’t totaled, but it was close. It was clear that the damage would take days to fix. With Nightfall on its way, we didn’t feel that we could wait. We were trying to figure out what to do when Wayne offered us a ride to his family’s place. The idea was to get there and then get a ride with one of the family to Metropolis.”

“We didn’t know what else to do,” Martha interjected. “We really wanted to get here, but there just wasn’t any other way. By that time, your Nightfall mission had failed and no one would rent or sell us a car. We thought about looking into something public, like an airplane or bus, but we were a long way from any of those places and all the news reports made it look like we wouldn’t have any luck. We decided that, as much as we wanted to get to Metropolis, it would be a mistake to become separated from Wayne. He had a truck that worked and room for us. With things the way they were, we were afraid that we’d be stuck in Ohio. We reached the Irig place in West Virginia the next afternoon. There was no way we could get out that day, so we hoped that we’d be able to get a ride to Metropolis the next morning. Obviously, it didn’t turn out that way. The family elders had already decided that no one should leave until after Nightfall hit. We were free to go, but no family member, not even Wayne, could give us a ride. It was very frustrating, but at that point, we figured what it would only be another day or so.”

Martha paused to take a sip of water, so Jonathan took over again. “What we didn’t count on was how bad the Nightfall pounding would be. The deep narrow valley did its job and shielded us from the worst of the hits. The hilltops around us took a beating, but very few of the fragments made it down into the valley. No one was injured, but we didn’t come away unscathed. Their two-way radio was taken out by one of the impacts. Another hit destroyed the bridge that was the only way to drive in and out of the valley. We were safe, but there was no way to communicate with the outside world and no way to leave. The family started repairing the bridge the day after the Nightfall impact, but it was only opened a couple of days ago. We had enough regular radios that we had a pretty good idea of the state of the world, but we were missing all the details.”

“So what did you know about Metropolis?” Lois asked.

“We knew it hadn’t been hit too hard,” Martha explained. “We heard that some buildings had been destroyed, but like some other cities, it came through better than expected. Since we knew that you were alive, once the bridge was open and some of the younger family members had been out enough to make sure that what we’d heard on the radio was correct, we started asking

about getting a ride. It turned out to be easier than we thought. To be honest, I think they were happy to have us non-family out of their valley. In any case there was no problem getting a ride.”

There were a few seconds of silence when Clark spoke up. “Well, I’m sorry that my memory is probably going to make our reunion more challenging. But I — we — are really happy that you’re okay and especially that you’re alive. We still have a lot to do this evening but first we need to do something about dinner. Then we can get you settled in. Lois and I don’t have the dividers that we used to convert this to a two-bedroom apartment, but it shouldn’t be too hard to set all that up again tomorrow. So..., what would you like for dinner?”

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Chapter 2: Directions

The door of the elevator carrying Lois and Clark opened to reveal that the main news floor at the Planet was as busy as ever. Many elements of the newspaper had changed after Nightfall, but one interaction had remained constant through it all. Just down from the elevator landing, Perry was bellowing at Jimmy.

“What kind of pictures are these?” Perry demanded while shaking a pile of photos in the face of the young photographer/fledgling reporter.

Clark was about to say good morning when Lois pulled him back. She wanted to see how this was going to play out. Clark paused, then they exited the elevator together quietly. They stopped and watched the exchange from a distance.

“Those are the new pictures out of Washington DC,” Jimmy replied confidently. “I thought this was what you wanted when you sent Paul and me there for the shoot.”

“For Elvis’ sake, son. Of course I wanted pictures. But these pictures don’t show me anything other than destroyed monuments. You know we’re trying to balance our reporting and stay away from the sensationalist disaster stories that the other guys are using. I’ve only said that just about every day since this all started.”

Just a few months ago Perry’s challenge would have had Jimmy in full retreat. But the stresses and additional responsibilities that the young reporter had dealt with during Nightfall had matured him. Now he had the confidence to trust his judgment. “Chief, did you read the note that was attached to those photos.”

“It said, ‘DC Photos.’”

“Did you see the small print?”

“What small print?” Perry asked.

“On the label for those photos,” Jimmy replied. “That was the only the first group. There are two more sets that we’re still working on in the photo lab. The other two groups are devoted to people. I think you’ll be satisfied that we can build a good picture of the way the residents of DC have come through the crisis.”

“Oh,” Perry said, now less sure of his position. “Well... good. Bring them to me as soon as they’re ready.” Then Perry turned and retreated to his office.

Lois and Clark went over to Jimmy, who was still watching Perry retreat to his office. “You’ve sure improved your skills in dealing with Perry on a rampage,” Lois commented.

Jimmy turned suddenly and smiled when he saw who it was. “Hey, Lois, CK, I didn’t see you arrive. I guess it’s gotten easier since I figured out that most of the time he jumps you like that, he’s really trying to make you and the paper better. You guys are in late, were you working on a story?”

“No,” Lois replied. “We spent the morning looking for apartments.”

Jimmy looked at Clark excitedly. “Are you looking for a bigger place? If you find one, I’d love to have a shot at your apartment. It’s one of the sweetest one-bedroom apartments I’ve seen that’s within walking distance of the Planet.”

“No, we aren’t planning to move. You won’t believe this

but...”

Suddenly there was a call from the vicinity of the elevator. “Clark, Lois, is it all right if we come on in?” It was Martha.

“Of course,” Clark said quickly. “First let me introduce you to Perry so he won’t wonder who the strangers are in his newsroom.”

As Clark led Martha and Jonathan toward the editor’s office, Jimmy asked Lois in a whisper, “Who’s that?”

“I’m sorry, Jimmy. I should have introduced you. Those are Clark’s parents.”

Jimmy’s eyes went wide. “His parents? I thought they were dead.”

“So did we. But they showed up at our apartment last night. It turns out that they’d left Smallville before the Nightfall fragment destroyed the town. They were headed this way, but got sidetracked and cut off in an isolated part of West Virginia.”

“Wow,” Jimmy said, barely above a whisper. “How’s CK taking it?”

“He’s doing okay,” she said cautiously. “He’s happy they’re alive, but it’s hard for all of them because he just doesn’t remember them very much. They’re all trying hard but... well, it’s just hard.”

“How about you?” Jimmy asked.

“I have it easy. The hardest part is filling in the blanks for both sides.”

“No,” Jimmy countered. “I mean how are his parents handling the fact that you two are married?”

Lois felt herself smile. “That’s been better than I could have hoped. They’ve both gone on and on about how much Clark talked about me and they seem really happy that we’re together. It’s nice to know that part of his memory was right. Not that it would make any difference now between me and Clark, but it sure does make it easier that his parents already knew how he felt.”

As Clark started toward Perry’s office with his parents in tow, he heard Jimmy asking Lois who his parents were. He mentally kicked himself for not introducing them. He had to wonder if that was partly because in many ways they were strangers to him. He knocked on Perry’s door, and his editor motioned him to enter immediately.

“It’s about time, Kent. Where have you and Lois been this morning? I hope it’s something I can print.”

“Sorry, Perry. But I don’t think so. I’d like you to meet my parents.”

Perry’s mouth dropped open. “Your parents? But...”

While Perry was looking for words, Jonathan stepped up to Perry’s desk. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. White. I’m Jonathan and this is Martha,” he added indicating his wife standing next to him. “From all that we’ve heard from Clark and Lois, we feel like we know you.”

Perry reached across his desk and shook Jonathan’s hand and then Martha’s. It was clear that Perry was still in shock, but that only lasted a moment.

“They arrived last night,” Clark said. “They were stuck in an isolated valley in West Virginia. They’ve been there since Nightfall hit.”

“Well that’s great news,” Perry said finally. “I guess I don’t need to tell you how worried Clark was.”

“We just wish we could have gotten word out,” Martha said. “I would have never expected the crazy path that led us from Smallville to Metropolis.”

“That’s right. You don’t have a home to go back to. Do you have a place to stay here in Metropolis?”

“We’re staying with Clark and Lois for now,” Jonathan answered. “We spent some time this morning looking for an apartment, but no luck so far.”

“I’m afraid that you’re going to have a hard time with that,” Perry said. “There are still people living in partially destroyed and burned out buildings for lack of anything better. Also, unless you have a few suitcases full of gold, you might find rates to be a little high for anything that does come open.”

Martha turned to Clark. “Is it really that bad?”

Clark looked embarrassed. “I’m afraid so. I had hoped that things were getting better. That’s why we went looking this morning. But what Perry says is pretty much my understanding. In any case, you and Dad are welcome to stay with us for as long as you need. You know that.”

“I might have a better idea,” Perry cut in. “Alice and I have a spare room that we’ve been sharing with people here at the Planet who needed a place to stay. Well, the Andersons, they’re a young family that have been staying with us, just found a place of their own. I was about to post that we had an opening. If you’re interested, the room is yours.”

“We can’t do that,” Martha said. “We’ll be fine with Clark and Lois. You should save that room for someone who really needs it.”

“Mrs. Kent...” Perry started.

“Please, call me Martha,” Martha interjected.

“Martha,” Perry corrected. “Everyone here has a place to stay. We’re at the point where people will take a room like ours to improve their situation. I’ve seen Clark and Lois’s apartment. It’s barely big enough for the two of them. All four of you living there isn’t an answer for more than a night or two. Besides, for Alice and me, most of our guests have been younger folks. It’ll be nice to have some company a little closer to our age.”

Martha and Jonathan looked at each other, and then Jonathan looked back at Perry. “If you’re sure...”

Perry burst into a big smile. “Absolutely!”

His obvious enthusiasm evoked a grin from Jonathan. “Well, okay then. After all we’ve been through, a little stability will be nice.”

Perry’s eyes suddenly went wide. “All you’ve been through?” Perry turned to Clark. “Clark, you know what kind of stories we’ve been running on surviving Nightfall. From what you know, is this that kind of story?”

Clark thought for a moment. “Sure. In fact, if we told it properly, it might be one of the best.”

Perry turned to Martha and Jonathan. “How about it? We’ve been running a series of stories about how people got through Nightfall. Our real focus has been on people who made it through by helping or getting help from each other. The very fact that you made it here leads me to believe that getting help is probably a significant part of your adventure.”

“It sure is,” Jonathan said. “We’d have never made it without the help of our neighbor and his whole family.”

“Perfect,” Perry exclaimed. “Would you be willing to share your story? I promise we’ll do right by you.”

“If you think anyone will be interested...” Martha offered defensively.

“Mom, these stories have been one of the best received series we’ve run since Nightfall. The way things are now, people feel a strong connection to stories like this.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Martha said to Perry. “Should we sit down with Clark to go over the story?”

“No,” Perry answered. “Clark is too close to you and the story. If you don’t mind, I’m going to have you work with one of our other staff writers.” Then Perry turned to Clark. “Clark, could you send Smith in and I’ll get him started with your parents.”

“So what kind of food do you like?” Clark heard Perry ask from behind as he left the office.

“We need to do something about this,” Clark whispered to Lois as they waited for the press conference to start.

“I agree. But I don’t know what to do,” Lois whispered back.

At that moment the mayor and a few members of the city council climbed the steps to a small temporary podium. The mayor walked over to the microphone and tapped it. “Is this on?” he asked.

The resulting chuckle from the gathered reporters and passers-by must have provided him with the information he needed and he began to speak. “As you know, we’ve been considering the problem of how to best honor Superman. While the Nightfall intercept did not go as well as hoped, there can be little doubt that had Superman not sacrificed his life for the rest of us, it would have been much worse. Since Metropolis was his home, we feel that it would be proper to honor him in some way. Therefore, on this very spot we will erect a statue in his honor. We know this is a pitifully small symbol, given his sacrifice, but we’re sure he’d rather we spent even that money to help the people of our city — of his city — to recover from Nightfall.”

The mayor signaled a worker near a table in front of the podium. The worker then pulled back a screen that had concealed a table. “This is a model of the plan for the park with the statue. There are also information sheets that outline the project. That is all. Good day.”

“He’s not taking questions?” Clark asked Lois.

“They are probably afraid of someone asking a loaded question about Superman actually being responsible for Nightfall. You know that there are still plenty of wackos out there who think Superman caused the Nightfall disaster on purpose.”

They worked their way to the table with the information. Clark looked at the model for the statue while Lois headed for the end of the table and picked up copies of the project information sheet. The model depicted Superman as if he was in-flight or just taking off the ground. Clark was still contemplating the model when Lois joined him. “Did I really look like that?” he whispered to his wife.

Lois looked at the model carefully. “It’s a good likeness,” she said, not bothering to keep her voice low. “I probably saw Superman up close as much as anyone, and that’s pretty much what he looked like.”

“I’m glad to hear you think so,” came a voice from behind them.

Lois turned to find the mayor standing right there. “Hello, Mr. Mayor. When you said no questions, I didn’t think you were going to stick around.”

“Sorry about that,” he said. “My chief of communications didn’t want to risk giving an opening to someone with an anti-Superman grudge.”

“That’s what we thought,” Clark said.

“What about you, Mr. Kent? You also knew Superman. Do you agree that we captured his likeness?”

“I’m afraid that I’m not a good person to ask,” Clark replied. “I was involved in an accident around the time of Nightfall that resulted in permanent memory loss. Among the things that are gone are all of my memories of Superman.”

“That’s right,” the mayor said, slapping his forehead. “I remember the story now. You were exposed to the same gas that killed Superman.”

“Yes,” Clark replied.

The mayor must have picked up the dark undercurrent of his curt answer. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kent. I didn’t mean to bring up such a trying experience.”

Clark shook it off. The mayor was just trying to be friendly. After all, he was a politician. “That’s all right, Mr. Mayor. Sometimes I’m more sensitive about what I lost that day. I really have nothing to complain about. One consequence of that day was my relationship with my wife.” Clark reached out and took Lois’s hand.

“You’re a lucky man. Well, I need to talk with some other

people before I head back to city hall.” The Mayor turned to Lois and gave her a nod of farewell. “Ms. Lane,” he said quickly then headed away.

Lois moved in beside him. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I guess,” Clark replied half-heartedly. “This whole thing has me upset. We need to talk about Superman tonight.”

They were just finishing the dinner dishes when Jonathan and Martha came in the front door. “We’re back,” Martha called out cheerily as she started to remove her coat.

“Hi, Martha,” Lois replied, as she started to dry her hands from helping with the dishes. “How was dinner at Perry’s?”

“It was wonderful,” Martha answered. “If that was any indication of what it’ll be like, we’re going to enjoy staying with the Whites.”

“Is the room big enough?” Clark asked.

“Sure,” Jonathan replied as he finished hanging his coat and headed for the sofa. “The room is more than big enough for what we brought with us. And the house... well, no offense, but for four people it will work a lot better than this apartment.”

“Of course,” Lois said. “We’re happy to make room here, but it is awfully small for the four of us.”

“But we’re going to miss you,” Martha said as she sat next to Jonathan on the sofa.

“You can still see us every day,” Clark replied.

“And we want to see you as much as possible,” Lois added quickly.

“I know,” Martha said. “And hopefully it won’t be too long until we can get our own place.”

“How did it go at the Department of Records?” Lois asked.

“I’m afraid that’s going to take a while,” Martha replied.

“Apparently a lot of people have tried to take advantage of the disruptions from Nightfall to steal other people’s identities.”

“We did a story on that,” Lois explained. “I’m not sure it’s fair to say that there have been a lot, but there were enough that the process to validate people’s correct identity was made much tougher.”

“I’ll say,” Jonathan added. “The people were sympathetic, but there are just so many things they have to verify. The lady said that it could take more than a month before we will be undeclared dead.”

Lois giggled at his phrase. “I guess that is better than being declared undead. My husband is already a space alien. I don’t need zombies for my in-laws.”

The all chuckled at that as Lois settled into the chair across from Clark’s parents. “When will you be moving in to Perry’s spare room?”

“Tomorrow,” Jonathan answered. “The room is empty tonight, but Alice wanted some time to get it ready.”

“We’re glad you’re here tonight. What we need to talk about affects us all,” Lois said.

“You told us it was important, so we made sure to get back early,” Jonathan replied.

“We—” Clark began, as he sat on the arm of Lois’s chair, “—think it’s time for Superman to return. My powers seem to be completely back and I’ve been hearing calls for help for more than a week now.”

“That’s why you invented Superman,” Martha said. “You never could stand by when people were getting hurt around you.”

“That’s one thing we wanted to ask you about,” Lois said.

“We don’t know what Clark did before Metropolis. I mean, how come no one ever heard of him before? I’d expect that there would be stories about a person with amazing abilities stopping crime and catching criminals even if he wasn’t wearing a bright costume.”

“That’s because he didn’t do very much in the way of stopping crime until he came to Metropolis,” Martha answered.

“At least, he never told us about any of that.” She turned to face her son. “Clark, you were always helping people. I don’t know how many accidents you prevented or how many people you helped, but that’s how you used your powers.”

“Sure,” Jonathan cut in. “You did a little of this around Smallville, but there just wasn’t much near home that caused you to use your abilities that way. That changed when you spent those years traveling.”

“It was always the same,” Martha took over the narrative. “You’d show up unexpectedly and tell us that you’d been seen doing something and it was time to move again.”

“You mean I got caught using my powers?” Clark asked.

“All the time,” Jonathan answered quickly.

Martha covered Jonathan’s hand with her own. “Well, not that often,” she clarified. “But often enough that you were frustrated that you had to move.”

“So why’d I invent Superman when I came to Metropolis?”

“I believe that part of it was that you were ready to try to establish something more permanent in your life,” Jonathan speculated. “But your mom and I were pretty sure you’d found another reason to stay in Metropolis.”

“Another reason?” Clark asked.

Martha laughed softly. “Well, you may not have your memories, but in many ways you’re exactly the same. Clark, your Dad and I were sure right from the start that the real reason you decided that you had to stay in Metropolis is sitting in the chair next to you.”

“Oh,” Clark said, blushing as he took Lois’s hand in his.

It was Jonathan that gave Clark the out. “So, if you’re going to bring Superman back, what did you want to talk with us about?”

“Well, there are two things,” Clark started. “First, is there anything that you can tell me about what I did and why. Lois knows the ‘what’ pretty well, at least since I created Superman, but we don’t know anything about the time before that. I’d also like to know your perspective on why I did the things that I did as Superman.”

Jonathan and Martha looked at each other. After a moment of silence Jonathan started. “It all started when your super hearing started working. You told us that you couldn’t stand by not doing anything when you could hear people who needed help. Before Metropolis, it usually meant preventing an accident or rescuing someone. You told me once that from the time you first arrived in Metropolis, you heard calls for help day and night. Almost every time you went to help, it was some kind of crime.”

When Jonathan took a breath, Martha took over. “I remember that talk,” she said. “You never wanted to be Metropolis’s enforcer. You were worried that people would think you were like that crazy bat-guy in Gotham City.”

“So I didn’t set out to just stop crime?” Clark asked.

“No,” Jonathan replied quickly. “You were always happy to help, but it seemed to us that you were frustrated with that role.”

“Clark,” Martha added, “I think you were trying to figure out how to help in other ways.”

“But there are so many calls for help,” Clark pleaded. “Since my special hearing has come back, I hear them all the time.”

“There’s only so much you can do,” Lois said. “Think about it, how many crimes do you think you prevented on any day?”

“Based on what I’ve read, it seemed like four or five,” Clark answered.

“Pretty close,” Lois replied. “You were averaging a little over seven interventions per day. Do you know how many violent crimes there are in Metropolis every day?” Lois asked her husband.

“More?” he asked.

“I did an article just before you started at the Planet. If you look at the data from last year, there was an average of a hundred

and twenty assaults per day in the city.”

“Every day?” Martha asked in shock.

“Yeah,” Lois replied in a resigned tone. “Metropolis isn’t the nicest place in the world.” Then she turned back to her husband. “And that’s only the violent crimes. If you look at the property crimes, robbery and burglary, then you have about six hundred more incidents every day.”

“Lois, you just said that every day there were more than seven hundred crimes in the city.”

“And those are only the ones that were reported.”

“And I only stopped about one percent of those,” Clark said morosely. “Why did I bother?”

Lois pulled him into a hug. “Because you care. And because you can help. It may not have been a big number, but your being here helped everyone feel like there was hope.”

“But only seven per day…” he said, shaking his head. “And you said that even to do that much, I was running off all the time?”

“Yes, you would disappear at the strangest times. Then you’d turn up with a Superman story. I have to believe I would have figured out what was going on after another month or so.”

“You probably would have,” he agreed. “But I don’t think I would have minded. I’m sure I wanted to tell you. But if I’m going to bring Superman back, do I go back to doing it that way?”

She looked at him intently. “You have to make that decision. I’ll support whatever you decide.”

He considered her words. “This,” he said, pointing at his wedding band, “says that we are in this together. I’ll take responsibility for the decision, but I need your advice and support. As the wife of Clark and Superman, I need you to tell me what you want me to do.”

Lois was quiet for several minutes. “I think you should focus on helping in emergencies, like fires and stuff. As for crime, I know you. You’ll never stand by and let something happen right in front of you, but I think you should try to leave most of the crime-stopping to the police.”

Clark considered her words. “If your numbers are correct, I was already leaving most of it to them.” He paused for a few seconds. “I think I’m going to try to cut the crime-fighting back. One thing I think the bat-guy has right is that he mostly works at night. During the day I think I’ll try to only get involved if it’s something big or if it’s right in front of me. Then I’ll do some random patrols at night to make sure the bad guys know I’m around.”

“What about accidents and rescues?” Lois asked.

“Honey, I have to do those. If a building is on fire, I can’t let people get hurt.”

“I was pretty sure that would be your answer. I think you have a good plan. We’ll see how it works out, but you’ll have my full support.”

“Then I guess tomorrow morning I’ll start looking for something to do for Superman’s return.”

“Son,” Martha interjected, “as soon as you make an appearance, you’re going to have to explain where you’ve been.”

“That’s the other reason we wanted you two here tonight. I was hoping that between the four of us we would come up with a good story. Lois and I have been talking about it, and, to be honest, we didn’t like any of our own ideas.”

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Chapter 3 — Swarm

“What do you think this is about?” Lois asked as she leaned in close to her husband. They had been in the process of getting out the door this morning when they’d gotten a call from the Planet. EPRAD had called an early morning news conference and Perry wanted the two of them to cover it.

“I don’t know,” Clark replied. “I’ve been trying to listen for

people talking, but the only voices I can pick up are from the reporters around us. By the way, none of them know what this is about either. If there's anyone here who knows what's going on, they aren't talking about it."

"Can you see who's inside the building?" Lois asked.

"I hadn't thought to look," Clark answered. "Give me a second."

She saw Clark pull his glasses down and stare intently in the direction of the building. After a moment, he lifted his glasses back into place. "There are a lot of military people in there. Is that normal for EPRAD?"

"No," she said flatly. "The only times that have happened before have been for military launches and... Nightfall."

"Military launches?" Clark replied in a puzzled voice. "I didn't think EPRAD had launch capability for any kind of satellite."

"It doesn't," she replied. "That's what has me worried. But I have no idea what else this could be about. I can't believe that there could be another Nightfall-like asteroid. Last time they said that it was a once-in-a-million-years type of event."

"I remember reading that in the Nightfall coverage," Clark said. "So why do you think we're here?"

"I don't know. But it can't be good."

At that moment, a door opened and a group of men came out of the building. There were four in all. Two of them wore military uniforms and the other two were in business suits. As soon as she saw the men in the suits, the word 'scientists' popped into her head. They all headed directly to the podium. "I don't recognize any of them," Lois told Clark. "I think the ones in suits are scientists."

"Why do you say that," Clark asked.

"I don't know. Something about the way they dress... or maybe the way they move. I may be wrong, but as soon as I saw them, that's what came to mind."

The men climbed the few steps to the podium and went to the cluster of microphones. The military officer with the general's stars stepped up to address the crowd. "Thank you for coming," he opened. "I'm General Isaacson. The scientists at EPRAD have discovered a cloud of asteroids heading for the Earth. They're approaching from the direction of the Sun, and will be here in approximately two days. Since we have no intercept option, we will be working in conjunction with EPRAD scientists to determine the places most in danger and will be evacuating those towns and cities. We will all take questions at the end of this briefing, but for now I'll turn you over to Dr. Aames who will handle the scientific briefing. Dr. Aames."

The general stepped aside as Dr. Aames approached the microphone cluster. "Now I remember him," Lois said. "I should have recognized him immediately. He's head of the EPRAD Anderson Center. He was the main guy that handled most of the Nightfall briefings."

Before Clark could respond, Dr. Aames began to speak. "Good morning. Approximately twelve hours ago, we picked up something unusual in the direction of the Sun during a normal sweep of our near-Earth space radar. Our instruments detected what appeared to be some sort of cloud moving at high speed on a course that will intercept the Earth. Since that time, we have been studying it with both optical and electronic sensors. The cloud consists of many thousands of — for lack of a better term — rocks. The largest are up to several hundred meters across and the smallest are too small for our instruments to measure. They are traveling in a group at a velocity of approximately one hundred kilometers per second. Due to the high velocity of these asteroids, those that penetrate the atmosphere will do an enormous amount of damage. We are still developing data, but we already know that there are at least forty-seven of these bodies between one hundred and three hundred meters in

diameter. There are many — possibly thousands — smaller than that, but the majority of those will burn up in the Earth's atmosphere and pose no threat."

Lois felt Clark's hand as he reached for hers. She glanced in his direction, but his attention was all on the announcement. He had a look of determination, but the way he held her hand told her something else. It was as if she could hear his thoughts. There was no doubt in her mind that her husband was thinking, 'here we go again.' She composed herself, gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, and turned her attention back to the front just as Dr. Aames finished.

Dr. Aames looked over at the general and stepped back. Then the general stepped up to the microphone. "We will be issuing a press release with all of the information that we have available. I will take questions now."

At first, the shouting left no room for a reply but within seconds the questions became clear.

"Is this related to Nightfall?"

The general nodded to Dr. Aames. "Yes," Dr. Aames said as he stepped forward. "We have analyzed the speed and trajectory of the cloud and determined that it is part of what remains of Nightfall. When Superman shattered that large asteroid, some of the debris was driven toward the sun. To our great misfortune, this group of rocks narrowly missed the sun and instead followed a sun-skimming orbit, which has sent them back in our direction. Unfortunately, the Earth is in exactly the wrong place."

"What damage will the impacts cause?"

Dr. Aames took this one. "The largest bodies, those over a hundred meters in diameter, will have the destructive power of exceptionally large atomic bombs. Because of the high velocity that these objects are traveling, each asteroid is far more destructive than an equivalent chunk of the original Nightfall asteroid."

"Why are they going so fast?"

"They were accelerated by the energy of the collision of the intercept ship that Superman drove into Nightfall. Remember, the original Nightfall impact took place at a velocity of nearly a thousand miles a second. This group was thrown from that collision with a large portion of that energy. As I said a moment ago, these happened to have followed a sun-skimming orbit and they're now heading back with all of their original, post-impact velocity."

"What is the government doing about this?"

General Isaacson stepped up to the microphones. "We're working to update the shelters that survived Nightfall and those lists will be available starting in a few hours. We're also working to plot the impact points of the largest of the asteroids. Even though the time is short, we will be recommending that everyone at those locations try to get at least twenty-five miles away. As Dr. Aames said, the impacts will have the energy of atomic bombs. There won't be any radiation, but the explosive concussion will be immense."

"But what are you doing to stop them?"

The general's expression turned cold. "Nothing. We simply don't have anything to use against a threat like this. Even if we had the launch capability that existed before Nightfall, there would still be nothing we could do. If we had rockets to shoot at the cloud, the thousands of small rocks would prevent us from reaching the largest asteroids." He took a deep breath of resignation. "They are going to hit the Earth and there just isn't anything we can do to prevent it."

Just as he finished his statement, a door opened and several men came out of the building carrying a few stacks of paper. "These are copies of the announcement with the information we have as of an hour ago. The only information missing are the projected impact points for the large asteroid segments. That information will be released as soon as we have accurate

information. We expect that to be approximately twelve hours from now.”

Lois hurried over to the stack of information sheets and retrieved copies for her and Clark. She returned to find Clark grim-faced. When she offered him a copy of the data, he didn't take it. “I have to do something,” he said, determination clear in his voice.

“I know,” she replied, fighting to maintain her composure for what was sure to come. “We can't talk here. Let's go.”

Bernie Klein wondered what Lois Lane could want to talk to him about. He hadn't heard from her since they had closed the books on Nightfall several months ago. It couldn't be a coincidence that she had contacted him only hours after the existence of the Nightfall asteroid group had been revealed to the public.

Despite the fact that he had plenty of connections with EPRAD, he'd been as surprised as anyone at the announcement of the cluster of asteroids that was bearing down upon them. The media seemed to have already decided on a name. They were calling it the Swarm.

What could she want? He was an accomplished scientist, but except for the Nightfall mission, he had very little involvement in matters related to space exploration. His real specialty the past year had been Superman. Since Superman had died, Bernie had been looking for a new area of specialization. His best guess was that Lois wanted to ask if Superman would be able to make a difference if he was still alive.

At that moment there was a knock on his office door. “Come,” he said, loud enough to be heard through the closed door.

The door opened and the administrative assistant for his group came in. “Dr. Klein, Ms. Lane is here to see you.”

“Thanks, Judy. Please show her in.” The young redhead stepped back and Lois entered the room.

“Good afternoon, Lois,” he greeted her. “I hope you and Clark have been well.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “We have.”

“So what brings you here today? I have to believe this is somehow related to the asteroid cloud.”

“When we were doing our investigation into Nightfall, you once gave Clark and me a tour of STAR Labs. I remember seeing a storage area in the back of the building. It had a door that led to a fenced area.”

“I know the place you mean,” Bernie replied, slightly confused. “What about it?”

“We need to go there now. There's something that you need to see in that room.”

“But Lois, I've seen the inventory of the boxes in that room. There isn't anything interesting there.”

“Bernie, I assure you that there is. Please indulge me on this. It would be best if we didn't waste any time.”

Bernie started to object, but he knew enough about Lois to realize that would be futile. “Okay,” he said in a resigned tone. “I can't imagine what you think we'll find there.”

She stood, obviously impatient to get started. “Trust me. I'm sure that you will agree that it was worth the trouble.”

The trip to the room only took a minute or two. The door was locked but Bernie had the key and in only a moment, they were inside. Once they were in the room Lois walked deliberately around the room looking at the walls and ceiling. Then she went back to the door they had used to enter and locked it. “Lois, what's going on?” Bernie asked, suddenly nervous.

She didn't reply. Instead, she crossed the room and unlocked the door that led outside. She opened the door and looked quickly outside. “You know that we can't leave that way,” Bernie said. “That's a gated area with our large liquid nitrogen storage tank.

There's a gate, but it's padlocked from the outside.”

Lois left the door ajar, stepped deliberately away from the door and turned back to him. “I don't intend to leave.”

“Then wha...” Bernie started. Before he could finish he heard a whooshing sound. Standing in front of him was a dead man. “Superman?” he sputtered.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Klein. I apologize for the cloak-and-dagger nature of this meeting. I needed to talk with someone that would be in a position to help me, but I wanted it to be kept as secret as possible.”

“Help you?” Bernie asked. “I don't understand. And where have you been? How are you alive?”

“Much of that will have to wait. Briefly, I was severely injured during the Nightfall mission. I made it back to Earth, but my powers were gone and I had the same kind of amnesia as Ms. Lane's husband. Until very recently, I had no idea that I was Superman. I was just another displaced and injured person trying to survive after Nightfall. My abilities returned only a short time ago. I was considering how to return to helping people when I heard to the news of the Swarm. I want to help if I can.”

Bernie was struggling to absorb all this. “Why... why me? And Lois, what's your part in this?”

“Superman contacted us — Clark and I — about a week ago. He had seen our stories about Nightfall and recognized the similarity between the amnesia that he'd experienced and what Clark went through.”

“You see,” Superman added, “my memory is completely gone. I have no recollection of any of my activities as Superman. I needed someone to talk to that knew me as Superman. The fact that Lois and Clark had also been through the amnesia made them the perfect choice.”

“So you don't remember meeting me?” Bernie asked.

“No. I know through Lois and her stories that I met you just before the Nightfall mission, but I have no recollection of it.”

“So why me?”

“Because you have connections to EPRAD and, according to Ms. Lane, you have access to the Nightfall mission technology. If I'm to have any chance to do anything about the Swarm, I will need both of those.”

“Why didn't you go directly to EPRAD?”

“Because I don't know if this will succeed,” Superman said. “And, after what happened with Nightfall, I want as few people as possible involved. Based on what I've seen of the Swarm, if I can reach it, there should be something that I can do. Lois has told me that you have duplicates of the Nightfall mission pack. Can you outfit me for a mission?”

“Yes. All of the remaining Nightfall mission equipment is in this building. I even have the communication link ground station.”

“What else will I need for a mission to deal with the Swarm?”

Bernie thought for a moment. “I need to get the equipment set up. Then I need a live link to the EPRAD communication system. How many people can I bring in on this?”

“None,” Superman said abruptly. “At least, none if we can avoid it.”

“I don't think that's possible,” Bernie countered. “Setting up the equipment alone will take several people most of a day.”

“What if you have one person who is both super strong and super-fast?”

“Oh... I guess I won't need as much help as I thought.”

“Good, when can we get started?”

Bernie thought a moment. “You said that you want this to be as private as possible, so I'll need to reserve one of the sealed labs and have the equipment moved there. I also need to set up a link to EPRAD so that I can tap into the telemetry that they are using to track the Swarm. Can you come back in early this

evening?”

“Can we afford to wait that long?” Lois asked. “The Swarm is moving awfully fast.”

“Yes. The soonest you should start will be early tomorrow morning. I want all of our tracking stations to be in line with the Swarm while you are out there working. We can spend the early evening setting up. That will give you overnight to rest or do whatever you need to get ready. Tomorrow morning the Swarm will still be roughly twenty-four hours out. Based on what you did during Nightfall, it will take—” Bernie pulled out a calculator and ran the numbers. “—approximately ninety minutes for you to reach the Swarm. The survival pack can sustain you for five hours. That will give you two hours dealing with the swarm. That should be plenty of time to deal with all of the largest fragments and many of the smaller ones.”

“Check the connections in the back of that third panel,” Bernie told his assistant. He never imagined that Superman would be helping him set up equipment. Then again, he never imagined that he’d be called in to be the sole provider for technical support for a mission to save millions of people. And after what happened during Nightfall, he never imagined that he would be seeing, much less working with, Superman.

“Try it now,” Superman called from behind the panel.

Bernie checked the equipment again. “That did it,” he said. It had only taken a few minutes to realize that when working with Superman there was no need to shout. Superman could hear every word no matter how softly he said it.

Bernie adjusted the image on the screen in front of him. It looked harmless enough. A series of points that looked all too much like a simple star field. “What are we seeing?” Superman asked from behind him. “Which of those points are asteroids and which are stars?” he asked.

“This is radar, not an optical image, so everything you see is part of the asteroid field.”

“Oh,” Superman replied. “Do you think you will be able to use this information to guide me?”

“Absolutely,” Bernie replied. “Watch this.” He adjusted the directional filter and most of the points except for the ones in the center of the image disappeared. “What I just did was to filter out those bodies that are not on a collision course with Earth. There is no reason to waste your time with ones that will miss us.”

“Good,” Superman said. “Can you tell me which are most dangerous?”

Bernie made another adjustment. The image seemed to zoom in so that the points filled the screen again. Then he made another adjustment and the lights started going out. He continued until only three lights were left. “Those are the three largest asteroids. They are all approximately 300 meters in diameter.”

“And I don’t need to try to destroy them?” Superman asked.

“Correct. All you need to do is push them sideways to change their direction. Based on the abilities you demonstrated before Nightfall, you should just give each one a good shove to the side and move on to the next one.”

“How can we be sure I pushed it hard enough?”

“I’ll be using the same directional filter that I am now. You will be working about thirty light-seconds out. Since the radar is being sent constantly, about thirty seconds after you achieve your deflection, that asteroid will disappear from my screen.”

“So should I wait for confirmation?”

“I don’t think so. We want to deflect as many as possible, so I don’t think you want to wait around. Remember that I will know thirty seconds after you achieve a deflection. But you won’t hear my confirmation for another thirty seconds after that. I don’t think we can afford to spend a minute on each rock you move.”

“But according to the information that I saw, there are only forty-seven large asteroids. That should leave plenty of time.”

“Those are only the largest ones,” Bernie replied. “We also need to take care of as many of the smaller ones as we can. We know that Nightfall was a very dense body so we have to assume that any individual fragment could be hard rock or possibly even iron. That means that in a worst-case scenario, anything larger than about ten meters across could reach the ground intact with devastating consequences.”

“Devastating?” Superman asked. “Do I need to stop more of the Swarm to protect all the people?”

Bernie struggled for a reply. “Are you asking how small you would have to go to make sure no one got hurt?”

“Yes. If I’m going to be up there, I want to prevent all of the ground impacts.”

“Superman, to do that you would have to divert everything above a meter in diameter.”

“Then that’s what I need to do,” Superman replied. “That should be our mission goal.”

“I understand what you want to do, but that isn’t going to be possible. There are thousands of rocks in the Swarm. You simply don’t have time to divert them all. The best we can do is to divert as many as we can. That’s why it’s important to work as quickly as possible. I’ll re-adjust the sensor every few minutes to only pick up the largest of the ones still heading at us.”

Superman was quiet for several long minutes. “How long do I have?”

“The survival pack was designed to give you five hours of air. I wish I would have known this was going to happen. If we had more time, I could have modified the pack to use the section that Luthor added for the Kryptonite gas, to carry another hour of air. Unfortunately, that isn’t possible in the time we have.”

“What if I did two trips?”

Bernie considered that. “It might be possible,” he said. “You could certainly get a lot more. All we would need to do would be to swap in new air tanks and a fresh battery pack. Do you think that you’re going to be strong enough to do a second trip? When we were preparing for the Nightfall mission, we never looked at your ability to do several trips.”

“If that’s what it takes, then I’ll have to be able to do it,” Superman replied grimly.

“Superman, please,” Bernie implored, “If you divert everything above the ten meter limit, then while there will probably still be damage and injuries, it won’t be a disaster. Think about the good you can do if you survive.”

After a long pause, Superman said, “All right. But just in case I have the strength, could you please make sure to have extra tanks and battery packs ready?”

“I will,” Bernie said.

“So what else do we need to cover tonight?” Superman asked.

This was the moment Bernie had been dreading. “There is one more thing,” he started nervously. “If we’re going to be successful, I’m going to have to involve a few other people.”

Superman’s face turned stern. “You know I don’t want that.”

“I understand,” Bernie said quickly. “But there are two problems. First, we need someone high-up in EPRAD to know that I have a mission going on.”

“Why?” Superman asked.

“Once you start deflecting the Swarm fragments, EPRAD and the military are going to want to know what’s going on. Someone might decide to cut external data feeds to try to contain the information. We need someone high up at EPRAD who knows how important it is not to cut our feed.”

“I guess I understand. What can we do?” Superman asked.

“I know Dr. Ames at EPRAD. I would like your permission to tell him that I’m heading an experimental operation that might be able to mitigate the Swarm. All he needs to know is that it’s critical that the STAR Labs feed not be interrupted.”

“So you wouldn’t tell him about me?”

“No. I believe I can extract a promise from Aames to remain silent and keep the STAR Labs feed alive until it’s all over. I think this is necessary for the success of the mission.”

Superman was quiet for a long moment. “Okay. I understand. Is that all?”

“Not quite,” Bernie answered. “This other issue is less critical, but would help me.”

“What is it?” Superman asked.

“Your mission will last many hours. If you do two missions, we will be at this for a very long time.”

“What are you saying?” the Man of Steel asked.

“Superman, you may have super powers, but I don’t. I will... well, I’ll need to use the rest room. And I worry about getting tired.”

“What do you suggest?”

“One of my colleagues here at the labs, Alyson Summers, could assist. She is a huge fan of yours, and I’ve already made sure that she will be in tomorrow.”

“You’ll vouch for her?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then. But no one else.”

“Agreed.”

“Fine,” Superman said. “Is that it?”

“Yes, that’s all. That door over there—” Bernie pointed at the door in the back of the room that Superman had used to enter, “—will be your entrance and exit point for this lab. The mission pack is ready to go now and we’ve tested the comm. link. The equipment here is all set. I’m going to head home and try to get some sleep. I suggest that you do whatever you need to do to prepare yourself. I assume you have a place to stay?”

“Yes. I have...” Superman cut himself off and looked suddenly cautious. “I have things to do before tomorrow morning.”

The apartment was quieter than Lois could remember. And the bed was cold. Lois didn’t remember the bed being so cold before. It hadn’t been that long since she’d slept alone, but just the same, it felt like forever. She really had changed a lot in the months she’d been with Clark. Lois had grown up convinced that she didn’t need a man in her life. Up until a few months ago, that decision had been easy. But whether she needed Clark or not — not a question she intended to pursue — she sure wanted him in her life... and in her bed.

Lois looked at the clock. It was after midnight and she’d been in bed trying to fall asleep for over an hour. It figured that tonight was the night that Clark’s parents had been scheduled to move in with the Whites. Martha had offered to stay, but Alice and Perry were expecting them tonight. Since Clark was going to be at STAR Labs all evening, Lois had insisted that Martha and Jonathan go ahead with the plan for moving to the Whites’.

There was a rushing of air and suddenly Clark was in the room in his Superman suit. It was nice to have him home. “Hi, honey. I missed you,” she said. He smiled back at her. She loved it when he looked at her like that. He didn’t need to say, ‘I love you.’ That look said it much louder than words. However, as much as she liked that smile, something was wrong. He looked worried. “Did everything go okay at STAR Labs?”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “It’s all set.”

“Clark, tell me what’s wrong.”

He sat on the edge of the bed. As soon as he sat down she reached for his hand. He looked at their clasped hands for a few seconds before he spoke. “Bernie says that no matter what I do, I can’t stop all of the rocks.”

“How hard could it be to push forty-seven rocks aside?” Lois asked.

“It’s not forty-seven. Those are only the large ones. Bernie

told me that while they may not be city-destroyers, there are thousands — possibly many thousands — of asteroids that could reach the ground. Our plan is to start with the largest and keep working until I need to return because the survival pack runs out. Since every rock that reaches the ground is a potential killer, every one that I leave behind could kill a person. Or worse, any one of those could kill a family.”

“Is that what has you so upset?”

“Yes. I let people down last time, and now it feels like it’s going to happen again.”

“Clark, if not for what you might be able to do, we’d be looking at a major disaster. Have you seen the updated projections for the destructive force of those large asteroids?”

“No,” Clark replied.

“There was an article in the late edition. The biggest asteroid, the three hundred meter one, is projected to land in France. Based on the information I’ve seen, that one impact will kill millions and decimate a large part of that country.” She let that sink in for a moment. “So don’t tell me you’re letting anyone down. Maybe you can’t stop every rock, but the fact that you’re here means that a few days from now millions of people will be alive who wouldn’t otherwise.”

“But I have to start back with an hour and a half of air. In the time it will take for me to return I could divert hundreds of rocks.”

She felt a chill run through her. “Please don’t tell me you’re thinking about not coming back.”

“No, it’s nothing like that. But I could fly more missions. Bernie told me that he has supplies that would allow us to re-outfit the survival pack for a second trip.”

“Okay,” Lois said, the relief clearly present in her voice. “But are you strong enough for two trips?”

“I don’t know. I feel like I have to be. How can I decide that I’m too tired to make another trip when failing to do so will cost lives?”

They sat silently for several minutes. “Clark, you know that I’ll never argue that even one life isn’t important, but there are other issues here. A minute ago I talked about what might have happened if you weren’t here for this... return of Nightfall. If you were to push too hard and not come back, who’s going to be here to save us next time the world is threatened?”

“There probably won’t be a next time,” Clark countered.

“If it was all about probability, then there wouldn’t have been a first or second time either. But even without another world-threatening disaster, you still need to be here to help with everyday emergencies. From what you just said, it sounds like once you’ve taken care of all the larger asteroids, the others are threats to individuals or individual dwellings?”

“That’s what Bernie said,” Clark verified.

“So if you take out a thousand of those, you have potentially saved what... at most a couple of hundred people? But if you’re here and help clear a high-rise in a fire or rescue a ship in a storm, won’t you save that many each time? And you can do that for many years to come. Don’t you see that it’s not just for you and me? It’s to everyone’s benefit that you make sure you survive the mission.”

He looked at her sheepishly. “I guess I’d better make sure I come back.”

“Yes. You’d better make sure.”

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Chapter 4: Return

Clark was surprised at how quickly the blue sky turned black. He’d only left STAR Labs a few seconds earlier, but now all of the blue was already gone. “Dr. Klein, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Superman,” came the reply.

“Good,” Clark said. “I thought that there was going to be a time delay.”

“There will be later. For now please turn and start for the sun.”

“Okay. I’m turning now,” Clark replied. “Is the tracking equipment working?”

“Perfectly,” Bernie replied. “It helps to have all the equipment from the Nightfall mission. We put it together quickly, but it was well-built.”

“I’m now flying toward a point just to the right of the sun.”

“Yes, your change is on our tracking system. That’s a good track for now. In about thirty minutes I’ll have you make a course change to get you better lined up with the Swarm. But for now just keep going in the general direction of the sun. What you do need to do is to see how much you can accelerate. We’re only reading you at around three hundred kilometers per second.”

“Okay, Dr. Klein. You may have to bear with me. I only remembered how to fly a little over a week ago. I’m going to try to accelerate. Can you please call out my speed every few seconds to let me know how I’m doing?”

“Sure, Superman. We are now showing you at eight hundred kilometers per second. Eleven hundred... twelve hundred... fifteen hundred... fifteen fifty.” There was a longer pause before Clark heard Bernie’s voice again. “You seem to be holding steady at one thousand five hundred and seventy kilometers per second.”

“I think that’s about as fast as I can go,” Clark replied. “It isn’t taking any real effort to maintain this speed but I don’t seem to be able to go any faster. There must be a trick to flying at higher velocities that I don’t remember. I can try pushing harder, but I don’t know how much that will help.”

“You should save your strength,” Bernie replied. “At sixteen hundred kilometers per second, our projections were that you would reach the Swarm in ninety three minutes. At your current speed it will only take about two minutes longer. Those extra two minutes aren’t worth the risk of you being fatigued when you reach the Swarm.”

“Okay, I’ll try to maintain this speed. Please let me know if I slow down. I don’t have any useful references to judge my speed out here, so I’ll have to depend on you to tell me if I’ve slowed down.”

“I’ll do that. Now, what I’d like to do for the next half hour is to try to identify some constellations and some key stars. If you can pick these out quickly and easily, I think it will help when I’m trying to give you directions”

“I understand,” Clark said as he looked around. “I’m looking at the Big Dipper now.”

“The world stood in awe today as Superman reappeared to save the people of the Earth from the return of Nightfall in the form of the Swarm asteroid cluster.” Lois stared at that opening line again. It was a little sensationalist, but given the nature of what was happening, it felt right.

This was her third pass over this article. She had come into the office and started on this story as soon as Clark had left for STAR Labs. Writing the coverage for an event that hadn’t happened yet was new for her. But in this case, she needed something to keep her mind occupied while Clark was off trying to save the world.

By now he should be most of the way to the Swarm. She’d half-expected some kind of report from EPRAD about an unidentified object heading from the Earth to the Swarm, but there had been no reports. Either they couldn’t pick him up on their radar, or since they had no idea what he was, they simply weren’t reporting anything. Of course, there was always the chance that — in deference to his agreement with Bernie — Dr. Aames was sitting on the news until something definitive happened.

If everything went as planned, Clark would divert the first of the large asteroids about ten minutes from now. As she stared at

the television, Lois couldn’t help but be nervous. Last time Clark had tried something like this, he’d been lucky to survive. Of course, that was why they had decided to only involve Bernie. Lois had a good feel about the scientist right from the beginning. Since Clark knew he couldn’t do this without help, they’d agreed that they were lucky there was a person that they trusted who had access to everything needed for this mission.

She hoped they wouldn’t come to regret agreeing to let Bernie bring in help. It did make sense, and it had probably been unrealistic to believe that Dr. Klein could do all of the ground support work alone. She wasn’t too worried about that woman at STAR Labs. Bernie clearly knew and trusted her. The EPRAD connection was, however, another story. Aames seemed like a good guy, but as a senior official at EPRAD he had other pressures. She wondered if Aames would really remain silent about Bernie’s mysterious mission. She hoped so. The last thing that they needed was to have EPRAD and the military bursting in at STAR Labs while Clark was still out there.

“Lois, where’s Clark?” Perry bellowed from across the office.

She minimized her document to make sure no one else saw it while she was distracted. “We have a tip about something happening at STAR Labs. There is an experiment underway that might be able to mitigate the effect of the Swarm.”

Perry’s face went stiff and he just stared at her for several seconds. She’d been working for Perry long enough to recognize the ‘wheels turning’ expression on his face. He was clearly going over the implications of what she’d just said. “My office,” Perry barked, as he snapped suddenly out of his muse. Without waiting for her to reply, he then turned and headed back to his office.

Lois took just long enough to save her work and lock her workstation before she headed for Perry’s office. Knowing that he was waiting for her, she walked right in and closed the door behind her.

“Sit down,” Perry said. As soon as she was in the chair he continued. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Lois felt herself squirm. “Perry, I’m not sure...”

“Do you know why I asked that question?” Perry interrupted. “Because Clark isn’t here?”

“No... Well, not exactly. I was wondering what you’ve been working on so intently all morning. With the Swarm cloud bearing down, I’d expected that you and Clark would be pounding the pavement for input on how people are getting ready. But instead, all morning I’ve seen you working intently at your workstation. I’ve also noticed that while you haven’t made or received any phone calls, you’ve checked the time every ten minutes since you’ve been in the office. Now, do you want to tell me something?”

“Okay, I’m facing the Earth now,” Clark said. “I’m surprised that there aren’t more rocks nearby. I thought this would be like flying in a gravel pile.”

Clark knew that there would be a full minute of time lag before he heard Bernie’s reply. It was frustrating, but there was no way around it. It did serve to remind him of how far he was from home. After a minute he finally heard Bernie’s voice. “Space is big. The fact that you see anything around you at all tells you that, by space standards, you’re in the middle of a gravel pile.”

Clark was about to reply when he heard more from Dr. Klein. “Per our plan, this pass through the cloud will be to take out all of the fragments over seventy-five meters in diameter. Verify that you are facing the Earth with Polaris above you. Then use the etching on your helmet faceplate to pick out a target star and head for a position that is fifty-seven degrees to the right and eighteen degrees up. If you head that direction you should see the first target in about one minute.”

Clark found the mark on the grid in front of his face. He

picked out a star in that direction and started for it. “I’m heading that way now,” he said. “It looks like the Earth is now at the opposite coordinate. It’s at minus fifty-seven and minus eighteen. If it is, then that will be easier for me to use. Most of the stars look the same. It will be easier if I only have to worry about the position of the Earth and the North Star. Can you give me directions using that method?”

Clark flew in the direction that Dr. Klein had indicated. He continued to scan that area ahead of him. He passed several smaller rocks, none more than about a yard across. Finally he saw something large ahead of him. That had to be it. “I have sight of the first target.”

Just as he reached the rock, he heard Bernie’s voice. “Superman, the location of the Earth is a good check after you start for your target star, but the reference system depends on using the locations of the Earth in front of you and Polaris directly above based on the marking in your faceplate. The software I’m using is designed to work based on those points. I think it would be safer if we stayed with the original method. So, once you finish with the first fragment, reorient yourself on Earth and Polaris. The next fragment will be at minus seventy-five degrees to the side and minus three degrees in elevation. Head for that as soon as you divert the first. It should only take you about thirty seconds to reach. From now on I’ll provide new coordinates without waiting for you to reply.”

Clark was at the rock. It was large, for a rock but smaller than Clark expected. He verified the position of the Earth and pushed the rock sideways. It was hard for Clark to be sure, but it felt like the direction changed. “I just finished with the first one and am heading for target number two,” Clark reported.

Clark had spotted the second target and was almost there when he heard Bernie’s voice. “Target three will be at plus fifty-two horizontal and minus sixty-one vertical. Don’t forget to orient yourself first.”

Clark took a second to commit the coordinates to memory then approached the asteroid in front of him. This fragment was larger. It looked easily two-hundred yards across. Clark pushed it like the other one. It was clear to him that it was much more massive, but after a few seconds he was sure it moved. “Fragment two is done. I’m moving on to number three.”

He reoriented himself on the Earth and started for the third target. Just as he started out he heard Bernie’s voice. “Superman, I have verification that the first target was deflected. Based on the new trajectory it will pass well clear of the Earth. That deflection was many times the minimum necessary to miss the Earth. If you can continue to do that for all of them, then you won’t have any problem. You should be on route to target three. As soon as I see that target two has been deflected, I’ll send you the target four data.”

“I’ve received your target one confirmation and am on my way to target three,” Clark said. This looked to be a good start, but it was going to be a long day.

Lois pondered Perry’s question. Was she ready to tell Perry what was going on? She loved Perry, but if he knew what was going on, he’d probably be obligated as the editor to run with the story. She figured he might understand why Clark — no, Superman... she had to remember to say Superman — why Superman wanted this mission to be secret.

“Perry, I...” but she never finished. There was a rap and the door opened without Perry giving the go-ahead to come in.

Jimmy stuck his head in looking more excited than Lois could remember. “Sorry, but you guys need to see this!” he said excitedly. “EPRAD is reporting something going on in the Nightfall Swarm.”

Jimmy hurried away leaving Perry’s door open. Lois turned back to her editor to find him eyeing her carefully. “We aren’t

done,” he said in an almost threatening tone. Then he stood and started out the door. Lois stood and followed him.

Once they were out in the bullpen, they found everyone gathered around the television which was tuned to the Nightfall information channel. “We now have confirmation that a third asteroid has changed course,” the LNN announcer said excitedly. “The previous one was one of the forty-seven largest fragments that government representatives were most concerned about. The third asteroid that changed course, while not one of the forty-seven, was one of the larger fragments. We have Chet Nielsen standing by at EPRAD. Chet what are we getting?”

At that moment, Lois felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to find Perry motioning her back to his office. In less than a minute, they were back in their seats. “So Superman is alive,” Perry offered.

“Yes,” Lois said after a long moment.

“Tell me.”

“I know this goes against your nature, but this was revealed to me in confidence. If I tell you, you have to promise me that none of this will end up in the Planet until Superman is ready for a public announcement.”

“You know this is huge. We can’t just sit on this story.”

“Then all I can tell you is that it is Superman out there working to deflect as many of the asteroids as possible. I’ll have the complete story to you within minutes of the mission being completed.”

Perry just stared at her for a full minute. “Fine,” he finally barked, “all of this is off-the-record... for now.”

“Thanks, Chief,” Lois said. She took a deep breath.

“Superman approached me and Clark about a week ago. He’s been suffering from the same amnesia that Clark went through. The difference with him was that not only did he lose his memory and identity, but he lost his powers as well.”

“He lost his powers? Then how did he survive?”

“He doesn’t know. He hasn’t been very forthcoming about where he’s been or what he’s been doing. He did tell us that he doesn’t remember anything from before Nightfall. In fact, he told us that he doesn’t have any memory at all of his Superman-related activities. He only discovered who he was when his powers started coming back a few weeks ago.”

“If he has no memories, why did he seek you out?”

“Once the powers came back, and he realized who he was, he remembered the post-Nightfall work that Clark and I did. He re-read all those articles and once he realized that Clark had suffered a similar memory loss, he wanted to know if there was anything that could restore his memories.”

“Why didn’t he let the world know that he survived?”

“After all that happened with Nightfall, he was unsure about returning to the public eye. Also, from what he told us, his powers only came back to their full strength about a week ago. I think he’d decided to come forward, but simply hadn’t gotten around to it yet.”

“So how did you know about what he’s doing now?”

“When he learned of the Swarm cloud, he knew he needed to do something. However, he didn’t want to the public to know about it until after the fact. He contacted us again and asked if there was anyone that Clark or I knew that would be able to help to facilitate a mission to the Swarm. I introduced Superman to Dr. Klein at STAR Labs yesterday afternoon. I don’t know much of the details, but I do know that Superman approached us with the idea of diverting those forty-seven largest asteroids that we’ve all been writing about.”

“But according to the EPRAD report that we just heard, he’s diverting other asteroids as well,” Perry countered.

“I heard. I have to guess that when he was working with Dr. Klein to define the scope of the mission, they decided to do more than just divert the forty-seven. I guess we shouldn’t be surprised

at that. We've run stories ourselves that fragments much smaller than those included in the forty-seven would do significant damage."

Perry considered that for a moment. "So where is Clark really at?"

"We got permission to monitor the mission with the understanding that nothing would be reported until we get the go-ahead from Superman. Clark is set up with a radio monitor so he can hear the exchanges between Superman and Dr. Klein."

"So where is he?" Perry asked.

"I don't know. Superman took him to a place where he could monitor the mission, but I don't know where that is."

"Can you contact him?" Perry asked.

"No. Not until the mission is over."

"What if something goes wrong? How does Clark get back from... wherever if Superman disappears again?"

She was quiet for a long time. There was a danger and a truth in Perry's question far beyond anything he could guess. She'd been working extra hard all day to keep her mind away from that exact subject. Finally she realized that Perry was still waiting for an answer. She composed herself and tried to sound matter-of-face. "I don't know," she said hesitantly. "I... I'm sure that in case anything did happen, Clark will find a way to get home. Besides, both Superman and Dr. Klein seemed committed to not having any sort of repeat of the Nightfall mission."

"Fragment three hundred seventy-three is done," Clark said into his transmitter. Because of the way Bernie was providing the target information, Clark knew how many fragments he'd diverted so far. Bernie hadn't told him which were the forty-seven that were his real primary targets, but he'd pushed enough large ones that he figured that there was a good chance that all of those had been taken care of. In fact, many of the more recent fragments had seemed a little on the small size.

Clark was about to repeat his message when he heard Bernie's voice. "Superman, after fragment three seventy-three, please just wait for further instructions. I'll provide you with information shortly."

Clark was tempted to acknowledge the message, but the few times he'd tried to say anything back to Bernie other than the notification that each fragment had been dealt with led to confusion. So he just waited.

"Superman, I have verified that fragment three seventy-three is safe. I have also re-verified that all of the fragments in this target group have been diverted. There were actually only two hundred ninety-seven fragments based on the original plan for this pass, but you had extra time, so for the last half hour I've had you diverting fragments down to below ten meters. You need to start back to the Earth to maintain your safety margin."

"Dr. Klein. This has been far less tiring than I thought it would be. I'd like to use some of my safety margin and do some more good out here."

After a minute, he heard Bernie's reply. "The largest of the remaining fragments are near the rear of the cloud, back where you started. The time it would take to reposition yourself to deal with those will deplete your extra air. The best use of your time is to start back. It will only take you about eighty minutes to make the return trip. Once you get here, then you can decide about making another mission."

That made sense. And he'd promised Lois that he wouldn't take unnecessary risks once he'd diverted the major fragments. "Okay, Dr. Klein. I'm starting back now."

He lined up the Earth and concentrated on accelerating again. After a minute he heard Bernie. "Very good, Superman. I have you on course home and your speed is just over fifteen hundred kilometers per second. You should be here in eighty-three minutes."

"Lois, have you heard from Clark yet?" Perry asked for about the twentieth time in the last two hours.

"No, Perry. I told you that as soon as I hear anything, I'll let you know."

The look on Perry's face had Lois wondering if he thought she was deliberately torturing him. He started to speak but stopped himself. They'd agreed that nothing would be said aloud outside of Perry's office that could reveal what was going on. "Have you been listening to the reports coming out of EPRAD?"

"Sure. All of the largest asteroid fragments have changed course. That group includes not only the forty-seven largest, but more than a hundred smaller fragments as well. That's good, isn't it?" she asked innocently.

"You must have heard the other reports. Almost everyone is speculating that this is Superman. It's gotten so bad that many news outlets are openly wondering if it was EPRAD or the military that have been hiding him."

Lois looked around nervously. "Well, I guess we — and the other responsible news outlets — will just have to wait until there is some credible evidence. I'll admit that I would be thrilled if Superman was alive, but we just don't know." She made sure to emphasize those last few words. Perry's frustration at not being able to use the information he had was making him careless.

Perry caught her message and looked a little embarrassed. "Yeah, right. Well, I'll sure be glad when we do know something. You're sure Clark has some kind of lead on this?"

She had to fight to keep from laughing. "He said he'd been sworn to secrecy. He was very excited about that lead and he told me to be patient."

"So you think we'll be able to get all of these?" Clark asked, looking at the long list in front of him.

"Dr. Klein thinks so," Alyson answered. She'd been going over the list with him while Bernie checked equipment. "Based on how quickly you were able to navigate last time, and the ease with which you diverted the large fragments, we think it's doable. Our concern is that you'll have trouble finding all of these smaller fragments. After all, we are talking about nearly a thousand individual pieces."

"I agree. But there's a lot of empty in that cloud. Anything as large as two meters in diameter will be noticeable. Are you sure it will be safe to let smaller fragments through?"

"We think so," she replied. "I wish I could say we were sure that this would completely eliminate all of the threats, but we can't."

At that moment Bernie came up to the two of them. "If you try for smaller ones, there are just too many. Even with the extra time and your improvements in locating the fragments, all our calculations show that you'll be lucky to divert these. If we were to try to go smaller — let's say down to one meter — there would be more than you could deflect even if you kept flying round trips up to the moment the Swarm passed the Earth. You have to believe us when we say that this is the best use of your time and the equipment we have."

"If only I had more time," Clark mused.

"Well, you do have a little more time, and that's part of this calculation. Remember that since the cloud is moving so fast, instead of the one hundred thirty minutes you had the first time, you will be able to spend one hundred seventy minutes working in the cloud. That's part of why we have as many targets as we do. You will need every one of those extra minutes."

"Okay. How long until we are ready?"

Bernie looked at the survival pack. "The battery pack has been changed out and the air tanks have been replaced. You could go right now, but I'd feel better if you could give us about ten minutes to run a set of tests before you go."

“Do you need me for those tests?”

“Only the radio test, and we’ll run that one just before you leave after you put the pack on.”

“Good. I have an errand to run that will take about five minutes.”

“Errand?” Bernie asked.

“I promised Ms. Lane that I would give her the go-ahead to publish the story of what we did here.”

“That’s right. I’ve been so caught up in what we’ve been doing that I forgot about that part. Are you sure Mr. Kent has been monitoring the communications on that spare radio link? I was sure he would say something.”

“I’m sure. He swore not to say a word but I’m sure he’s hearing everything.” Clark looked at the wall clock. “It’s almost noon now. I’ll tell her that she can release the story at five p.m.”

“Shouldn’t we wait an extra few minutes so that we know that you make it back safely?”

Clark almost said that wasn’t important, but he knew better. “I’ll ask her how she wants to handle it. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“All, right. I’ll get on these tests,” Bernie said.

Clark shot out of STAR Labs and was inside their apartment in only a second. He went quickly to the phone and dialed Lois’s desk.

“Lois Lane,” he heard when she answered the phone.

“Hi, honey. I’m back home for a minute. I missed you and wanted to say hello.”

He heard her breath catch. “Clark, I’m... I’m glad you found time to call me. How’s the... assignment going?”

“Good. Everything is going according to plan. In fact, it’s turning out to be a little easier than I expected.”

“You said you’re home for a minute. That means you aren’t done?”

“No. The... interview this morning went well, but I need to have another go at this source. I was able to get all of the bigger pieces of information that I need, but there are a lot of smaller items that still need my attention.”

Lois was quiet for a few seconds. “Are you sure you’re up to this? We know that this source can be very dangerous if you approach him wrong. If you aren’t at the top of your game... Well, you know what happened last time.”

“Honey, I promise you that I won’t be taking any unnecessary risks. The guy that I’m collaborating with on this work has cautioned me several times about the same thing.”

“Okay,” Lois said, nervousness clear in her voice. “When will I be hearing from you?”

“It will be about five hours from now. When all the work is done, I’m going to head for home. I’ll ask the other guy to call you and let you know that everything went well and that I’m nearly home.”

“Clark...” she sounded choked up.

“Honey, are you okay?”

“Yes,” she replied deliberately. “I... Please be careful. I need you to come back.”

He’d been afraid this would happen. Their rule was nothing on the phone that would reveal his Superman identity. But this was an extraordinary situation. “Lois, I wouldn’t be doing a second round unless I was sure this would be successful. I love you and will be with you tonight. Okay?”

“Clark, please call me the minute you get home.”

“I will. And I’ll see you in a few hours. Good bye. I love you.”

“Bye,” she replied. “I love you too.”

As Clark hung up the phone, he wished he was as confident as he’d told her he was.

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Chapter 5: Too Many

Lois’s feelings as she hung up the phone were all mixed up. First, and most importantly, she was relieved that Clark was okay. She’d tried to maintain a positive attitude, but she’d been all too aware that she’d nearly lost him last time he tried to take on Nightfall.

She was relieved to hear that he was back safe, but now he was heading back out again. Lois tried to comfort herself with the knowledge that he’d had a successful mission, and that there should be every reason to believe that this would go well. Furthermore, since he’d already dealt with all of the largest fragments, this trip should be easier than the first.

A glance across the bullpen reminded her of the problem at hand. Perry wanted to run the story. Lois decided to deal with this one now and get it over with. She stood and headed for Perry’s door. She started to knock but he waved her in before she could.

“Tell me you have something I can use,” Perry said anxiously.

Lois sat in the chair heavily. “I heard from Clark. Superman came back to Earth to replace his air tanks and he’s headed back out. From what Clark told me, Dr. Klein and Superman decided that there was enough danger from the remaining smaller fragments that he was going on a second mission.”

“So Superman is going to divert all the fragments?” Perry asked.

“Clark didn’t say. I got the impression that there had always been a possibility of two trips. I know that the goal of the first trip was to try to divert all the city-destroyers. I think this trip is to take care of as much of the rest as possible. I’m sure Clark will have all the details when it’s all over.”

Perry considered her news for a minute. “Do you know if there’s going to be another trip after this one? Is it possible that Superman will keep doing these trips over and over until the Swarm passes?”

“No,” Lois answered. “I do know that Dr. Klein only had enough supplies for two missions. I also know that Superman talked with... his advisors, and they convinced him that now that he’s returned, it’s in the best interest for the people of the Earth if he survives instead of risking killing himself trying to divert every stone that’s heading this way.”

Perry’s eyes went wide. “Superman’s advisors? Since when did Superman have advisors? And how do you know about them? Can we get an interview? Now that would be a story! I can see...”

“Perry!” she barked, cutting him off. “I shouldn’t have said anything. We can mention that Superman has advisors, but we can’t know anything about them.”

“So how do you know what happened? Unless...” Perry just let that hang.

The stillness sat between them for several long seconds. “Okay, I might have been in the room during the conversation,” she admitted. “But that’s for your ears only. There’s more to Superman than anyone knows.”

“Were you... in the room with his advisors... before Nightfall? I remember that you had a meeting with him.”

That caught her off guard. “No,” she answered quickly. “That meeting was something else entirely. Superman doesn’t remember anything from before Nightfall so neither he nor I know if he had advisors before. As for this time, he was looking for input from people he trusts. I can’t tell you who else was there but he included Clark and me because of the stories we wrote after Nightfall.”

“Do you think he would be open to talking about the fact that he has advisors at all? It would be a great follow-up story and would help people to feel better connected to him.”

“I don’t know, Perry. He’s actually a very private person. But I’ll ask.”

“Good,” Perry replied. “We’ll talk about that some more later. If he agrees to let us publish anything, it will make good follow-up.” He paused for a few seconds. “So where are we now?”

“Superman’s is on his way back to the Swarm. I don’t know any details beyond that. I’m sure Clark will be able to fill us in on the details when Superman gets finished.”

“How long will that be?”

“The support pack is designed for five hours and that’s how long the first trip lasted. I’d have to guess that it will be that long again.”

“And there isn’t going to be any information until that time?”

“Not that I know of. Like I told you earlier, my understanding is that the only people involved are Superman and Dr. Klein. I figure if Dr. Klein is busy guiding Superman, there won’t be anyone available to do a press release.”

“Then the best we can do is be ready.”

“And hope for the best,” Lois added.

“Target seven ninety-six is done. I’m moving on to target seven ninety-seven.” Clark oriented himself and started for the coordinates that Bernie had given him. He was thankful that now the time delay for messages between him and Dr. Klein was down to less than thirty seconds. The time reduction made the effort much easier, but it also reminded him that the cloud was approaching the Earth very quickly.

He’d just reached seven ninety-seven when he heard Bernie’s voice. “Target seven hundred ninety-eight is negative eighty-two degrees horizontal and plus twenty-four degrees vertical.”

“Target seven ninety-seven is done. Moving on to seven ninety-eight,” Clark reported.

He’d barely started for seven ninety-eight when he heard Bernie’s voice again. “Superman, are you doing all right? Over the last few minutes, your vital signs have started to change. These readings are suggestive of signs of extreme fatigue.”

Now that Bernie pointed it out, he had been feeling a little more strained the last few minutes. As he approached the fragment it became apparent that this was one of the larger ones he’d seen on this second trip. When he pushed on it he felt a wave of fatigue pass through him. It moved, but this had been harder to move than the largest ones from the first trip. “Target seven ninety-eight is done. Dr. Klein, I have not received coordinates for seven ninety-nine. I’m waiting for direction. As for how I feel, I am starting to feel more tired.”

Just as he was finishing this message the radio came alive. “Target seven hundred ninety-nine is positive fifteen degrees horizontal and plus forty-three degrees vertical. And I am becoming very concerned about your vital signs. Please report on how you feel.”

“I’m starting for seven ninety-nine,” Clark said. He didn’t bother repeating how he felt. Even though they were shorter now, these long time delays were still confusing.

He was still on his way to seven ninety-nine when he heard Bernie’s reply. “I’m becoming concerned at your vital signs. Go ahead and take care of seven hundred ninety-nine and report. However, just wait there after you finish. I want to see what your vitals do, and we may have to change our plan.”

A moment later, Clark reached the target. This was another large fragment. Clark gave it a shove. As with the last one, the strain was much larger than he’d been experiencing earlier. “Seven ninety-nine is done. I’m definitely feeling more strain now. I’ll wait here for further instructions.”

“Superman, I believe we need to change the mission parameters,” Bernie’s voice betrayed concern. “During the last two deflections your vital signs jumped alarmingly. I also noticed that on the way to seven hundred ninety-nine, you were flying much more slowly than you have been. I think we need to consider terminating the mission.”

“We still have nearly two hundred more to go. We need to complete the mission,” Clark retorted.

“Based on what I’m seeing from your bio-monitors, I fear that there is a non-trivial probability that if you try for all those, you won’t make it back. Alyson has been reviewing the remaining fragments and has identified those that pose the highest threat. Based on these criteria, I would like to limit your remaining efforts to only eleven fragments. Please let me know when you are ready.”

Clark almost snapped back that this was too important, but he remembered Lois’s admonishment. In the long run he could help more people by surviving today. “Very well, we’ll limit this to eleven more targets. I’m ready to go as soon as you can provide the coordinates.”

As Clark approached target eleven he could hardly believe how much he was sweating. He was soaked and could feel his heart pounding. He reached the fragment, which looked to be roughly twenty-five meters across, and pushed it. It seemed to take all his strength before the large boulder changed direction. “Target eleven is done. I’m waiting for your confirmation and ready to head back.”

“I have confirmed that eleven was deflected. Please start back now. But be careful not to push yourself too hard.” There was a brief pause and Clark almost replied when Bernie started again. “You look awful.”

“I’m starting back,” Clark replied. “And how do you know I look awful?”

“Your vitals are all running much lower than I’ve seen them. And you’re barely making eight hundred kilometers per second. At that rate it will take you an hour to get back. That’s within your safety margin but just barely.”

Clark would have sworn that he’d been flying as fast as he had been on his first trip out this morning. “Understood. I am going to try to fly a little faster. Could you please update me on my speed and my stress levels?” Then Clark tried to accelerate. This should have been easy, but he could feel the act of accelerating taking a toll. The good news was that once he increased his speed, it took almost no effort to maintain it in the vacuum of space.

“I see you over eight hundred and fifty kilometers per second now,” Bernie reported. “Please be careful. That acceleration is placing a great deal of strain on you.”

Clark kept pushing. He needed to get home. He needed to see Lois. With that thought, he made one more push to accelerate. As his effort hit a peak, he felt another wave of dizziness wash over him.

“Superman! Please report! Superman! Superman!”

Clark shook himself. Why was Bernie yelling at him? “Superman reporting. What’s the problem?”

Bernie’s yelling continued for about ten more seconds due to the time delay. “Superman, thank goodness. You must have blacked out. You were accelerating and all the sudden your vital signs spiked and then dipped to a dangerously low level. I haven’t heard from you for over ten minutes. You’re on course for Earth and are coasting at just over fourteen hundred kilometers per second. That will get you back in approximately twenty minutes. Please save your strength for decelerating when you reach Earth.”

He’d been out for ten minutes? “Confirmed, Dr. Klein. I’ll coast and try to regain my strength. I feel better now, but I can tell that I’m not right.”

“I’m glad you’re back with me. I’m not sure that even you could survive a re-entry and collision at fourteen hundred kilometers per second. I suggest when you get back to Earth, if you have any trouble slowing down, you might come in at a shallow angle and let the atmosphere help with your deceleration.”

That should require less effort as long as you are careful about temperature.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. However, I suspect that after my little nap and twenty more minutes of coasting, I shouldn’t have a problem slowing down.”

“Your vitals are steady now, but they aren’t getting much better. Please keep the atmospheric braking option in mind.”

“I will. When do you plan to tell anyone what we did?”

“I have a short announcement that I typed up last night.

Actually I have two announcements. One is intended for EPRAD and the government types and the second that is more of a press release. My original plan was to send them to Dr. Aames at EPRAD and the STAR Labs PR department at about this time. However, since the notes assume you survived the mission, I want to make sure that you really make it back. I’ll issue the release the moment you get back.”

“Okay, Dr. Klein. I’ll do my best to make sure that your release is correct and I survive the mission.”

Twenty minutes later Clark was lying on the floor in Dr. Klein’s lab. He’d been able to come straight in and hadn’t blacked out. Not quite. But he’d never felt so tired. “Superman, do you need me to call an ambulance?” Dr. Summers asked.

“No,” Clark insisted. “Just give me another minute and I’ll be fine. I’ll go... home and rest for a day or two.”

“Home?” Bernie asked.

“Please, let’s just leave it at that for now.”

“I understand, Superman. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to realize that you’ve had to be somewhere these past months.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t say anything about it.”

“Of course. All we know is that you came to do the missions and left when you were done. I think it would be good for the public to know how much effort it took for you to do this. Would you mind if we reported that element of your mission?”

Clark thought for a minute. Now that he was going to be in the public eye, it wouldn’t hurt for the people to know that he was willing to push himself to the breaking point to help. “Sure,” Clark said after a moment. “People deserve to know the details. It would also serve to explain why I didn’t do a third mission to try to divert even more fragments. Just don’t say anything about where I went after the mission, other than to recover.”

“That’s what we’ll do,” Bernie said.

“Then I think I’m strong enough to go now. I’m sure that the government and press will have all kinds of requests. I plan to give a press conference in a few days after I’ve recovered. Good luck handling all this. I didn’t intend to leave you to do it on your own.”

“That’s all right, Superman. You already did the heavy lifting today. We can take it from here.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch.”

Before Bernie could reply, Clark used a burst of super speed to exit the building. He was home only a second or two later. He wasted no time getting to the real reason for his quick departure from STAR Labs. The phone rang only once before he heard, “Lois Lane.”

“Hi, honey. I’m home.”

“Clark,” she replied. He loved the fact that he could tell from her tone how much she’d worried. “Aren’t you home a little early?”

“Yeah,” he answered, letting his fatigue come through in his voice. “The... interview was mostly over and I started getting tired. I needed to cut it short and head for home. It was all I could do to stay awake during the drive.”

“I’m coming home right now,” Lois said abruptly.

“You can’t. You’re the only one with the story.”

“Perry figured the whole thing out right after all this started. He pulled me into his office and, well, he’s been in on it since

early this morning.”

Perry knew everything? She couldn’t mean... “Lois, just what did Perry figure out?”

“That Superman was alive and responsible for diverting the asteroids,” she said calmly.

“Oh,” Clark sighed. “So where did you tell him that I was today.”

“I told him the truth. That you were in an isolated site with a radio monitoring Superman and Dr. Klein.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to write that up this evening,” Clark said. “Today took a lot out of me.”

“I can tell. Perry has everything he needs to report the essential elements of the story. I spent all day with him, and we have several articles that just need a few details. Is Dr. Klein going to release the information?”

“Yes. He should be starting that process at this very moment.”

“Okay, I need to tell Perry to pull the pin and then I’ll be on my way home. In the meantime you get some rest.”

“I will. I’ll see you in a few minutes. And Lois, I love you.”

“I love you too. Now get some rest, you’ve had a full day.”

As she hung up the phone, Lois fought to calm her nerves. Part of her wanted to rush home right now to be with Clark. She’d always feared that this mission would take a lot out of him, but she still hadn’t been ready for the reality of the situation. After all, he was Superman. Now that he had his powers back, he seemed to be indestructible. But of course, as Nightfall had proven the first time, that was far from the truth.

She stood and headed for Perry’s office. She had to keep her mind composed to explain to Perry why she needed to rush home to Clark. When she reached Perry’s door, he was busy with Samuelson. She knocked once and waited. Both men looked up and Perry held his hand up indicating that she needed to wait.

Less than a minute later Samuelson left. “Come in,” Perry offered. “Have you heard from Clark?”

Lois closed the door behind her. “Yes. Unfortunately he’s been hurt.”

“Hurt? How?” Perry asked.

“He fell at the monitoring station,” she lied. “He hit his head when he fell, and was groggy when Superman came for him.”

“Is Clark at the hospital?” Perry asked, concern clearly evident in his voice.

Lois had to think fast. “No. Superman X-rayed Clark’s head and told him that he would be fine. Superman flew Clark home and he’s resting in bed now.”

“Okay,” Perry said. “So Superman’s back?”

“Yes. The second mission is over. I wasn’t able to get all the details from Clark, but I get the impression that Superman ran into some difficulty at the end. Other than that, everything went as planned.”

“So we need to get ready.”

“Yes. Clark told me that Dr. Klein is moving ahead to release the news of Superman’s return and the successful Nightfall Swarm mission. We should get someone over there right now.”

“You aren’t going?”

“No. Clark needs me at home. Besides, we should let someone ask the questions who doesn’t already know the answers. We can always augment the report based on Clark’s inside information. Our plan had been for him to come in and we’d write it up here, but with Clark hurt I’ll need to go to him.”

“Is he all right?”

“Sure. Superman checked his head and he’ll be fine after he recovers. But it sounds like he may be stuck at home for a day or two. I’ll get all of his information about the mission details and email you the story. I’m sure we can have it ready to go along with whatever we are able to develop based on Dr. Klein’s

announcement.”

“Okay, then you should get going. I’ll be watching for your email with Clark’s mission details.”

Lois went directly to her desk. She made sure that she had backup copies of everything she’d written and that she’d sent all of the semi-completed articles to Perry.

The next few minutes passed in a whirlwind as she hurried to get out of the office and navigate her Jeep home without causing — or at least being part of — a traffic accident. She wanted to get home so badly that it felt like swimming through molasses, but as she put the key in the door, it had seemed like no time at all.

Lois almost called out as soon as she was inside, but realized just in time that Clark might be sleeping. Sure enough, when she reached the bedroom, there was Clark sound asleep. She stood at the side of the bed next to him. He looked perfectly healthy. Now she had an answer to the question of what a person looks like after spending the day saving the world.

After a moment, she sat down on the side of the bed. Apparently he wasn’t that tired because the motion of the bed caused Clark to stir. “Hi,” he said sleepily.

“Hi, yourself,” she replied. “You look like you’ve had a hard day.”

“Yeah, a long day of business travel can really take it out of you.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? Does anything hurt?”

“Not really. I think I’m fine,” Clark answered. “I just... I wore myself out.”

He was hiding something. She could tell. “Clark, tell me exactly what happened.”

He hesitated for a second. “I was...”

“Before you say anything,” she cut him off. “Assume that I’m going to make Bernie tell me everything that happened to Superman during the mission.”

He hesitated for a moment before starting again. “Like I told you earlier, the first mission was easy. Everything went as planned. For the second mission the rocks were all going to be smaller and I’d gotten pretty fast at moving from one to the next, so we tried for a lot more.”

“How many?” she asked.

“Nearly a thousand. There were a lot more of those smaller rocks. Anyway, I was about 80 percent done when I started getting tired.”

“What did it feel like?” she asked.

“At first it was just that my powers seemed to be running out. Once it was clear that I might have trouble finishing the mission, we decided to cut it short and only divert those that posed the greatest threat. By the time I’d done the last diversion based on that shortened list, I was both weak and tired. Then when I started back, I had trouble flying fast enough. I made a push to get my speed up and... well, I pushed a little too hard and blacked out.”

“Oh, Clark,” she said as she leaned in to hug him. “How long were you out?”

“About ten minutes,” he said softly. “But once I woke up I felt much better.”

Lois was about to comment when she heard the front door open. “Lois, Clark?” It was Jonathan’s voice.

“We’re in here,” Lois called. “Come on in.”

She looked questioningly at Clark. But before he could reply, Martha came hurrying into the room. “Son, are you okay?”

“Martha, Jonathan, I’m so sorry,” Lois apologized sincerely.

“When Clark called, all I could think of was to rush home. I should have called you. Clark shouldn’t have had to do that.”

To Lois’s relief, Martha turned and smiled at her. “That’s okay, Lois. And the fact is that Clark didn’t call either.”

“Then how did you know to come?”

“Perry called Alice and said that Clark was at home hurt and that you had lit out of the office like a cat with its tail on fire.

Perry thought you looked too frazzled to think to call, so he passed us the news. Alice gave us a ride over.”

“But I still should have thought to call,” Lois said. She felt so bad. Why hadn’t she thought to call Clark’s parents?

Martha came over and put her arm around Lois. “It’s fine. Really. How could I feel bad that as soon as you heard that Clark was hurt, your only thought was to get to his side?”

“You’re sure?” Lois asked. “I feel really bad.”

“I’m sure,” Martha said, giving Lois a squeeze. Then Martha turned to Clark. “Son, how are you?”

“Tired,” he answered. “I haven’t felt like this since right after Nightfall.”

“You aren’t having that burning inside, are you?” Lois asked, suddenly much more worried.

“No,” Clark answered. “None of that burning. But I haven’t felt this tired since those first few days.”

“What burning are you talking about?” Jonathan asked.

“I was pretty beat up when I got back from Nightfall,” Clark explained. “The main symptoms, aside from the amnesia, were the fatigue and a sort of burning all over inside. At the time, we thought it was some kind of reaction to the trauma from the building fire and maybe from inhaling smoke. Later on, when we learned I’d been exposed to poison gas, we thought it was some kind of weird reaction to that. Then, once Lois and I figured out who I was, it seemed likely that it was a reaction to the Kryptonite in the gas.”

“But there isn’t any burning this time?” Lois asked once more, just to be sure.

“No. In fact I’m not even sore. I just have no energy at all,” Clark explained. Then he turned to his parents. “Did I ever use up my energy before? I don’t remember anything about using my powers growing up.”

“Once you got your abilities, they never seemed to run out. At least, not that you ever mentioned,” Martha said.

“You didn’t even get tired,” Jonathan added. “You once stayed up for a few days to see what would happen. You finally went to sleep on the third night, but even then you woke up in a few hours and you said you felt fine.”

“What about after doing something big with my super powers?”

“Nothing you ever did growing up seemed to come anywhere near straining your powers,” Jonathan said.

“What was the biggest thing I ever did?” Clark asked.

Martha and Jonathan looked at each other for a second as if trying to remember what he’d done. Then Lois realized that she may know this one. “What about when Clark lifted the space transport into orbit? That seemed pretty big to me.”

“Of course,” Martha said. “That has to be it. You never did anything close to that at home. At least, not that I know about.”

“Agreed,” Jonathan added. “That would have to be it.”

“Then I know the answer,” Lois said. “Clark, when you got back from carrying to transport into orbit you didn’t seem tired at all. You seemed perfectly normal when you flew me back to the Planet and after that — as Clark — you put in a full day’s work with no problem.”

Clark looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, this was a lot more work than that. When you think about it, I did two missions back-to-back. Even the first mission was more work than lifting the space transport and I felt fine after that.”

“So you think you managed to find the limits that were always there?” Martha asked.

“That’s my guess,” Clark replied.

Lois sat down on the bed again and took her husband’s hand. “Please, Clark, if you get into a situation like that again, remember that even you have limits.”

He smiled weakly up at her. “Now that I know where they are, I promise I’ll be careful.”

They were all quiet for a minute and Lois noticed that Clark started to fall asleep again. Then she remembered that Perry was waiting. “Honey, can you stay awake long enough for me to get some mission details? Perry is holding a section of page one for your inside mission information.”

“Of course,” Clark answered, suddenly alert. “As long as I don’t have to do it while running around the block.”

“No,” she replied. “Not this time. But next time I think we’ll do it during Tae Kwon Do practice,” she said with a smile. “Now, let me get my pad and we’ll get this done so you can get some sleep.”

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Chapter 6: Distress

Clark continued to be amazed at how quickly the world adapted to Superman’s return. In the two weeks since the successful Nightfall Swarm mission, the new routine had come to seem nearly normal. When their role in facilitating the contact between Bernie and Superman came to light, he and Lois had been in the spotlight briefly. But the fact that Superman had insisted that they played no other role in the Swarm mission helped that pass quickly.

For Clark, things were very different. At first, once people knew that Superman was around, calls for his help had been common. However, he’d been able to deal with that issue. It was challenging, but he’d generally been able to stay within the rules that they had all discussed that night before the Nightfall Swarm was announced.

He and Lois had hit on the idea that when Superman had returned from the first Nightfall mission, he’d crashed in another city. There were people there who had helped him recover from his Nightfall injuries and that city — which would remain unnamed — was now his home. During the news conference that followed the Swarm mission, he’d stressed that he no longer lived in Metropolis. He’d only made this return in this city because of the presence of people that knew him from the time before he’d lost his memory. Of course, there was also the presence of STAR Labs and Dr. Klein.

That kept the calls of, “Help, Superman” to a minimum. After the first few days, they had pretty much stopped all together. From time to time he did intervene in situations that were particularly dire, but whenever he did so, Clark made sure to make some time and fly to a few other cities in the world and do other rescues as well. His hope was that this created the illusion that his Metropolis rescues were just a matter of his regular around-the-world patrols.

Still, every time he heard a call from somewhere in Metropolis, and chose not to respond, it ate at him a little. But even that one day of hearing an unceasing stream of calls for his aid had convinced him that it was an unsustainable existence. Lois had shown him the statistics and that first day had convinced him of the truth in her numbers. The calls for help in a city the size of Metropolis were endless. Even if he only tried to respond to a small portion of the calls that he heard, he’d never keep up. It was like the Santa Claus problem. There was so much to do that even if Santa only spent a second in each house, even to cover a city the size of Metropolis alone would take over a month. And that was with no travel time from one house to another. Clark had to concede that one man, even a super one, simply couldn’t save everyone by himself.

Lois had it right. He could do the most good by being there as a symbol of hope. There were times when he could make a difference, like he did for the Nightfall Swarm, or saving a sinking ship, but for everyday crime, he just couldn’t help that much. At least not by trying to do the work himself. So his new focus was doing the big things. He had saved a few ships and helped out in fires. He would be that symbol of hope!

Lois held and reassured him each time he heard of a death

that he might have prevented had he responded to a cry for help. Knowing what he did, he had to wonder how he’d handled those situations before he had Lois’s active support. And he now knew that however much he had run off to be Superman, he’d been only stopping a small fraction of the crime in this city. Unfortunately — or perhaps fortunately — the memories of those times and the decisions he’d made seemed to be lost forever.

This morning he was a few blocks away from the office with Lois and Jimmy. They were covering the demolition of LexCorp Tower. The tallest building in Metropolis had come through the original Nightfall barrage unscathed, but by chance had been one of the few buildings hit by one of the smaller Swarm fragments that Clark had not diverted. The fragment that hit the building had come in almost perfectly vertical to the ground. It had only hit near the base of the building, but that had been more than enough. It had taken out three of the four primary support pillars in the main tower. Then it had expended its energy in the building substructure and compromised the foundation.

The building was still standing, but just barely. There was a genuine fear that at any moment it could topple into one of the other undamaged buildings nearby. The most visible tribute to the power and ego of Lex Luthor had become the most dangerous building in Metropolis. It had to come down, but due to the nature of the damage, there was no conventional way to bring the building down safely and without risking other structures nearby.

When they all arrived at the demolition site, Lois took immediate charge. “Jimmy, why don’t you work your way around the building and see what interesting shots you can get? Get some of the building, but look for good shots of the people making this happen. You know... Police, demolition support workers, bystanders, whoever you can see.”

“I get it Lois,” Jimmy answered. “What about you and CK?”

“I’ll come with you and Clark can go the opposite direction. We’ll interview people while you take the photographs.”

“Got it,” Jimmy said. “Should we get started?”

“You go ahead and I’ll be right behind you.”

Jimmy started off and Lois turned to Clark. “Are you all set?” “I think so,” he replied. “Superman is due to meet with the demolition foreman. I’ve studied the plans and it should be very easy to take out all the supporting columns.”

“I still don’t like it,” Lois said. “It feels like you’re bringing the building down on yourself.”

“Well, I am,” Clark answered cheerfully, trying to lighten the tone. “But I’ll be gone before the building falls.” He waited for an answering smile from his wife that never came. She was clearly not in a joking mood about this. Clark moved forward and took her in his arms. “Honey, I’m going to be careful. After the Nightfall Swarm mission, this should be easy. I did a few practice runs and based on the timer I wore, I never had any trouble at all staying ahead of the projected collapse.”

She seemed to find his more serious tone more acceptable. “I know. But I still don’t like it.”

Clark looked at the time. “I need to meet the demolition supervisor.”

She released him and stepped back. “Okay. I’ll be with Jimmy when you’re done.”

As Lois turned to follow Jimmy, Clark hurried to a nearby building. He entered the stairwell as Clark Kent and exited the underground parking structure as Superman. A moment later he was descending to the center of demolition planning area.

“Hi, Superman,” he heard as soon as he touched down. It was Jerry Foster, the demolition expert that he’d been working with. “Hi, Jerry,” Clark said. “Are we about ready?”

“We are,” Jerry said confidently. “We’ve been on a five minute hold for the last twenty minutes.”

“Am I late?” Clark asked.

“Not at all,” Jerry reassured him. “We had extra time built

into our plan in case anything came up. Since things went per plan earlier this morning, there was extra time left over in the schedule.”

“Is there anything we need to do before we go ahead?” Clark asked.

“Part of that is up to you,” Jerry answered. “We have to wait five minutes after we sound the first demolition warning. That means that we have to wait at least that long before you can do anything. If you want more time to review the plan, we can spend some time on that before we sound the five minute warning.”

“Do you have those cards we talked about?” Clark asked.

“Sure,” Jerry said as he turned to the table behind him. He picked up a small stack of laminated plastic cards and offered them to Clark. “They’re in order from the highest floor to the lowest per the demolition plan. Each card has the number of the floor or floors that are covered by that card.”

Clark looked the cards over. Every card had a red line indicating a path for him to follow for the demolition of each floor, and a red X on the columns that he was to remove. There were only seventeen cards since most of the cards covered many floors. These cards were going to be invaluable in the proper demolition of the building. “I’m ready,” Clark said. “Sound the five minute warning.”

Jerry hesitated. “Superman, are you sure? There are nearly a hundred floors in that building. Once you start you’ll only have ten seconds to finish and get out. We can still go with the plan where you plant explosives and we implode it the regular way.”

“Jerry, we’ve been through this. That would take a lot longer. Every hour this building remains standing increases the chance that it could fall in an uncontrolled collapse. That’s an unacceptable and unnecessary risk. Besides, based on all my practice runs I’ll be done in just under four seconds. That gives me a hundred and fifty percent safety margin.”

“I’d feel better personally if your hundred and fifty percent safety margin was a little longer than six seconds. You’re sure you don’t need to study the levels any more?”

“I’ll study them between now and when I start. Go ahead and give the five minute warning.”

Jerry turned and headed for a group of men nearby. As Clark started reviewing the cards, he heard a loud siren. One thing that Clark liked about these cue cards was that not only did they show the columns that needed to be removed, they showed the path for the most efficient destruction of each floor.

Clark had finished his second pass through the card deck when another siren sounded. This one was followed by a booming voice announcing, “One minute to demolition.”

Clark was wondering if there was going to be a start signal when Jerry approached him once more. “Everything is clear,” Jerry said. Then he checked his watch. “If you’re ready, it’s time.”

“Then let’s do this,” Clark said and took off. He headed for the window on the top floor that had been designated as his start point and entered. This part of the building looked completely undamaged. Clark glanced once more at the cards he was carrying, gathered himself and shifted to super speed.

The world got still and quiet. That was one of the things he liked about super speed. Since he knew that timing was especially critical for this task, he made an extra effort to be sure he was as accelerated as his super speed would allow. After a few seconds — probably about a micro-second in real time — Clark decided he was ready. He shot toward the first column and hit it as he went by. At this speed, it offered as much resistance as a thin piece of Styrofoam. He followed the route on the card and took out the rest of the supports. His route ended at a wall with a missing window. During planning they’d decided that the best way to go from one floor to the next was the outside of the building. To prevent knocking windows out at super speed,

yesterday Clark had removed the sections of glass on each floor.

At first it seemed easy. Clark could tell that he was staying well ahead of the collapse. In fact, a glance toward the top of the building confirmed that he’d taken out twenty floors before the collapse of the top floor had really gotten underway. It was around the fortieth floor from the top that he began to get worried. The columns seemed to be getting harder to break through and he was feeling a noticeable strain to keep his speed up. By the time he worked his way down to the thirtieth floor, it was taking a real effort to punch through the support columns. What was worse, it looked like the collapse was catching up to him.

By the time he reached the twentieth floor, Clark wasn’t sure he’d be able to finish. Of course, one of the reasons for starting at the top was that if enough of the building was collapsing, the lower floors would simply be crushed. The key floor was the thirteenth. Once he took out that floor, then he could safely get out of the building and leave the rest to gravity.

The problem happened on the seventeenth floor. He was about half-way through the floor when he ran into a wall that shouldn’t have been there. Well, the wall was supposed to be there, but it was supposed to be a nonstructural divider wall. There had been several of these on every floor. Even when not at super speed, he could tear through them like tissue paper.

This started out as one of those no-resistance walls, but in this case, on the other side of the nonstructural wall, there was a very thick wall of concrete and reinforced steel. It had to have been at least six feet thick and was heavy with rebar. In this place at this time, Clark was unprepared for anything like this. When he hit that wall, the first several feet shattered and exploded into a thousand fragments of concrete and steel. But the wall was very thick and the impact stopped his progress. He never had a chance to try to go around because before he could recover, the building fell on him.

For Lois, the demolition had gone from an intellectual curiosity to a major news event in a flash. Of course, most of the public didn’t know what was wrong nearly as quickly as she did. She’d been standing with Jimmy when the siren sounded marking the beginning of the demolition.

At first she’d been disappointed. The first building ever being imploded by Superman should have looked or felt different. But, except for the lack of the rapid pop-pop-pop that marked the beginning of most building implosions, this looked just like the others she’d seen.

Shortly after the siren sounded the building started to collapse on itself. She knew that Clark was inside going as fast as his super speed would carry him knocking the building down one level at a time, but the only thing visible from the outside was the collapse.

Once the top of the building started to fall, it just kept on coming. Within a few seconds the dust started to billow up obscuring the view but it was clear that the building was coming down as planned. Seemingly before any time had passed at all, LexCorp Tower was no more.

It wasn’t until about ten minutes later that she started to worry. The plan had been for Clark to meet them with the excuse that he’d gotten stuck on the other side of the access street when they’d closed the fence. But once the path had been open to the public and Clark was nowhere to be found, she started wondering.

A few minutes later, the activity around the debris picked up. There was still a lot of dust in the air and Lois was surprised to see anyone trying to work in that mess. She worked her way over to the demolition planning center to find it abuzz with activity.

She stopped one of the workers as he hurried by, “What’s all the excitement?” she asked.

“The foreman thinks Superman may be in there somewhere.” Lois’s mouth fell open. Based on Clark’s absence, it seemed all too likely that the supposition was correct. “Do you know what they’re trying to do?”

“You’d have to ask the foreman. We’ve all been told to be ready to go in once the dust settles a little. I think they are trying to figure out how to locate Superman if he’s buried in there. I’m sorry, but I need to get going,” and the worker turned and hurried on his way.

“Do you really think Superman got caught in the collapse?” Jimmy’s voice startled her. She’d been so caught up in the moment she’d completely forgotten that he was right behind her.

“It’s possible. If something went wrong... well, that building came down awfully fast.”

“But wouldn’t Superman just break out on his own?”

She turned to face her young colleague, “I don’t know,” she barked at him. “All I know is that he isn’t here.”

Jimmy was taken aback at her tone. “I... I just mean, well, he’s Superman. Besides, how do they know he just didn’t hear another emergency call?”

Lois had to remind herself that she couldn’t be too distressed about his condition. For the rest of the world, he was Superman, not Clark. She couldn’t react as if it were her husband that might be buried in the rubble. “You’re right. We need to see what the foreman knows.”

It only took a moment to work their way to the command post. It was easy to see who was in charge from the swirl of activity around him and the orders he was giving. She rushed right up to him and inserted herself into the fray. “Excuse me. I’m Lois Lane of the Daily Planet. Can you tell me what’s happened?”

He paused as soon as he heard her name. “Lois Lane,” he asked. “You’re a friend of Superman’s, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I heard some of the talk on the way in. Do you believe he’s under that?” she asked, pointing in the direction of the collapsed building.

“I do,” he said. “Superman had promised that he’d check in as soon as he finished the demolition. I can’t think of any other reason that he didn’t keep that appointment.”

“Perhaps he heard an emergency call,” Lois offered, echoing Jimmy.

“Superman and I talked about that possibility. He promised that if he heard a call, he would leave a note before he left the area. See that chalk board?” he asked, pointing at a large, blank chalkboard. “The only reason that’s here is in case he needed to leave a note quickly.” Then he walked over to the board and pointed at two pieces of chalk. “Those have not been touched. I wish I had an alternate explanation, but I have to believe that Superman never made it out of that building.”

“If he’s in there, do you have any idea how to get him out?”

“We’re going in as soon as we can get the equipment here. Our best hope is to start digging through the rubble as quickly as possible. My biggest fear is that we may hurt him more if we go in too aggressively. I’m not sure what to do.”

Lois thought for a minute. “Superman is invulnerable. The biggest risk for him will be if he is deprived of air for too long. My suggestion is that you go in with the most powerful equipment you have on site and start digging.”

“I’m not sure,” he said doubtfully.

“Listen to me,” Lois flamed. “My husband and I know Superman better than anyone. Your equipment isn’t a threat to him. Besides, that whole building just fell on him. A piece of excavation equipment can’t do any more harm than the falling building. So get that equipment moving now!”

The man seemed taken aback at her attitude. But to his credit he knew what to do when he faced a determined Lois Lane. “Yes, ma’am,” he said. Then he turned to the audience that had

gathered during their talk, “You heard the lady. Get every piece of digging equipment in there now. Charlie, call the equipment yard, have them send everything they have that can dig. Bill, contact MPD and ask for their help in clearing the streets to bring in the equipment.” The men seemed to be frozen in shock and hesitated. “Move, people,” Jerry yelled, “We need to start digging through that rubble.”

Less than ten minutes after Jerry had sent out the call, the heavy equipment started arriving. Ten minutes after that they’d had to send out a second call that no more equipment would fit in the area. There were front-loaders and bull dozers all around the building. There simply wasn’t room for any more to operate without getting in each other’s way.

And the people... Every piece of equipment that was working near the building carried a few extra people watching for any sign of red or blue. Lois knew from exposes on construction safety that these people were violating every rule in the book, but that didn’t matter right now. This was a rescue operation and everyone involved thought that rescuing Superman would be worth the risk.

“Lois?”

She turned to find Jimmy coming up behind her. His voice was muffled by the filter mask he was wearing because of all the dust being stirred up. Everyone in the area had to wear them or get kicked off the site. “Hi, Jimmy. Did you see anything on the other side of the site?”

“No, just more digging.” He held up a note pad she’d given him. “I’ve been talking to the workers. I never realized how hard it is to come up with different questions to ask. I’ve got some good stuff here, but most of it is more about how everyone feels looking for Superman.”

She managed a weak smile. “Touchy-freely stuff. Clark will love it,” she said, her voice catching at the end.

Jimmy obviously noticed his distress. “Have you heard from CK yet?”

“No, but I’m sure he’s fine,” she lied. “You know how he gets an idea in his head and just takes off sometimes. I can’t imagine where he went, but I will definitely be giving him a piece of my mind when I see him.”

She watched Jimmy digest what she’d said. Jimmy was smart enough to see that she was scared. Fortunately, he was also smart enough to see that he shouldn’t call her on Clark’s current whereabouts. “So how is the Superman search going?” he asked.

Lois turned back to face the work area. “They’re making incredible progress. All we can do is hope that they find him soon.”

Jimmy glanced at his watch. “It’s been twenty minutes. How long do you think he can survive buried under all that?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, holding her voice steady.

“Superman once told me that he could hold his breath for over twenty minutes, but I don’t think he ever had to go longer than that.” She took a second to compose herself before continuing. “It looks like they’ve moved more than half of the rubble so far. I have to believe that they will find him soon.”

As if on cue Lois noticed a sudden commotion on one side of the zone. “Come on,” she shouted over her shoulder to Jimmy. Without waiting to see if he was behind, she took off at a run. Thank goodness that she’d chosen to skip heels today. She hadn’t gone far before she could make out shouts of, “We’ve found him,” echoing around the site.

By the time Lois reached the recovery spot, paramedics had arrived and Clark was on a gurney. The colors of his red and blue uniform were barely visible under the white concrete dust. She rushed up to his side only to be held back by the police that had established a quick perimeter. “I need to see him,” she shouted. “I’m Lois Lane of the Daily Planet.”

"I'm sorry, Ms. Lane. Everyone wants to be there. We need to let the paramedics do their work."

"But I have information that might help."

He looked at her for a second. Maybe he knew her history with Superman, or maybe he saw something in her eyes, but whatever he saw, he released her arm and let her through.

"How is he!" she barked as soon as she reached the gurney.

"Who are you?" one of the paramedics asked.

"I'm Lois Lane. I'm one of the few people that have any knowledge of Superman's medical background."

He immediately changed his attitude. "Thank God. I was scared to do anything. I'm Carl, and that's Cindy and Jacob," he said indicating the other paramedics. "What can you tell us?"

"First of all, what's his condition?" she asked.

"He's alive, but if he were a human I'd say just barely."

"Have you tried to start an IV?"

"We tried, but the needle won't penetrate his skin."

Lois smiled. If he was invulnerable, it probably meant that Kryptonite had not been involved. And best of all, he was alive. "That's a good sign," she said. "Except for a few differences, like the invulnerability, you can treat him like a normal person. All of his internal organs are the same and his vital signs mean pretty much the same as for a normal person. What is important for right now is that you give him as much oxygen as possible."

"We already have him on straight oxygen," Carl said, cutting her off.

"I just wanted to make sure," Lois offered. "The other thing he needs is direct sunlight."

"Sunlight?" Cindy asked.

"Yes," Lois said, glancing around at the bright blue sky above and the sun shining down. "You need to keep him in the sun as much as possible. In fact, do you have any scissors?"

Jacob reached into a supply bag and brought out a pair.

"Here," he offered.

"Cut off the uniform," she said. "Just leave enough to... protect his modesty. And remove his boots. We want to have as much of his bare skin exposed to direct sunlight as possible."

Cindy produced another pair and tried to cut the uniform. Unfortunately, the scissors wouldn't cut. After struggling for a few seconds, the young woman looked helplessly at Lois. "I can't cut this. His uniform seemed to be as invulnerable as he is."

Lois thought for a second. "Try lifting the cloth away from his skin and then cutting the material."

Cindy tried and once she got the material approximately an inch away from his skin, the scissors were able to cut the cloth. "That does it," Cindy said. "How did you know that would work?"

"Um... Just something Superman told me once," she said vaguely. "Please, let's just focus on getting the uniform off."

Fortunately, the paramedics were more concerned about helping the fallen hero to worry about the source of Lois's valuable information. Lois helped Carl pull off the boots while the other paramedics cut away the Superman suit. They finished with his top and Jacob started to cut away the legs of his pants. Lois caught Cindy admiring her husband for an extra few seconds, but before she could comment the younger woman had gone to work on Clark's other leg. In less than a minute Superman was wearing only those red briefs that she teased him about sometimes.

"Now what?" Carl asked once the clothes were off.

"Now we wait," Lois answered.

"Shouldn't we transport him?" Jacob asked.

"Not unless you have a way to move him and keep him in the sun. Direct sunlight will do him far more good than being in a hospital room."

Cindy had been checking his vitals. "She's right. His heart beat is stronger."

Carl looked at the position of the sun and the surrounding skyline. "Ms. Lane, I don't think we will be able to get more than about another hour of sunlight. Normal procedure would be to transport him as quickly as possible."

Lois was still relishing Cindy's report that Clark was growing stronger. For that alone she had forgiven the young woman for ogling her husband. But Carl needed an answer. "If this were any normal patient, you wouldn't be listening to me in the first place. But he's not, so you have to." She took a breath to calm herself. "Carl, I guarantee that when Superman regains consciousness, he will support everything I've told you."

"Are you his designated next-of-kin?" he asked.

"No. Superman never thought he needed that. But I will be after he wakes up. In any case, all I'm asking you to do is wait here for as long as we have sunlight. As soon as we lose the sun you can take him to the hospital. Okay?"

Carl took only a moment to decide. "Fine. But if he starts getting weaker, we go."

"Agreed," she replied.

"So who is Superman's doctor?" Carl asked. "We need to inform him and have everything ready at the hospital."

"Dr. Bernard Klein," she answered. "He works out of STAR Labs."

"Does he have admitting privileges at Metropolis General?" Carl asked.

"I doubt it," Lois answered. "He's more of a Superman scientist than a medical doctor."

"Then Superman will get the admitting physician at Met Gen. That's where I have to take him and his doctor needs to be someone with hospital privileges."

Lois thought for a minute. "What would have to happen for you to take him somewhere else?"

"You mean another hospital?"

"No. I mean STAR Labs."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

"What would have to happen?" Lois insisted.

"I'd need to get direction from both the hospital and my supervisor at the ambulance agency."

"Expect a call," she barked, as she reluctantly turned away, leaving her husband, for the moment, in the hands of the paramedics. Now what was the President's phone number?

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Chapter 7: Loss

The Metropolis General emergency room was not where Lois had planned to be at this time. An hour ago, she'd been sure that she had enough influence to change the destination for Superman's ambulance. However, she'd come face to face with reality.

First she'd tried calling Dr. Klein. He said he'd be happy to work with a medical doctor, but was unwilling to force himself into the middle of things and insist he be named as Superman's physician without more real familiarity with his potential patient.

Then Lois had tried calling in favors from the military. She had some friends, and at first she thought that approach was going to work. However, when her contacts got back to her, she learned that her initial secrecy about Superman's return had come with a political price tag. Both the military and space establishments had been embarrassed at being out of the loop for the Nightfall Swarm mission, and for the moment, Lois was not going to get any help.

Finally, out of pure desperation, she tried calling in some favors from the mayor and city council. Apparently she wasn't owed any favors.

She'd tried three avenues of attack — science, the military and political — and they'd all failed. Her last hope had been that Clark would regain consciousness before he was transported, but that didn't happen either. So here she was, surrounded by others

from the media who were looking to get the jump on the story of Superman's hospitalization.

"Lois," came a familiar voice from behind.

She turned to see Dr. Klein approaching from the far door. "Hi, Bernie. Thank you for coming."

"Not a problem at all. Do you have anything new on Superman's condition?"

"No. The sunlight seemed to help, but he never woke up."

"I'll do what I can," he said, "but I'm honestly at a loss as to how to approach taking care of Superman. Do you know anything about any previous injuries? Did he tell you any details about the aftermath of the first Nightfall mission?"

Lois considered her answer carefully. Ever since this afternoon she'd been thinking that it was way past time for Clark to have a doctor. "Did you have time to think about a possible doctor for Superman?" she asked, ducking the question for the moment. "I mean on a long term basis." she added quickly. "Would you be able to provide medical support for Superman?"

"Probably," he answered with some hesitation. "I guess it depends on how close his physiology is to that of a human."

"So if he's more like a normal man, you would recommend yourself?"

"No. I would only be the best choice if his physiology is less like that of a human. The closer he is to a normal man, then the better he will be served by having a regular medical doctor."

Before Lois could reply there was a commotion at the ambulance entrance and a scattering of, "That's the one!" and "He's here!"

Lois started toward the center of the commotion, but her desire for a little isolation left her too far from the ambulance entrance. The other reporters had her quite effectively blocked out. "I should go meet with the admitting doctor," Bernie said. "I spoke with him before I came over. He seemed glad to have my input."

"Go," Lois said, "But I'd like to continue our discussion later."

Bernie nodded then turned and headed through the door that led to the treatment rooms. As soon as he turned away, Lois started working her way through the other reporters. She'd been in this town too long to let a little pushing and shoving get between her and her story. And when the story was her husband... well the other reporters wouldn't know what hit them.

One advantage of being a smallish woman was that she could slip around and through spaces that most men didn't even realize were there. Of course, a few carefully aimed elbows also came in handy. By the time Carl and Jacob were pulling Clark's gurney out of the ambulance, she was right at the front of the group.

"Carl!" she shouted at the paramedic, "How is he?"

The paramedic glanced her way. Why was he smiling? "You can ask him yourself," he said as he pulled the gurney out.

An instant later Lois had her answer. They pulled Clark's gurney out feet first. When his head cleared the ambulance he was awake and smiling in her direction. Her first thought was to run to him, but fortunately the crowd of reporters prevented her from making such a mistake. It wouldn't do for the wife of Clark Kent to be seen hugging Superman just as he came off the ambulance. There were shouts from other reporters, but Lois barely noticed them. All she knew was that her husband was awake and smiling at her.

The reporters tried to follow Superman into the examination room, but the hospital seemed to be well-supplied with large, intimidating orderlies who quite effectively blocked the door. As soon as Carl and Jacob disappeared into the room, Lois realized that she might be able to get some information from Cindy. Unsurprisingly, by the time Lois had reached the ambulance, the young paramedic was surrounded by reporters and being peppered with questions.

"No," Cindy said, "he didn't tell us anything about what happened in the building. He only regained consciousness a few minutes before we arrived here."

"What did you give him to wake him up?"

"Nothing. We couldn't start an IV because the needle wouldn't penetrate his skin. And he was unconscious, so we couldn't give him anything orally."

"What did he say when he regained consciousness?"

"He asked what had happened, and how long he'd been out. He also asked if anyone else had been hurt during the building collapse. In general, I'd say that he seemed more concerned about someone else getting hurt than he was in his own condition."

"When..."

"There isn't anything else," Cindy insisted, cutting off the question. "Like I said a moment ago, he only woke up just before we arrived, and that's all we know. Now, I still have to clean up this ambulance for our next call, so please excuse me." The nearest reporters barely had time to get clear before she had closed the ambulance doors from the inside.

Lois headed back inside the ER. There was no way she was going to go home until she knew what was happening with Clark. Then she realized that she already had more data on the story than most of the reporters here. Only a handful of reporters knew that Clark had woken up inside the ambulance and even fewer were aware of the details she'd heard from Cindy.

The pay phone was taken, but Lois remembered something from when she had been in high school and had volunteered as a candy striper in this hospital. She headed into the general care wing and found an empty room. Sure enough, there was an unused phone that would be perfect for calling in the story.

She was about to dial the number for the Planet when she remembered her earlier error in not updating Clark's parents. So, instead of dialing the Planet, she dialed her own phone number. She'd asked Clark's parents to wait at their apartment until Clark could resurface. She figured that they might come in handy for providing an excuse for his whereabouts during this time. The phone only rang once.

"Martha Kent speaking."

"Martha, it's Lois," Lois said in hushed tones.

"Do you have news on Clark?" Martha asked, the concern evident in her voice.

"Not about Clark," she said cautiously. "I haven't seen him all afternoon. But I have information about Superman."

"Oh," Martha said. "Of course. Well, how is Superman?" she asked, obviously remembering the phone protocols that Lois and Clark had insisted on.

"I'm at the hospital. Superman's ambulance arrived a few minutes ago. I haven't been able to get close enough to find out anything yet, but he was awake when he came off the ambulance. He was smiling."

"That's great news. So he's going to be okay?" Martha asked.

"I think so," Lois answered, trying to sound confident. "I wish he would have just flown away when he came off the ambulance, but I guess we have to be happy that he's awake."

"He'll be fine," Martha assured her.

"Thanks," Lois replied. "I wish we could talk longer, but I need to go. I have to call in the story of Superman's arrival at the hospital into the Planet."

"I understand, Lois. Do you want me and Jonathan to stay here?"

"Yes, please. If Clark shows up at home, someone should be there."

"We'll stay for now," Martha said. "Try not to worry too much."

"I'll do my best. Good bye."

Lois heard the phone click signaling the end of the call. Lois took a deep breath and composed her thoughts for calling in the

story, then dialed the Planet.

No matter what she tried, she couldn't fall asleep. Lois had been at the hospital for more than an hour after calling in the updates to the Superman story. She'd been hoping that she would be there to see Superman come out of the ER room and fly away. Unfortunately there had been no announcement and Perry had finally sent Nicholson to relieve her. She'd only left when Nicholson promised to call her immediately if anything happened. Once she got home, she briefed Clark's parents on the cover story she'd invented, and sent them off to the Whites to try to get some sleep. At that point she was thinking that Clark would be home any minute.

But he wasn't. What had happened? Why wasn't Clark home yet? Once she'd discovered Clark's other identity, she'd been relieved that the one thing she didn't need to worry about was his well-being. After all, nothing could hurt Superman. At least, nothing but that Kryptonite stuff, and other than the samples that were left-over from the original Nightfall mission, there didn't seem to be any more of that. But between the Nightfall Swarm and what happened today, she was getting the impression that being married to Superman was as stressful as being married to a cop or a soldier.

"Lois," she heard from the outer room. "Are you awake?"

"Clark," she cried as she jumped out of bed.

Before she could even reach the archway that separated their sleeping area from the rest of the apartment, she reached her husband. In an instant her arms were around him and pulling him tightly against her. "I was so worried," she said softly.

"I know," he replied. "I'm sorry. I should have been more careful before I tried to do something like demolishing a building."

All of the sudden the phone rang. Right this moment Lois didn't feel like letting go of her husband. After a few rings the answering machine engaged. "Ms. Lane, this is Veronica Nicholson. Superman came out of the ER room about a minute ago. He super-spined away without saying anything to anyone. I'm trying to get some information from the doctors, but so far they aren't saying anything either. I have the office cell phone and I'll be here at least another twenty minutes if there is something you need."

The phone disconnected and Lois looked at her husband. "So what do the doctors know?"

"Nothing. They gave me some pills for the pain, but that's all."

"Where do you hurt?" Lois asked, concerned.

"I sort of ache all over. But it isn't bad anywhere."

"Clark, what happened? Did the building just catch up with you?"

"No. There was a wall that wasn't supposed to be there."

"We talked about that possibility. I thought you could tear through walls with no problem."

"This was reinforced concrete, and it had to have been more than six feet thick. I could batter through it, but at that time and in that place, it stopped me cold. Before I could recover, the building was coming down on top of me."

"What was a wall like that doing there?" Lois asked. "I thought you double checked the building a few days ago to make sure that the plans you had matched the actual building structure."

"I did," Clark confirmed. "I thought I had checked everything, but I must have accidentally skipped over that floor. I don't know how I managed to miss that wall during my check. Also, based on all the research that Jerry did before the demolition, that wall should not have been there."

"Lex had a lot of secrets," Lois suggested. "Maybe it was something like that."

"Maybe," Clark agreed. "I need to ask Jerry."

"So how are you now?"

"A little tired and a little sore. I think I'll be fine with some rest and sunlight."

"Had you thought about getting checked out? I mean medically."

"How would I do that? No one has any medical records."

Lois paused for a moment. This idea had been swirling in her mind much of the time Clark was out. "How do you feel about Bernie?"

"I like him."

"Do you trust him?"

"Sure. That's why we went to him for the Swarm mission. Lois, you know that."

"Clark, Bernie has access to the test data from before the first Nightfall mission. He also has copies of Clark Kent's medical records after Nightfall."

Clark's face went very still. "Are you suggesting that we tell him all about Clark Kent and Superman?"

"I think the events of the past six months make it painfully clear that you need a doctor," she said seriously. "The only two that we can even consider trusting are my dad and Bernie. And, aside from any other concerns, my dad isn't the Superman specialist."

"I see your point," Clark said. "But..."

Lois cut him off with a finger to his lips. "But we can we talk about this in the morning," she said. "For right now I'd like to spend the rest of the evening showing you how much I missed you."

Two days after the collapse of LexCorp tower, the city was still abuzz about what had happened to Superman. Clark had returned to Superman duties the next day and the only statement that he had given was that he needed to be more careful if he ever decided to help demolish a building again.

Dealing with the general press had been easy. However, handling Perry and Jimmy had been far more difficult. Lois had defended Clark's sudden disappearance by using his parents as an excuse. She had made up a story about Clark's parents being near the demolition site when Jonathan felt ill. Clark's excuse was that he had rushed his dad to his and Lois's apartment and had been there the whole time. Jimmy seemed to buy the story, but they were far less sure of Perry. Their editor had accepted the story with a keen skepticism. Then he'd stopped asking questions. It was the questions that he didn't ask that pretty much convinced both Lois and Clark that he either knew the truth or suspected it strongly enough to back off.

Today they were in Bernie's office at STAR Labs. She'd finally convinced Clark that this was necessary and they both agreed that if anyone was going to know the truth, Bernie was the guy they wanted to trust.

The door to the office opened and Bernie came in. "Sorry I'm late," he said cheerfully as he closed the door and headed to his seat on the other side of his desk. "I've been buried with requests for data ever since the Nightfall Swarm mission."

"People are wanting information about Superman?" Clark asked.

"Not really. Well, there was some of that at first, but mostly it has been requests for how Superman and I performed the intercept mission. The space guys want to make sure that they capture the information that I learned about running that sort of mission."

"What information are they most interested in?" Lois asked.

"Mostly is about how we communicated. They want to know how we worked with the time lag in communications. They have also asked a lot of questions about how I provided Superman guidance information so that he could find the targets. I think

they are thinking about future space missions.”

“I guess that would be valuable,” Clark speculated.

“It is,” Bernie agreed. “I didn’t think much about it at the time. Superman and I were mostly making it up as we went, just doing what needed to be done. Speaking of which, have you heard from him? How is he?”

Lois looked at Clark and nodded for him to go ahead.

“We’re here about him,” Clark said. “After the building collapse, he realized that he needed someone to turn to in case he gets injured.”

“Yes,” Bernie answered. “Lois and I talked about that at the hospital. But I’m not sure I’m the right person.”

“Bernie, there’s more to this than just taking care of Superman. The person that serves as his doctor will have access to information about him that is very private,” Lois said.

“So in this case, the best physician is not necessarily the best person,” Clark added.

“I understand,” Bernie said seriously.

“Are you willing to take the job and protect Superman’s confidences?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Then what do you need?”

“I need to see Superman. I’d like to run some follow-up tests to see how the building collapse affected him. It’s too bad that he doesn’t have a medical history. That would be valuable to provide a background.”

Clark took a deep breath. “He has a medical record — at least a short one. And you already have it.”

“What? No I don’t. All I have are the results of the tests that we did before the initial Nightfall mission.”

“No, you have more than that. You have all of the medical information from when I was recovering from amnesia.”

Bernie went stiff. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I am Superman.”

“But you can’t...” Bernie sputtered. “I’ve seen the medical reports. I studied them carefully when you were recovering from the gas poisoning. You’re a normal man.”

“I guess there are differences that don’t show up in normal tests.”

Bernie looked back and forth between Lois and Clark. He looked like he was trying to figure out what to say, but no words come out.

Lois turned to her husband. “Clark, show him.”

Clark glanced in the direction of the door. Then he levitated so that he was floating up near the ceiling of Bernie’s office. “Unless a normal man can do this,” Clark said, “are you ready to accept that Clark Kent and Superman are the same person?”

Lois watched Bernie’s reaction as Clark levitated. It was almost funny. Until this moment she would not have had a good feel for what ‘calm shock’ looked like. Now she knew. When Clark first started to levitate, Bernie’s reaction was to simply watch with almost clinical detachment. It was as if he were watching some planned experiment play out. Then, after another second, she realized that he appeared frozen as he contemplated Clark hovering above.

“Dr. Klein? Are you still with us?” she asked.

That was all it took to snap him out of it. He shook his head ever so slightly and looked at her. “Yes. Of course. Sorry, I just...” Then he looked back up at Clark floating above. “Well, that’s... amazing.”

“So you believe us now?” she asked.

Bernie just nodded and Clark lowered himself back to his seat. “We need you to help us figure out what happened at LexCorp Tower,” Lois said directly.

“Of course,” Bernie said. “But there is so much more. I would have never guessed that you would be so normal. Hold, it!” he exclaimed, “Are you a regular man that acquired your

powers later?”

“I really don’t know what I am. I arrived as a baby in what my adoptive parents say looked like a space ship,” Clark answered.

“Really!” Bernie exclaimed, “What did it look like?”

“I don’t remember. I only saw it once and that is part of what I lost to the amnesia. I only know that I saw it because my parents told me that I told them about it. They remembered it from when they found me, but all they could really tell me was that it was very small.”

“I wish you two would have trusted me right away after Nightfall,” Bernie said.

“We couldn’t,” Lois said. “Because of his amnesia, Clark didn’t realize he was Superman until much later. All the time we were investigating the Nightfall mission, we had no idea that Clark was Superman. And later... well, that isn’t the kind of information you share lightly. It’s a very dangerous secret for Clark and everyone that is close to him. Can you imagine what someone like Lex Luthor might do if he believed that you or I knew who Superman’s family was?”

“I understand,” Bernie said. “I’ll be extra careful.”

“So, now that you know the rest of the story, what do you suggest for a follow-up to what happened?”

“I’d like to review your medical information. Then we’ll need to figure out a way to draw some blood. I saw the ER team break two needles trying to start an IV on you the other night, so I know that won’t work.”

“The only time I’ve been vulnerable was after exposure to Kryptonite,” Clark reminded him.

“We have that gas. I think I might be able to do something with embedding a trace amount in a needle.”

“Do you have to do that?” Lois asked. “I don’t like the idea of exposing Clark to Kryptonite again.”

“If we’re ever going to understand how he’s different from you and me, we will need to start with his anatomy and blood chemistry. I promise we’ll keep the exposure as small as possible.”

“What else?” Clark asked, clearly wanting to move on.

“We should repeat the battery of strength and speed tests that we ran before Nightfall. We established a fairly concise set of baseline data about your abilities. Since we’re going to be testing you, it would be good to see if anything changed as a result of your Nightfall experience.”

Clark was back in Bernie’s office. He’d spent a lot of time with the scientist over the past few days. He heard a sound from behind when the door to Bernie’s office opened and Lois came in. “Was it anything important?” Clark asked.

“Not really,” Lois replied, “Perry was just reminding me of the deadline for the evening edition.”

“Do you think we’ll have anything that we can share?”

“I think it’s best if we find something. You know the questions that the tests have generated. Once the general public learned that Superman was lifting ships again, we had a story that needs some kind of conclusion.”

Clark reached out and took his wife’s hand. “I wish I knew what to think. I’m... I’m nervous.”

“Why?” Lois asked. “You told me that you were able to do all the tests.”

“Yes,” Clark agreed, “but some of the lifts were very hard. I wish I could remember how it went the first time.”

Before Lois could answer Bernie came in carrying a stack of papers. “Sorry, but I wanted to run one more set of calculations through the computer before we talked.”

“That’s fine,” Clark said as Bernie took his seat on the other side of his desk. “Did you get enough information to generate meaningful results?”

“Yes,” Bernie replied, his voice suddenly somber. “I’m sorry for taking so long, but when the first set of results came in, I wanted to be sure so we performed a second round of tests.”

Lois looked sharply at her husband. “You didn’t tell me that you were repeating tests.”

“I wasn’t... I mean I didn’t.” Clark turned to Bernie. “I didn’t repeat any tests.”

“The duplicate tests were designed to test the same ability in a different way. We created new tests that may have seemed different, but tested the same ability. We weren’t trying to deceive you. We were just trying to be as careful as possible.”

“Why?” Lois demanded sharply.

Bernie blanched at her challenge. He’d clearly never run into Mad-Dog Lane. “The preliminary results showed a marked decrease in your abilities.”

Both Lois and Clark were silent for a few seconds. “What kind of decrease?” Clark finally asked.

“Speed. Strength. Your ability to fly carrying a load. Pretty much everything that we had baseline data on from before Nightfall.”

“How much of a decrease?” Clark asked.

“At first the data suggested a drop of about a ten percent. But when we ran more tests the number came in slightly below that. Based on the test data we collected, your abilities are eighty-six percent of what they were before Nightfall.”

“But that’s just because he hasn’t recovered from Nightfall completely, isn’t it?” Lois suggested.

Bernie shook his head. “We don’t think so. That was one of the things we were looking for.” He looked directly at Clark. “Your powers fluctuate based on your expenditures, but you recover quickly when you have access to sunlight. Of course, we can’t say for sure until we have some data over different, longer time periods, but our official position is that the Nightfall experience has permanently cost you fourteen percent of your abilities.”

“What... What does that mean in terms of my ability to perform the duties of Superman?”

“Nothing.” Bernie replied immediately. “Well, at least not for everyday actions. For all practical purposes, you’re still just as strong and just as invulnerable as before. We do think it has impacted your endurance, but that will only show up in long-duration expenditures of energy like what happened during the Nightfall Swarm mission.”

“What about LexCorp Tower?” Lois asked.

“It might have had something to do with what happened at LexCorp Tower, but we just can’t be sure. You hit a six-foot-thick block of reinforced concrete. Even at full power, that barrier might have stopped you for the second or two that it took for the building collapse to catch up with you. Your slow recovery may be related to your reduced abilities, but we just can’t know for sure. The baseline data that we had from before the first Nightfall mission simply was not that comprehensive. With your permission we will periodically retest you to see how your abilities evolve and change, but for now that’s all we have.”

Clark turned to Lois. “What should we report?”

She looked at Bernie. “Has this information been shared with the government?”

“Yes,” Bernie replied. “They assisted in designing the tests. You didn’t ask me to keep that information secret,” he added defensively.

“No we didn’t,” Clark reassured him. Then he turned to Lois. “We have to assume that this information will be widely available, at least in secret government circles, so I would rather make it completely public.”

Lois looked at Bernie. “Have you gotten any pressure to keep any of this secret?”

“Not really. I was very open with my government contacts

that I was going to share all this information with Superman. If Superman chooses to share this with the Daily Planet, there isn’t anything I can do about it.” He offered them a manila envelope. “This is Superman’s copy of the test results and the report that I generated.”

Clark took the report but didn’t open it. “Eighty-six percent?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so. But based on the tests you really shouldn’t notice any difference in day-to-day activities. It wasn’t your loss of speed that enabled the building to collapse on you, it was that concrete barrier.”

Clark glanced briefly at Lois. “Yes, that barrier,” he said softly.

Bernie continued without seeming to notice the interruption. “And I’m not sure what you expect to have shot at you, but you are still completely impervious to any conventional weapon. Bullets can’t hurt you. We didn’t test this, but based on my calculations even something like a high-velocity depleted uranium tank round wouldn’t have a chance to hurt you. Even an artillery round — same result. You aren’t as strong or as tough as you were, but you were so far above anything else, that the loss simply doesn’t matter. Oh, it will take you a few extra seconds to fly across the world, but for getting around Metropolis or even the United States, the impact to your travel time will be barely measurable.”

“But I will run out of energy sooner. We saw that.”

“Yes,” Bernie confirmed. “And when you do get depleted, it will take longer to recover. If you want to be extra conservative, you might consider cutting back on Superman’s activities.”

“We were already considering something like that,” Clark said. “Being Superman was a learn-as-I-went exercise. From what Lois has told me and what I do remember, at first I was trying to help everyone with everything. I think I was going to have to cut back anyway. This just provides another reason.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Bernie interjected. “You need to be extra careful to stay away from Kryptonite.”

“I don’t think you need to warn us of that,” Lois replied.

“Of course, but let me clarify,” Bernie said. “We believe that the Kryptonite somehow destroyed approximately fourteen percent of your abilities. Some of the data suggests that if you were to go through another long-duration exposure to Kryptonite, it could continue to permanently remove your abilities. There is a chance that if you were to suffer continuous exposure, you could permanently lose up to ten percent of your abilities each day.”

“From what I recall of Kryptonite, I fear that a week of continual exposure would kill me.”

“I understand. But one of my coworkers suggested that a lower-level exposure could remove all of your abilities without killing you.”

“Dr. Klein,” Lois injected coldly. “Why are your researchers having that kind of discussion?”

“Please,” Bernie pleaded defensively, “I’m on your side. But when you have very smart people reviewing data and trying to understand what it means, ideas and meanings get discussed. I promise you that no one involved means you any harm. We’re simply trying to understand the data and interpret its meaning. I assure you that none of those discussions ended up in any report.”

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Chapter 8: Gone

Lois looked at her investigation notes with distaste. No matter how much she tried to get back into the swing of regular reporting, she just didn’t seem to be able to get away from the Superman stories. In many ways, that was ironically funny. During the period before Nightfall, she had thought that any story which didn’t revolve around Superman wasn’t worth her time. Now that she could have all of those that she wanted, she was much more interested in going back to regular news and more

conventional investigations. However, now that she wasn't looking for them, those stories of her husband's exploits seemed to come looking for her.

It had been almost two weeks since Clark had been trapped by the collapse of LexCorp Tower. The revelation that Superman had suffered a permanent loss of abilities after Nightfall had been a shock to the world, but it did make it easier for Clark to not respond to every incident.

"What did I miss?"

Lois turned to find Clark behind her. He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss before she could answer. "Nothing," she said. "I thought you would be back sooner."

"I would have been, but—" Clark looked around to make sure no one was within earshot before continuing. "I'd barely arrived in Metropolis when there was a mugging just down the block. Since I was right there, and already in the suit, I stopped it."

"Was there anything newsworthy?" Lois asked.

"Not really. It's just..."

"What?" Lois pressed.

"I swear that there's been a big increase in the criminals trying to shoot me since they learned that I'm not as powerful as I used to be."

"What happened?"

"There were two bad guys in what looked like a run-of-the-mill mugging. When I intervened, both of them immediately pulled out pistols and started firing at me. In fact, once I arrived, they appeared to lose any interest in their original target and only seemed interested in me. Their guns were loaded with armor piercing bullets and they made a point to aim at my head."

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. Dr. Klein was right when he said that any reduction in my overall abilities doesn't seem to have any noticeable effect. I wish there was some way to get that message out."

"Well, we did try. That article..." Lois trailed off without finishing. She'd tried to warn him that this exact result was likely if Superman admitted any weakness, but Clark had insisted on going ahead. Sometimes Lois hated being right.

Clark grimaced at the reminder of his mistake. "That's okay. I should have listened to you when you said that an interview where Superman discussed his new limitations was a bad idea. I should never have made any statement on the matter."

"Well, it might have helped," Lois said, in a conciliatory voice. "After the news came out that your powers had been reduced, some people were bound to try to challenge you anyway."

"Yeah. But the fact is that having Superman come out and say that the loss of powers wouldn't have any effect, did exactly the opposite of what I'd hoped. I think that just about everyone assumed that Superman was lying and really was vulnerable. Now every criminal that I encounter seems to feel that they have to find out for themselves."

"It won't last too long," Lois comforted. "According to my sources, the underworld is figuring out that your announcement was real. Bobby was telling me earlier today that the air is thick with stories of every kind of cop-killer and armor piercing bullet failing to do anything more than annoy you. Some of the stories of the expression on your face when people start shooting are priceless. Apparently, you have a very telling, 'not again' look of exasperation."

"I hope you're right," Clark said. "So, what are your plans for today?"

"You know that we've never been able to get a lead on who's running crime in this city since Lex's empire collapsed. Remember that I told you that I had a lead that might prove promising?"

"Yes," Clark said cautiously.

"This morning I got a call from a woman who claims to be a secretary in City Hall. She says that she's seen some people coming and going who feel very suspicious."

Clark looked skeptical. "That doesn't sound like much of a lead."

"I know. But one of the people she described sounded a lot like Casey Maze."

"Crazy Casey Maze? The guy that was too dangerous for Nigel St. John?"

"Relax, Clark. I'm not meeting him. This woman — she's going by the name Sally — described a few of the people she'd seen. Maze's tattoos make him stand out, which was why she remembered him."

"Do you need me to come with you? I'm supposed to cover the city council meetings this afternoon, but I can switch it."

"No need," Lois reassured him. "We're meeting in a public place and only for a few minutes. If I were considering a meeting with someone like Maze, then you can be sure that I'd want you with me. But this Sally woman is just a low-level secretary that likes my work and wants to do something to help. She may not know anything, but if she does, then this will be a chance to establish another contact in city hall."

"If you're sure..."

"Clark, we've had this discussion before. I'm glad that you care, but you can't get in the way of me doing my job. You know that I know how to do first-contacts with sources."

"I know, but I will worry, so please be careful."

The absence of the sound of Lois's heartbeat surprised Clark when he got home at 6:35 in the evening. Having the advantage of Superman's hearing meant that he didn't need to bother with calling out. He looked quickly around the apartment but there was no note to be found. As near as he could tell, the apartment was exactly the way they'd left it this morning. He picked up the phone and dialed Perry's house.

The phone rang only twice before being picked up. "Hello?" It was Alice.

"Hi, Alice. It's Clark."

"Oh, hi Clark. Would you like to speak to your parents?"

"Thank you, but not right now. Has Lois been by there?"

"Lois? No. I haven't seen her since the two of you came over for dinner a few nights ago. Were you expecting her to drop by?"

"No," Clark answered. "I just came home from the office, and she wasn't there and now she isn't at home either. I'm just trying to figure out where she went. I'll make some more calls. Tell my parents 'Hi' for me."

"I'll do that. Good luck finding Lois. You know how she can take off after a story sometimes."

"I do. Well, thanks Alice. Bye."

He heard Alice say "Bye" as he was hanging up the phone.

Of course Lois could be off chasing a story, but since they'd been married she had been very good at letting him know when she was going to be working on something after hours.

Sometimes she got a little secretive about the details — the habits from her time as a solo reporter were hard to break — but she almost always made sure that he knew when she was going to be out. Tonight felt wrong. Very wrong. Something had to be happening. Clark changed quickly into the Superman suit and did a quick check of the city. His first stop was the Planet, just in case he'd just missed Lois when she left. When he saw Perry in his office, he switched back to his Clark clothes and went in.

"Perry?" Clark asked as he stuck his head in Perry's door.

"Clark? Why are you here, I thought you went home?"

"I did, but I can't find Lois. Do you have any idea where she might be?"

Perry shook his head. "No. The last I heard was when she went to meet that source early this afternoon. I haven't seen her

since then. Do you think something went wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Clark answered. “But this doesn’t feel right.”

“I’m sorry, Clark. But she’s a big girl. I’m sure she’s fine.”

“Yeah,” Clark said doubtfully. “She’s probably at home now wondering where I am.”

“Head home and try to relax,” Perry said. “She’ll turn up. Probably with a story.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks Perry.” He headed out of the office and — just to be careful — verified that she still wasn’t at home. Then he spent the next fifteen minutes buzzing the city trying to look for either her or something happening that she’d find newsworthy. Unfortunately, Metropolis was unusually quiet tonight and the search came up empty. Then he spent five more minutes making slower-speed passes over all the areas of their ongoing investigations. There was no sign of her at all.

When, after half an hour, Clark returned home, Lois was still not there. Now he was worried. He checked the time, picked up the phone and dialed another number. After a single ring he heard a gruff voice. “Forty-Third Precinct.”

“This is Clark Kent of the Daily Planet. Is Inspector Henderson in?”

“One minute.”

After only a few seconds Bill answered the phone. “Henderson.”

“Bill, it’s Clark Kent.”

“Kent, what do you need this evening?”

“I’m sorry to call you about this, but I’m having trouble finding Lois.”

“Clark, I like you two, but it isn’t my job to keep track of your wife.”

“I know, Bill. But she’s seemed to have disappeared, and something about this doesn’t feel right. Do you know of anything going on in the city tonight that might cause her to forget to tell me she was chasing a story?”

“No, the day has been quiet and I haven’t seen any reports of anything that fits that description.”

“Okay. Thanks, Bill.”

“Don’t worry, Clark. I’ve known her for a long time. She’ll turn up. Just try to relax and enjoy a quiet evening. I’m sure she’ll have a great story when she comes in.”

“You’re probably right. Have a good evening, Bill.”

The click of the Bill hanging up the phone sounded unusually loud.

Four hours later, Clark was at his wit’s end. He’d buzzed the city several times and talked to every snitch that he could contact at this time of night. He’d even called the White’s house once more to see if Perry had heard anything. Unfortunately, all of his efforts came to the same end. Lois was nowhere to be found. It was as if a hole had opened up in the universe and swallowed her whole. With nothing left to try, he finally climbed into bed alone for the first time since he’d been married.

The bullpen lacked color this morning. But that only made sense. Clark’s whole world had gone cold and grey. Lois was missing and he was lost.

After he went to bed, he’d lain there for a few hours listening for any sign of her coming in. After 2:00 a.m. he’d given up completely on sleep and started doing patrols. He spent the rest of the night covering Metropolis like a blanket. He’d been careful to never go more than a few minutes without returning home to see if Lois was there, but she’d never come. Other than causing a number of petty criminals to have a really bad evening, the exercise had been a waste of time.

Once he was at the Planet, he headed straight for Perry’s office. Perry saw him coming and waved him in before Clark even reached the door. “Any word?” Perry asked.

“No. I filed a missing person report this morning. While I

was there, I talked to Bill Henderson.”

“Now does he believe that Lois is missing?” Perry asked, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“Yes,” Clark answered. “It turns out that he’d gone ahead and put out a bulletin to be on the look-out for Lois last night.”

“Well, Bill is a good man. I’m glad he believed you.”

“Yeah. He told me that after our call ended last night, he realized that Lois would have let me know if she was going to be doing anything that would keep her out. Unfortunately, that extra time didn’t seem to help.”

“Are you sure Lois didn’t have any plans other than that meeting with this Sally woman?”

“That’s all she said. Now, something might have come up suddenly, but I have no idea what that could have been.”

“And Lois didn’t give you any indication of where this meeting was going to take place?”

“No. Lois only said that it was going to be in some place public. It was clear that she viewed this as a very simple low-risk first contact.”

“Do you think this meeting was a setup?”

“Of course,” Clark answered quickly. “Don’t you?”

“I didn’t want to say so, but yes. I’m surprised that Lois would be able to be caught in something like this. She knows how our business works.”

“Well, she didn’t seem to think this was a high-risk contact. Still, the fact that she had arranged for the meeting to be in a public place tells me that she was trying to exercise at least a normal level of caution. The problem is that generally we have some clue when to be extra careful. Right now, neither Lois nor I are involved in any particularly sensitive investigations. The research that involved this Sally woman was basic old-school influence peddling. Lois’s background work had only just started, and so far all we had was a little hearsay. Kidnapping Lois to stop this investigation doesn’t seem to make any sense.”

“Are you going to be able to work today? I didn’t really expect you to come in if Lois didn’t turn up,” Perry said.

“I need to try to do something to keep my mind occupied,” Clark replied. “I can’t just sit at home. I’ve asked Mom and Dad to stay at our place in case Lois comes home, so I’ll know immediately if she shows up there. The police have the number here and at home, so they can reach me at either place. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to be here.”

“I understand. Do you need anything from me?” Perry asked.

“Just bear with me that I may not be at my best today.”

“Do what you can. And try not to worry. Lois can take care of herself better than anyone I’ve ever met.”

The phone didn’t even complete its ring before Clark had the receiver to his ear and was saying, “Clark Kent.” It had been that way all morning.

“We have your wife.” The voice sounded artificial and electronic. The person at the other end was clearly using some kind of voice altering device.

“If you’ve harmed her—” Clark started, not bothering to contain his anger.

“She’s fine,” the voice cut him off quickly. “We mean no harm to either you or your wife.”

“I want to talk to her!” Clark demanded.

“No. If you follow my instructions she will be released completely unharmed. But until then, you will not be able to talk to her.”

“Then I won’t cooperate!”

“Then we will kill her. If that’s what you want, you should hang up the phone right now.”

Even through the voice distortion device, Clark could feel the icy callousness of those words. “What do you want?” he asked.

“Better,” the voice said. “You are to contact Superman and

tell him to appear on the roof of the Jefferson building at precisely 12:15 this afternoon. He will receive further instructions from there. Once he meets us, we will consider you to have met your obligation and your wife will be released.”

“What if I can’t find him? I know Superman, but I’m not his keeper.”

“We understand. In that case then we will try again tomorrow. But that does mean that your wife will remain our prisoner for this evening. Also, if this goes on for more than a day or two, we will be forced to kill your wife and move on to our backup plan to contact Superman.”

“I’ll do my best,” Clark said, “but please promise not to hurt her if I can’t reach him today.”

“I promise nothing. However, I will say that we are unlikely to kill her today. Still, I advise you to do your very best to reach Superman quickly. I’m sure your pretty wife would rather be in your company than ours.”

“Twelve fifteen on top of the Jefferson building. Is there anything else?”

“Only that we will consider it an act of bad faith on your part if you tell the police about this call. We don’t have any particular objection to your having spoken to Inspector Henderson last night and again this morning. But if you were to tell him about this phone call before we have the chance to meet with Superman... well, we would have to consider that an alteration of the conditions for your wife to be released unharmed. And, as is obvious, we have connections into MPD and will know if you chose to act foolishly in this regard. So, do you understand what we require of you?”

“I understand,” Clark answered seriously.

There was a click of the phone being hung up on the other end. In some ways this was comforting. At least now he knew what had happened to Lois. The kidnapers said that she was all right, but they could be lying. Still, what choice did he have? This operation had clearly been planned carefully. These people knew what they wanted, and seemed to be able to monitor his activities. At least, they knew when he’d contacted the police. Clark thought for a few seconds, then stood and headed for Perry’s office.

Perry was busy so he waited for Perry to finish chewing out Ralph for his latest story gaffe. In less than a minute Ralph left the office and Perry waved him in. “You’ve heard something?” Perry asked anxiously. He was clearly worried about Lois.

“Yes. Lois was kidnapped. I just got a call from the kidnapers.”

Perry’s face went cold. “What do they want?”

“They want to meet Superman. Since there are clearly ways to meet him without kidnapping anyone, I’m not sure how much I believe that’s the whole story. I hope that they just want to be sure that he comes, but there’s no way to know for sure.”

“Have you called the police yet?” Perry asked.

“No. They warned me against that. They seem to have some way to know when I talk to the police. They certainly knew about my two conversations with Henderson last night and this morning. Also, given the nature of their request and the timing, I don’t see what the police could do.”

Perry was silent for a moment. He seemed to be thinking through options. “How are you supposed to arrange this?” he finally asked.

“They told me the time and the place. I really don’t know what to expect, but that will be for Superman to decide.”

“Clark...” Perry started, then paused. The older man stared at him for several seconds then started again. “Can you reach Superman that quickly?”

“Yes. Chief, you know that Superman is closer to Lois and I than most people know. I’m sure I can reach him and that he will be there.”

“Okay... if you’re sure this is the best course of action then you should go ahead.”

“I am. I have to do whatever I can to keep Lois safe. I know Superman will feel that way as well.”

“I’m sure he does,” Perry replied. “Did they give you any clue what they want from Superman?”

“No. But obviously it can’t be good. One thing was very clear from that phone call. These people are smart and capable. They aren’t doing this to get Superman to help with some small problem. Whatever this is about, it’s big.”

“So, how does talking to Superman do them any good? They can’t force him to do anything.”

“I don’t know. They might try to keep Lois and try to use her as a lever against him. I also have some other ideas of what they might want, but those ideas don’t feel reasonable. But the fact that they set all this up worries me.”

“So what’s your plan?” Perry asked.

“I need to contact Superman. Then I want to talk to my parents. I’m going to ask them to remain at our apartment until this is all resolved. Perry, I’d like to take the rest of the day and see if I can get all this straightened out. In fact, depending on what... Superman needs of me, I may have to be out even longer than that.”

“Of course, Clark,” Perry said. “Do what you can to get Lois back safely.”

“Well, at least this one doesn’t smell,” Clark said to the empty tunnel in which he found himself. It had been a long afternoon. Clark had arrived on the top of the Jefferson building right on time. Less than a minute later he heard a cell phone start to ring. It was under a ledge near the door that provided access to the roof. Clark picked up the phone and pressed the answer button. “Superman speaking.”

He heard the same electronically distorted voice that had delivered the original instructions. “Go to the corner of Baxter and Lake. On the southeast corner you will see a yellow newspaper box. Next to the box is a door. Go through the door and wait inside. You will receive further instructions. Bring the phone. You have twenty seconds.” Clark heard the click of the cell phone disconnecting.

It took far less than twenty seconds to find the door. The room behind the door looked like it might have once been the store room for a shop. There was another door, but since Clark had been told to wait, he didn’t try to go through it. The room itself was bare except for a chair in the middle of the room, a clock on the wall and a camera pointed at the chair. At the twenty second mark, the cell phone rang again. “I’m here,” he answered.

“Sit in the chair for fifteen minutes. Under no circumstances are you to leave the room for any reason. You will receive further instructions.”

That instruction seemed odd, but with Lois at risk, Clark didn’t know what else to do, so he sat down. Precisely fifteen minutes later the phone rang. “Now what?” Clark said when he answered the phone.

“You will find a map with instructions taped to the bottom of the yellow newspaper box outside. Follow the instructions on the map. You have three minutes to arrive at the next destination. Leave the phone on the chair.”

The map was right where they said. The reason for the map became quickly obvious. The instructions were very detailed and led to a deep, dirty section of the city sewer system. There was an old service phone at the end of the path. Obviously the next method of contact. At what he guessed was the three minute mark the phone rang.

“Count slowly, out loud, to three hundred. When we hear you reach three hundred you will receive your next destination.”

“One, two, three...” Clark started. He’d never heard of

anything like this. He guessed that this was part of making sure he was not being followed or communicating with anyone.

When he said the words three hundred, the voice picked up again. “Look down the tunnel. You will see that in one direction there is a blue light. Follow the tunnel in that direction. Go past the blue light and continue until you come to a red light. At that point, turn to the passage on your left. Follow that until you see another red light. You will find another packet of instructions hanging on the wall. Follow those instructions.”

An hour later Clark found himself in this location. He’d been in and out of the sewers several times. One stop had been a shack out in the country, but he’d had a feeling since early on that this trek was going to end in the sewers. This place was cleaner than most of the sewer locations he’d seen today, but not the cleanest. Clark moved to a spot where what looked like a red plastic plate sat on the floor of the tunnel. The instruction had been to go to this spot and wait for instructions.

He been there only a few seconds when a portion of the wall beside him opened. “Superman, please come in.” This was a real voice with no electronic distortion. Clark tried to look through the wall, but he couldn’t see anything. The room on the other side must be lined with lead.

He passed through the door into a dark room. He’d barely cleared the entryway when the door slid closed behind him. He turned to the man standing at the far end of the room. “You must know that you can’t imprison me with any kind of door. Not even a lead-lined one.”

“We know. The door didn’t close to imprison you. It’s simply that while it is unlikely that we will be disturbed, it is possible that a sewer worker could wander by. Closing the door simply ensures our privacy.”

“Has Ms. Lane been released? What’s this about?”

“I don’t know the answer to either question. I am simply a link in the chain. My job is to bring you to my employer.”

Clark was furious. This had gone on all day. They must know by now that he was determined to cooperate. “Then let’s get on with it,” Clark said shortly.

“Very well,” the man said. “Follow me.” He walked to the far side of the room and opened another door. “Superman, if you please,” and he gestured Clark to go first.

In the room was a complicated wheelchair and what looked like a metallic hood. “Please sit down. From here out you get to ride. I am going to have to ask you to wear this hood so that for the rest of the trip, you can’t see where we are going.”

Clark sat in the chair. The man put the hood on his head and buckled a strap under his chin. The hood had been well made. He could breathe, but he couldn’t see anything. “Can you hear me?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Clark replied. “Let’s just get this done.”

“I’m about to turn on a sound and vibration unit build into this chair. It is intended to make it more difficult for you to tell where we are going.” Clark felt the chair begin to vibrate. “Relax, Superman, you will be at your destination in less than an hour.”

It felt like the chair was moving. Then he heard what sounded like a car engine start and he could feel the forces of movement. He must be in some kind of vehicle. Then he could hear what sounded like street sounds. And he picked up some smells. First there was a bakery and then what had to be an Italian restaurant.

Clark couldn’t tell how long he seemed to be in the vehicle. Based on his rough estimate of the time and the change in the things he’d heard and smelled, it was possible he’d left the city. Right at the end, all the sounds stopped except for a vehicle sound, and it had an echo that gave Clark the impression that they were driving through some kind of tunnel. Finally, the engine sounds stopped altogether and he heard a door open. He strained for voices but couldn’t make out anything. He felt the chair moving again. With the chair vibrating it was hard to tell but he

seemed to move at least another couple of hundred yards.

Finally everything went quiet. “Where am I?” Clark shouted. “I demand to speak to the person in charge!”

Nothing but silence answered his call for several seconds. Then he felt a wave of pain that he recognized too well. Kryptonite! He felt himself sag in the chair. Then he felt a sharp pain in his arm. “How about that?” a voice said right next to him. “He bleeds just like anybody else.”

“That’s what the boss said would happen,” came another voice.

The lead helmet was pulled roughly off his head. The heavyset man in front of him was different than the one he’d met in the tunnel. “Listen, Supes, you need to pay attention.” The pain was too great for Clark to look up. Suddenly he felt a rough slap and the man grabbed his head and lifted it. “See those openings up near the ceiling? Those are gun ports and they’re manned continually. If you make any move to escape, the men behind those slits will open fire. Based on how easy it was to cut you just now, I don’t think you want them opening up on you. So don’t make any sudden moves. The boss will be here to see you in a minute.”

The man dropped his head and started away. Clark mustered enough energy to look around. He was in a large cylindrical room. It had to be at least twenty feet across with a high ceiling that towered at least thirty feet above him. High up on the wall there was a large glass section in addition to those gun ports. There was a single, tunnel-like doorway through which the man had just exited. Finally, there were green glowing crystals everywhere. Most were suspended from the ceiling on wires but some were sticking out of the walls all around him.

“Well, we meet again,” a voice said from the doorway. “You have no idea how much I’ve looked forward to this.”

He knew that voice. He’d just never expected to hear it again. Coming into the chamber was a smiling Lex Luthor.

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Chapter 9: Prisoner

Clark had two categories of memories of Luthor. Some were relatively vague, half-remembered images from before Nightfall. In those memories, Luthor always seemed like some kind of cartoon villain. Clark had an image of a man who had more money and power than any reasonable person could want, but continued to take and destroy seemingly only for the pleasure of doing so.

Then there were the complete memories of what he’d seen of Luthor after Nightfall. As Clark Kent, he’d never been in a position to see behind the mask that Luthor usually wore. If it hadn’t been for that recording where he so clearly claimed responsibility for the Nightfall trap that had cost Clark so much, he would have a hard time believing that Luthor was in truth a villain.

But now, with Luthor all but laughing as he gloated over a captive who was not only incapacitated, but in pain as well, the image of that cartoon villain returned. And as Clark watched Luthor circling the room, it was all too apparent that those half-remembered images of the cartoon villain were the far more correct memories of this man.

“He’s nearly unconscious,” Lex said, as he looked up toward the window near the ceiling of the chamber. His tone made it clear that he wasn’t happy that Clark wasn’t more alert. “I don’t want him to die too quickly.”

“Sir, you told us to be cautious,” came a defensive voice over a speaker. “Right now, we’re making sure that he’s getting enough Kryptonite exposure to incapacitate him. After you’ve finished your initial interview, we’ll begin a series of tests to determine what level of Kryptonite exposure is optimum for rendering him powerless and vulnerable, but not enough of an exposure to be fatal. We have a series of tests planned that should

only take a few hours to complete. Once we have that information, we can position the Kryptonite to have exactly the result you desire.”

Luthor grunted and turned to face Clark. When he realized that Clark was watching him, his smile grew even broader. “Well, hello, Superman,” he said loudly. “I was afraid that you weren’t going to be awake for this interview.” Lex stepped back and went over to a shelf that seemed built into the wall. On the shelf was a pair of black gloves. “Your being here almost makes me glad that my little trick with the concrete wall in LexCorp tower failed,” Luthor said over his shoulder as he put on the gloves. Then he turned back to Clark. “Did you wonder why there was a thick concrete wall right in the path you were supposed to follow for that demolition?” The gloves were on his hands now and Luthor returned to Clark’s location in the center of the room. “I have to admit that I did that whole concrete wall trap on just a whim. I figured what would be the harm in dropping a building on you?” Then Luthor leaned down and got right in Clark’s face. “Did you enjoy it as much as I did?”

Clark didn’t see the point of an answer so he started to turn his head away.

There was a sudden sharp blow to his face as Luthor punched him. Clark felt a sharp, scratching sensation as he saw blood from his face splatter. A closer look at the gloves revealed that those leather gloves seemed to have metal studs embedded in them. “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” Luthor shouted. “You’re only going to be alive as long as I find you entertaining! So, did you enjoy it when I dropped the building on you?!”

“No,” Clark replied.

That brought a smile to Luthor’s face. “Good,” he said, now eerily calm. “I’d hate to think that you could demolish my building and not suffer for it. But as I said, if I’d killed you then, you wouldn’t have had the chance to see this nice room that I prepared. Do you like it?”

Clark had learned his lesson from the earlier blow. “Yes,” he replied.

That elicited another smile, and even a light laugh from Luthor. “Good, I’m glad you appreciate your accommodations. Let me give you the tour.” Luthor walked over to the wall and put his hand on the smooth white surface. “The walls are reinforced concrete and eight feet thick. Half-way through, there is a layer of lead plating to make sure that you can’t see anything beyond this chamber.” Then he stepped over to a piece of Kryptonite that was mounted on a rod sticking out of the wall. “These rods can be extended all the way to the center of the chamber or retracted into the wall.” Then Luthor pointed at the ceiling where Kryptonite was suspended from wires. “Those can also be raised and lowered. All of these are controlled from that room,” he pointed at the glass, “to fine-tune your exposure. Once we figure out the dosage, we should be able to keep you alive, but unpowered, for an exceptionally long time.”

Then Lex moved to another chunk of Kryptonite that looked to be mounted on the wall. “You will see that I have these smaller pieces embedded in the chamber walls all around you. If the calculations on your susceptibility are correct, as long as you remain at the exact center of the chamber, these shouldn’t cause you any harm. If you were to try to get anywhere near a wall or the entrance, they should slow you down.” Then Luthor walked over to the entrance tunnel. “See this line?” he asked, pointing at a red line approximately five feet from the door. “That’s your deadline. If you touch that line, the men behind those guns above you will open fire. No hesitation and no questions asked. If you touch the line, or they even think you are about to touch the line, all of the Kryptonite suspended above you will drop to the floor and they will open fire. If you die I will be mildly disappointed. If you escape, every one of them and their families will be killed.”

“Why?” Clark croaked.

“Because the game isn’t over,” Luthor snapped. “You thought you’d won.” With every word his voice grew a little louder. “You thought you took my city and then you took everything else. You need to know that the game isn’t over until I say it is!” he shouted. By the time he had finished he’d been shouting at the top of his lungs.

In that moment, Clark realized that Luthor wasn’t simply angry and evil. The ex-billionaire was insane as well. And Clark was completely in his power. “If you want to win so badly, why don’t you just kill me?” Clark asked in a croaking voice. “Why all the trouble to build this room?”

“Because you need to suffer,” Luthor said coldly. “When I thought I’d killed you, I figured we were even. I’d lost a lot, but you’d lost your life. That seemed fair. But no, you weren’t dead. Not only that, but you came back and pulled that stunt with Klein to make yourself more popular than ever. So now it isn’t enough to kill you. I need to make you suffer. This room can inflict no small amount of pain on its own. But I plan to visit you every day to make sure you’re... comfortable.”

Suddenly Luthor pushed him. Clark fell out of the chair and onto his back. Then Luthor was above him, punching his face. Based on the way the blows were falling, he guessed Luthor might be kneeling on his chest, but Clark really couldn’t tell. The beating went on and on. Clark had seen bullies in schoolyards do this to helpless victims. He never thought he would be on the receiving end of this kind of beating.

He must have passed out because the next thing he knew was water splashing on his face. “You’re back? Good,” Luthor’s voice said. “Now that was fun. Just think, Superman, we’ll get to play this way every day. At least, up to the point where I get tired of the game and decide to kill you.”

Clark heard footsteps retreating and then Luthor’s voice again. “I want that report on his reaction to varying the Kryptonite distance to be waiting for me first thing tomorrow morning,” Luthor said, apparently to someone in the control room. “And don’t let him die. I’ve barely begun to play.”

Slowly, but painfully, Clark opened his eyes open to find Luthor standing at the doorway staring at him. “Oh, and one more thing. You came here to rescue the lovely Ms. Lane. Well, I thought you should know that I have no plans to release her — ever. I have plans for her, but... well, let’s just say that I don’t think Mr. Kent would approve of my plans for his wife.” Then Luthor laughed and walked out the door.

The bed felt especially soft this morning, but Lois’s clothes felt a little tight. Then she realized that something was wrong. Her eyes popped open and she looked around the room. This wasn’t home. In fact, this wasn’t any place that she remembered.

How did she get here? She concentrated for a few seconds. She’d been in the park. She remembered watching the people walk by. The woman, Sally, was supposed to meet her at three o’clock sharp. The last thing she remembered was a sting in the back of her neck. Lois reached to the back of her neck and could feel a small bump where she’d been stung — or more probably, where she’d been drugged. She looked around the room again. It looked more like the bedroom of a nice apartment, than what she would find in a hotel room. However, there was no window.

Lois swung her legs off the bed and sat up. She didn’t feel any residual dizziness so she stood, moving slowly just in case. She achieved vertical without any problem. That was a good sign. She went to the bathroom. It was very nice. Wherever she was, it was a classy establishment. The bathroom was well stocked including towels, washcloths and other linens that a person might need. There was a medicine cabinet which contained a few basics such as aspirin and mouthwash. It even held a new toothbrush and tube of toothpaste.

A large walk-in closet on the other side of the bathroom was

fully stocked with women's clothes. It only took a few seconds to determine that they were all of a similar style as she generally wore, and that everything was in her size. The implications of the clothes sent a chill through her.

It was time to find out what was going on. She returned to the bedroom and headed for the closed door that looked like should lead to the rest of the apartment. She hoped she wouldn't have to batter her way out, but was ready to do so if that was going to be what it took to get home. Somewhat to her surprise, the doorknob turned easily.

The doorway led to a short hall. At the end of the hall was a huge living area. Off to the left was a kitchen and eating area. In front of her was some kind of gathering area with chairs and a sofa. Off to her right was an entertainment area with a large television. This was clearly some sort of luxury apartment.

"I'm glad to see that you're awake," came a pleasant voice from her right. Lois turned quickly to see an older woman smiling at her from the other end of the entertainment area. She seemed to have come from a section of the apartment out beyond the entertainment area.

"Who are you?" Lois snapped. "And why am I here?"

"My name is Martha," she woman answered calmly. "Martha Severs. As to why you're here, I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know. One minute I was in Children's Park to meet someone. The next thing I remember is waking up here." Lois looked her over. "You don't look like you were kidnapped."

"No, dear, I was hired to be here. But I've already been told that you aren't here by choice. If we can sit down I'll be happy to tell you all I know."

This woman sounded awfully genuine. Maybe it was that English accent. Or the fact that she looked like somebody's grandmother out of a movie. But this wasn't the time to talk. "I need to get out of here," Lois said. "Where's the door that leads out of this place?"

"This way," the woman said. She started toward the kitchen area and walked up to a metal panel the size and shape of a doorway. "From what I can tell, this is the door."

Lois looked at the 'door' carefully. It was nothing more than a flat, blank sheet of steel. As a test, Lois pounded on it with her fist. She could tell from the sound and feel that it was very thick. She looked back at Martha. "What do you mean by 'from what you can tell', don't you know how to get in and out?"

"No, dear," she answered. "I was asleep when I arrived and woke up here just as you did."

"But you said you weren't kidnapped."

"No," then Martha looked around. "Can we please sit down? It would make a much more pleasant talk."

"Fine," Lois said, not ready to trust this woman no matter how grandmotherly she seemed.

Martha headed immediately to the kitchen table and sat. Lois followed and sat across from her. "That's better," Martha said. "So if you aren't going to tell me your name, could you please make up something? I hate the idea that I'll be addressing you only as Miss for as long as we're here."

"I'm Lois Lane," Lois said.

"It's nice to meet you, Lois," Martha said. "You're American, aren't you?"

"Of course," Lois replied.

"How nice," Martha said. "I used to see a lot of Americans, but after Nightfall, most of you stopped coming to London. Do you live here?"

"I live in Metropolis," Lois answered, confused.

"I've always wanted to visit the states," Martha mused. "I've grown up wanting to see the world, but somehow I never got around to it. What were you doing in London?"

"London? I haven't been in London for years. I was in

Metropolis when I was kidnapped."

"Oh, my," Martha said. "Then I'd say one of us is a long way from home. I was hired in London."

"Hired?" Lois asked. "Maybe you should tell me how you came to be here."

"I responded to an advertisement in the London Times for a ladies maid. I applied for the job and was called in for an interview. The interview was fairly standard. The only unusual part was the question about being out-of-contact."

"Out-of-contact?" Lois asked.

"Yes," Martha replied. "The woman interviewing me — her name was Beth — said that the lady that I would be taking care of went long stretches in total isolation and that if I took the job I could be out of contact with my friends and family for several months."

"Didn't that strike you as a strange situation?"

"Yes, but I've heard of things like this before. Lois, how much experience do you have with people of extreme wealth?"

"Some," Lois said cautiously, "but that isn't my life."

"I can tell," Martha chuckled. "Dear, for the most part people are people. But I've been doing this sort of thing much of my life, and I've seen enough to know that it takes all kinds. So, the idea that my lady would be a recluse was unusual, but not startling."

"But I'm not a recluse. I'm a prisoner!" Lois snapped.

"I know that now, and I'm sorry. But I didn't find out that part until I arrived in this place," Martha replied.

"So how did you get here?" Lois asked.

"Back in London there was another round of interviews.

Finally, they told me that I got the job. I was told to pack whatever I needed for a trip that would last from one to two months. Then they picked me up at my home in a limousine. That was the last thing I remember before I found myself here. When I woke up, I started looking around this apartment. Within a few minutes a voice started talking to me."

"A voice?" Lois interrupted.

"Yes. There are speakers throughout the apartment. The voice sounded electronic and artificial, but it explained that I would be taking care of a very important woman who was going to be held against her will. When I heard that last part, I couldn't believe it. I'm no criminal. I tried to protest and tell the voice that I wouldn't have anything to do with holding a person prisoner. The voice just said that I wouldn't be required to do anything outside the bounds of the job I was hired for."

Then Martha paused for a moment. "The voice also said that failing to do my job would have serious consequences," she said, fear now evident in her voice. "So I hope you'll let me take care of you."

"Of course," Lois said softly.

"Anyway, that was about two days ago," Martha, continued. "At least, I've slept twice since then. You'll notice that there are no clocks and no way to judge time in this apartment."

"Do you know if this is London?"

"No. I would have sworn that I had only been asleep for a few minutes when I woke up here. But I guess that doesn't mean very much. This place," Martha motioned to indicate the room, "doesn't feel like London to me. I guess that means we're in Metropolis."

"Not necessarily. This place doesn't feel quite like Metropolis either. It reminds me of a luxury hotel suite I saw in Hong Kong once."

"You think we're in Hong Kong," Martha exclaimed.

"No. But I think this apartment was designed so that it could be almost anywhere." Lois glanced at her bare wrist. Until now she hadn't noticed her missing watch. "How did I arrive?"

"I don't know. I guess someone brought you in while I was asleep. All I really know is that you were in your bed when I woke up a few hours ago. I closed your door so that I wouldn't

disturb you when I started my morning routine.”

“You said you’ve been here a few days?” Lois asked.

“Yes.”

“How do you get food?”

“The kitchen is stocked with basic necessities. But the voice told me when I arrived that all meals would be delivered by the dumbwaiter.” Martha pointed to the small opening door in the kitchen wall. “There is a menu next to the dumbwaiter. When I want something I press the call button and place my order. The food comes a little later.”

Lois went over to the dumbwaiter door. It seemed to be locked. “It’s locked,” Lois said to Martha.

“I noticed that it only opens when the food is there.”

“Oh,” Lois said. Perhaps that would be an avenue of escape. She’d keep those thoughts to herself for now. Martha seemed genuine, but there was no way Lois could trust her.

Suddenly there was a voice from over Lois’s head. “Ms. Lane?” This was clearly an artificial voice of someone using a voice altering device.

“I demand that you release me immediately!” Lois shouted.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lane, but that will not be possible. You must remain our guest for the time being. I assure you that we mean you no harm, and, as you will see, we have done all that we can to make your stay as pleasant as possible.”

“You’ll never get away with this,” Lois said. “My husband will find me. We have powerful friends.”

“I cannot speak for what your husband might do. If he does find you, then you may leave us sooner than we planned. However, the chances of being rescued by your husband are very small. We know the team of Lane and Kent, and we know which person is the more capable member of that team. With you here, I doubt he will have any success in finding you. As for your powerful friends, we have taken that into account as well. In fact, it will come as no surprise to you that your friendship with Superman was the primary reason that you are with us now.”

“You know Superman?” Martha interrupted.

“We’re... friends,” Lois answered.

“Ms. Lane, you’re too modest. You are our guest because we need Superman to do something for us. Your presence is how we intend to compel him to cooperate.”

“Superman’s just a friend,” Lois appealed. “Holding me won’t get him to do anything for you.”

“We shall see,” the voice replied. “Whatever Superman may or may not do, you will be our guest for quite some time. Martha is there to make your stay as pleasant as possible. We hope the apartment meets your needs. Also, if there is anything you would like in terms of books or movies that are not already present in your suite, please let us know. You can ask for whatever you would like using the same call system as you use to order food. As I said, you are our guest and we will do what we can to make your stay as pleasant as possible.”

“You could let me go,” Lois commented.

“I’m sorry, but that is the one request that we cannot grant. Henceforth, we will only contact you on an as-needed basis.”

A long moment passed in silence. “I think he’s done,” Martha said.

“I need to think,” Lois commented. “It feels like morning to me. I need to go through my morning routine. How do I get coffee?”

“I’d be happy to make you some, dear. That’s one of the things we can do for ourselves. Why don’t you do get yourself cleaned up and I’ll get the coffee started.”

“Thank you, Martha. What about breakfast?”

“I had mine before you woke up. You can order whatever you want when you come out and have your coffee. It has only taken a few minutes from when I’ve placed my food orders to when the food arrived. Breakfast has been very quick to arrive each day.”

“Is the food any good?”

“I think so,” Martha replied. “But I’m easy to please. All the food that I’ve had so far has been very good.”

“Well, that’s something,” Lois grumbled. “I’m going to take a shower. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“Fine. Oh, and how strong do you like your coffee?”

“As strong as you can make it,” Lois said as she turned and headed back to her room.

It had been several hours since Lex had finished his encounter with Superman. Lex had known that the confrontation would leave him wound up, but this was far beyond what he’d expected.

The months since he’d disappeared had passed in something of a blur. Fortunately he’d planned well and money wasn’t a problem. At first he’d been afraid that he would have to abandon his identity because of his role in the Nightfall mission failure. However, there remained enough people that either hated Superman for their own reasons, or were willing to forgive anything for money, that he was able to reestablish his life using his own identity.

In many ways, his biggest challenge had been trying to pick a path for the rest of his life. He hated walking away from his unfinished business in Metropolis. It wasn’t his empire... that was a contest that he’d already won. No, his biggest regret was the loss of Lois Lane. From the moment she’d called him out at the White Orchid ball, she had captivated him as few other women had. It hadn’t taken long to decide that she would be the next Mrs. Luthor.

After Superman had been killed, he’d been certain that she would be his. With her world collapsing around her, she would naturally turn to him for support. But he’d made a slight miscalculation in the form of Lois’s hayseed partner. Kent had been collateral damage in his attack on Superman, and that had brought out the maternal instinct in Lois.

Under other circumstances it would have simply added spice to the game. It would have been amusing to see Kent confused and alone after Lex had charmed Lois away from him. Of course, if that did prove too challenging, then Kent would have simply met with a tragic accident. The streets of Metropolis had been so dangerous since Nightfall.

But Lex had been forced to flee before those plans could be put into serious motion. And what was worse, the evidence that Nigel had stupidly allowed to survive had turned his Lois against him. That meant that he needed to find a way to not only eliminate Kent, but to rehabilitate himself in her eyes. Planning for that operation had been nearly complete when Superman reappeared.

Superman provided Lex with new purpose. He would destroy the hero — painfully, personally this time — and use the same operation to effect his rehabilitation with Lois. Indeed, the operation was proceeding perfectly according to plan. Superman and Lois were now exactly where they were supposed to be.

Lex was considering heading for bed when a particularly special light flashed. Lex picked up the phone and dialed a number that he’d committed to memory. The voice at the other end of the line answered with, “Control room.”

“You signaled,” Lex said.

“She’s awake.”

“Good, how is she?”

“Angry. As you predicted, she tried threatening us with powerful friends. I replied with the exact lines from the script.”

“I want the record of your exchange, along with the video, sent to me immediately,” Lex said calmly.

“Sir, we can provide a feed. Also, as you know, you could speak to her directly. It would be impossible for her to recognize your voice.”

“I can’t risk that,” Lex replied. “She’s too smart. She might be able to pick out a phrase or recognize word choices if I were to speak to her directly. We will continue as planned.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s happening now?”

“They — her and the servant woman — have decided that it’s morning. They’re getting ready for breakfast.”

Lex glanced at the clock which showed 2:00 a.m. Removing them from any external time sense would create subtle imbalances which would serve his long term goals. “Very well, remember, they cannot be allowed to have any clues as to the time of day or any other time passage.”

“Yes sir. I have the men who are monitoring Ms. Lane’s apartment on special three-hour shifts around the clock to make sure that they are always fresh.”

“Good,” Lex said. “I’ll be waiting for that video.”

“I will send it as soon as this call is finished.”

Lex leaned back in his chair and smiled. After they were married, Lois was going to love Italy. And eventually, after — with her help — his image had been rehabilitated — she would come to relish in being the very public Mrs. Lex Luthor.

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Chapter 10: Changes

“...in front of him?”

The voice startled Clark awake. For only the briefest instant, he couldn’t remember where he was. Unfortunately, his discomfort reminded him all too quickly of both his location and situation. He seemed to be strapped in a chair that was deliberately designed to be too low. His ankles were chained to the legs of the chair with ankle cuffs. His arms were chained to his side. The position would have been uncomfortable even without the Kryptonite, and he’d been in the exact same position all night. Right now Clark could tell that Kryptonite was nearby, but the real sources of pain were his knees and back.

The he heard Lex’s voice. “Of course. I prefer that he know what we’re planning and what’s in store for him. For Superman, this room is — if you will — a roach motel. Why do you think I had your men epoxy all that Kryptonite to the walls of the entryway tunnel?”

“To make it impossible for him to escape,” the other voice replied.

“Exactly. I didn’t have people scouring the central part of the country looking for these crystals because I liked the way they look.”

“Yes, sir. You were fortunate to find that Kryptonite meteor impact site east of Dodge City. If not for that find, we wouldn’t have enough of the crystal to create a chamber like this.”

There was a pause as if Lex were considering something. “Did you finish your Kryptonite susceptibility tests last night?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What did you learn?”

“Didn’t you get the report?” the voice asked in a slightly confused tone.

“Yes,” Luthor replied coldly. “But I want to compare your interpretation of the data against the opinions I formed. So humor me and assume that I didn’t read the report.”

“Very well. We have identified five key distances where the effects of the Kryptonite seem to be significantly different.”

Luthor looked in Clark’s direction. As their eyes locked, Luthor checked for only the briefest instant then smiled ever so slightly. Without taking his eyes from Clark, he continued his discussion. “Describe the effects and the distances.”

“At five meters, the effect seems to disappear. I would like to have tested that distance more thoroughly, but at the first signs of him getting stronger, we terminated that part of the test.”

Luthor looked around the room. “The Kryptonite in the walls is closer than that. How were you able to perform those tests?”

“I had my assistants temporarily cover the Kryptonite on the walls with lead shielding and used the Kryptonite on the ceiling cables for this part of the test.”

Luthor’s turned quickly to the scientist. “You fool! That was dangerous. What if he would have escaped?”

The scientist stood his ground. “Mr. Luthor, I’m in charge of this operation because I’m the best. If he would have escaped, I’d be dead now. I knew that before I started. I took precautions. In any case, he didn’t, and now that we have the information, there is no need to do anything like that again.”

Luthor glared at the scientist for a moment before letting the issue pass. “Continue,” he said finally.

“At four meters he is clearly affected. The health monitors suggest that he only feels minimal pain, but there are no signs of his getting stronger.” He paused but Luthor said nothing and he continued. “Three meters is where the significant negative effects really begin. At that distance he is clearly in pain and his vital signs start to drop. I suspect that if he were to be exposed to that level for too many consecutive days, it could kill him. However, it is possible that he might be able to survive — but just barely, and he would be in a great deal of pain.”

“Does he recover when you move the Kryptonite back to four meters?”

“Yes, but very slowly.”

Luthor was silent for another moment. “Tell me the rest,” he said.

“Two meters seems to be the beginning of the terminal distance. He was clearly incapacitated and his vital signs started dropping very quickly. I would guess that continual exposure at that distance will kill him in less than a day. It was during that test that he lost control of himself.”

“Lost control?”

There was a pause and the sound of a throat being cleared. “He lost control of both his bowels and bladder.”

Lex laughed out loud. “That’s excellent. I see that you’ve cleaned him up.”

“Yes, sir. Per your instructions we had already removed the uniform that he arrived in and sent it to your office.”

“You made sure it was undamaged?”

“Of course, sir. You made it quite clear that you did not want your trophy damaged in any way.”

“Good. Continue,” Luthor directed.

“We had dressed him in one of our duplicate uniforms before we started this test. Once he had his — accident — we changed the lower part of his uniform again.”

“Do you think this is going to be a problem? I don’t want him soiling himself during our sessions.”

“I don’t believe that there will be. I have information from STAR Labs that he appears to be capable of existing solely on light, and may not need either food or water. My plan is to keep this room very brightly lighted using full-spectrum lamps and see how his system reacts. If that works, and he is able to survive on only the light, then once any food or water works its way out of his system, there will be no way for that unpleasantness to repeat itself.”

“Good. In the meantime keep him clean. I want to see his blood, but not his bodily waste.”

“Of course, Mr. Luthor.”

“So tell me what happened when the Kryptonite was set to one meter,” Lex directed.

“True lethality,” the scientist replied. “We had to keep the test short for fear of killing him ourselves. But when he was that close to the Kryptonite, he was completely incapacitated. He could not move and could barely continue breathing. My calculations suggest death in just a few minutes.”

“Are there any other factors I should know about?”

“The amount of Kryptonite is important. More material has a

proportionally greater effect.”

“So, with the amount that we have suspended from the ceiling,” Luthor asked, “What would happen if we hit the panic button and drop all of it to the floor?”

The scientist looked up for a moment as if surveying the amount of Kryptonite. “With this much he would be completely overwhelmed. He would be unable to move and I’d estimate that he would be dead in less than a minute.”

“And if he somehow got free of his restraints and charged the door?”

“That doorway tunnel is over two meters long. He wouldn’t even make it half way through before he would be overwhelmed. That is part of the reason that we have an airlock-style door to get in and out of this chamber and Kryptonite embedded in both doors.”

“So there isn’t any way he can escape?”

“No. Not unless a person were to remove all of that Kryptonite. Even if someone were to try to carry him out, because of the time it takes for the doors to cycle, he would be dead before he could get clear.”

“Good,” Luthor said. Then he turned to Clark. “I hope you were paying attention. I want you to know just how helpless you are.” Then Luthor came over and squatted next to him. “If you beg for death, I might just decide to kill you quickly,” he whispered.

Clark had known that the man was evil, but this was way beyond his experience. And he had Lois.

Luthor stood and headed for the shelf with the gloves. “Zee, please let me have some personal time with Superman.” Luthor said as he put on the gloves. As Clark watched the scientist head for the tunnel that led out of the room, Clark felt a shattering blow to his jaw. “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” Luthor yelled as he delivered a blow to Clark’s midsection.

Clark looked up at him. “What do you want?”

“That’s better. I want you to tell me where you’ve been staying since Nightfall.”

“No,” Clark replied clearly.

“Wrong answer!” Luthor shouted, as he hit him across the jaw again. “You see, I have to pay your benefactors my respects for taking such good care of you.” Then Luthor turned and looked up at the glass of the control booth overhead. “Zee, what’s the Kryptonite distance?”

“Four meters,” came the reply through the speaker system.

“Lower it to three,” Luthor commanded.

Clark could feel the change immediately. Except for Luthor’s blows, the main source of his discomfort had been from the chair. Now he could really feel the Kryptonite. It was like a fire burning its way through his body. It continued to get worse until Clark simply couldn’t keep his eyes open. For a long time all he knew was a mix of the burning pain of the Kryptonite mixed with the different pain of Luthor’s beating.

He must have blacked out, because the next thing he heard was that voice again. “That’s four meters, sir.”

“Perfect,” came Luthor’s voice. Clark could tell that Luthor was no longer next to him. A long moment passed in silence. He’s expected Luthor to continue the beating. Or to gloat... or something. Finally Clark forced his eyes open. There was Luthor sitting in a chair that Clark had not noticed before. He was just staring at him. “You’re still with us,” Luthor said pleasantly. “I wanted to try something.” He reached behind the chair and pulled out what looked like a hard rubber or plastic police baton. Without warning he swung and hit Clark’s head. There was an explosion of pain and then blackness. Just before the dark took him, Clark heard Luthor laughing.

Lois spent her third day in captivity reading. Under other circumstances, this might be some kind of vacation. She looked

at the room around her. If this were a hotel, she suspected that it would be a five-star establishment. Her bedroom and bathroom were both luxurious. The exercise room had more and better equipment than many commercial gyms that she’d belonged to over the years. The library was of stunning diversity, and when she’d asked about a new bestseller that she’d wanted to read, it was delivered in the dumbwaiter in less than an hour. And the food! Lois had always appreciated good food. One of the reasons that she’d never cooked, was that she knew that she couldn’t do as good as a restaurant. Clark was a good cook, but the food here made his best seem like eating from a dirty can.

She wondered what Clark was doing. Was he okay? These people... they’d implied that she was being held to compel him to do something. They must know that they couldn’t really make Superman do anything against his nature. They probably just want him to steal something. Even then, it would probably be from someone with insurance. Whatever it was, she wished he’d get on with it. She did miss him and wanted to go home.

She reached to the table beside her, picked up the small bell located there and rang it. A moment later Martha arrived. She was wearing some kind of uniform that reminded her of a maid. “You rang, ma’am?” Martha said.

“Martha, I asked you to call me Lois. And you know you don’t have to wear a uniform.”

“I understand, ma’am. But I was hired to do a job, and this is the only way I know how to do it.”

“Fine,” Lois replied. “But at least think of calling me by my first name,” she pleaded.

A slight smile touched Martha’s lips. “I’ll consider it,” she offered. “In the meantime, what can I do for you?”

“Would you be a dear and make me a cup of Earl Grey tea?”

“I’ll be happy to,” Martha said. “And please let me know when you start to get hungry and I’ll place your dinner order.”

“I guess that is one of the things that’s bothering me the most. Without some sense of time I don’t know what to do about eating. Are you hungry?”

“No,” Martha replied. “But that’s because I already ate.”

“You did,” Lois said, surprised. “Why didn’t you tell me and we could have eaten together?”

“Ma’am, I’m used to eating alone. I’ve never eaten with any of my ladies, and it just doesn’t feel right. Besides, it seems clear that you are I run on different clocks. So please just let me know when you get hungry.”

Lois considered that for a moment. Martha was a dear, but she seemed awfully fixed in her ways. “I really don’t feel hungry,” Lois admitted. “For now I’ll just have that tea and continue on my book.”

“Very good, ma’am. If that will be all, I’ll go prepare your tea.”

“Yes, thank you, Martha.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am.”

As Martha left the room, Lois realized that she appreciated the convenience of having the older lady around. That first morning, when she’d found herself here, Lois had been convinced that the best aspect of having Martha would be company. But, despite the fact that she’d remained friendly, by this morning it was clear that Martha was much more comfortable in the more constrained relationship of a servant.

Since the reality was that both of them were prisoners, Lois had decided to try to work within the constraints of the situation and had been doing her best to make Martha comfortable. Lois wasn’t sure if it was more due to Martha, or an unknown side of herself, but it had been surprisingly easy to take on the pattern of Martha’s “lady.” In fact, Lois was surprised how much she enjoyed being taken care of once she’d resolved herself to it.

As she picked up her book, she had a fleeting thought that Clark really didn’t have to hurry that much.

As Lex approached the Superman chamber, he couldn't help but wonder how long he was going to be able to continue to enjoy this daily distraction. This would be the fifth day of Superman's captivity. While he continued to enjoy beating the sap senseless several times every day, Lex had to admit that the joy was going out of it. This morning for instance, Lex was looking forward to abusing Superman, but he was far more interested in what was happening to the charming Ms. Lane in her luxury captivity.

Then it hit him. Today would be a perfect day to go with a little psychological warfare. He had his doubts about the effectiveness of more physical torture. But a little psychological game would be perfect.

Lex found himself smiling as he reached the stairway that led to the main observation chamber. After climbing a few steps he reached to small control room. There were three people present. One was monitoring the bio-sensor panel and the other two were watching Superman through the thick leaded glass.

"Dr. Zee," Lex said by way of announcing himself, "Do you have anything to report this morning?"

Zee turned around. "Good morning, Mr. Luthor. During a review of Superman's vital signs last night, we discovered an anomaly. I've been personally reviewing the data so that I would be ready for you this morning."

"Is something wrong?" Lex asked. "Is there any danger that he will escape?"

"No, sir," Zee replied confidently. "As we discussed that first morning, the Kryptonite in the chamber makes that impossible. What we have noticed is a steady lowering in his vital signs. If you would look at this graph, you will be able to see what I mean."

Lex stepped over to the work surface that Zee had indicated. There were a series of lines that showed a general tendency down. "What do these mean?" Lex asked.

"Each of these lines tracks an element of Superman's physical well-being. As you can see, ever since he's been here they have trended down."

Lex looked at the dates on the chart. "Do you believe that my time with him has anything to do with this?"

"Yes, but only to a small extent. I specifically looked for variances in the data during and just after the time you spend with him each day. There is a minor variance, but those fluctuations are only a small part of the general trend. I have to believe that it's the Kryptonite in the chamber itself. I don't know any other way to interpret this data than to say that it's killing him."

It looked like the concern about becoming bored with Superman was unwarranted. "Do you have an estimate of how long he has?"

"At the rate these indicators are dropping, they will reach zero in approximately a month."

"So he'll be dead in a month?" Luthor asked.

"No, Sir. He'll die far sooner than that. Once he reaches this point," Zee indicated a level of about forty percent on the chart, "he'll be unable to sustain himself. I believe that he will reach that point in about a week. And I fear that if you continue your daily... recreation, he won't last that long."

"Are you telling me that I should ease up on him?" Luthor demanded.

"No, sir. I would not presume. I'm simply providing you the information that I have."

Lex considered this for a minute. "Do you have a suggestion that might keep him alive longer?"

"Yes, I do. We have an option to tie the mechanism that controls the height of the suspended Kryptonite to the health monitor. We can then dial in the desired health level and the machine will automatically adjust the position of the Kryptonite

to keep him at that level. If you would like to see it in action I can make the connection now."

"Do it," Lex said.

Zee must have anticipated his decision because he simply flipped a switch. Lex looked out through the observation glass and watched the Kryptonite start to rise to the ceiling. It stopped at what Lex recognized as the four meter mark. He turned to Zee. "Why did it stop there?"

"I programmed the mechanism with limits on the possible travel. The automated system is limited to travel from four meters to two meters so that we don't risk either underexposing or overexposing him to the effects of the Kryptonite."

"Let's see how he does on this for a few days," Lex said. "And I had been planning on altering my time with Superman anyway, so I will give him today off to have a chance to regain some strength." Lex then left the control room and entered the chamber with the helpless ex-hero. Lex had noted that Superman was unconscious. In prior days, he'd simply pounded on the hero until he woke up, but today he simply brought a paper cup filled with ice water. When he reached Superman — strapped in the chair as always — he threw the water in Superman's face.

The big guy reacted as Lex had hoped. Superman shook his head and muttered, "Wha..." After a few seconds he looked up. As soon as he recognized Lex his face took on an air of hopeless resignation. "Oh..." was all he said.

That reaction and look completely made up for not getting to beat on him today. As Lex looked into the battered, bruised and cut face of his enemy, he realized that he had achieved his goal. Superman was broken. Now it was time to rub salt in the wounds.

"Good morning, Superman." Lex said cheerily. "My scientists tell me that you're dying. It is my intention to kill you, but not this quickly. So, I'm going to give you a day off and there will be no beating today. Besides, my fists were starting to get a little sore so I could use the day off as well." Lex paused, but Superman didn't reply. "I wanted to compliment you on your idea to remove Mr. Kent to parts unknown before coming to see me. My contacts at the Daily Planet have passed along the information that his parents shared with Mr. White. However, I do intend to make Mr. Kent pay for his part in what he did to me."

Lex noticed that Superman looked more alert now. "You are listening," Lex said, "Good, I don't want you to miss this part. You see, my revenge against Kent is tied to my larger plan. My abduction of Ms. Lane was only partially to capture you. I have a larger long-term plan to make the lovely Ms. Lane mine. Even now she is being held prisoner only a few hundred yards from you. Of course, her accommodations are much more comfortable than yours. She is learning to appreciate the finer elements of life. I have also developed some extremely compelling evidence that I was as much a victim as you in the original Nightfall encounter."

"She'll never..." Superman muttered, then seemed to catch himself and stopped speaking.

Lex laughed out loud. "This is wonderful. I definitely need to see if I can find some way to keep you alive long enough to see that plan come to fruition. In the meantime, I'll leave you to your own thoughts. You can have all of today alone to visualize the lovely Lois happily married to me." Then Lex turned and walked away. Yes, this had been much more enjoyable than just another physical beating.

Lois rang the bell again. Where was that stupid woman? It seemed that every day the old hag put less effort into her work. She'd been serving Lois for eight days now, and Lois was reaching the end of her patience.

There was a light knock on the door. "Come in!" Lois barked. The door opened quickly and Martha came in. "What took you so long?" Lois snapped. Then she noticed that Martha looked

particularly disheveled. “And what’s wrong with you? You look like you just got out of bed.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Martha said defensively. “I was asleep when you called. I’m having trouble adjusting to the schedule without a clock to help me keep track of time.”

“You were asleep? I told you two days ago that you may rest more during the day, but you must be ready for me when I wake up. I suppose that means you haven’t placed my breakfast order yet?”

“No, ma’am.”

“And you probably haven’t even started my coffee?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll try to do better.”

Lois scowled at her. “You’d better. Get those started at once. I’m going to take my shower. I expect that by the time I’m done, my coffee will be ready and breakfast will be here.”

“I’ll try, ma’am. Is that all?”

“Not quite, you stupid cow. You are not to have anything to eat yourself this morning. Perhaps that will help motivate you to get up on time tomorrow. And don’t think I won’t check. I spoke to the call service yesterday and made sure that they’ll report to me everything that has been ordered. If I find that you tried to sneak food, I will make your life even harder than it is now.”

“Yes, ma’am. I wouldn’t dream of defying your instructions. Will that be all?”

“Yes. Now get out!”

Lois watched Martha turn and start through the door. Just as the door closed, Lois heard Martha’s voice from the other side of the door. “Evil bitch.”

Lois almost called her back, but what was the point? She didn’t care if Martha liked her or not. Just so long as the old hag gave good service. Martha was really no more than a peasant of a woman. Taking care of someone as important as Lois was clearly far beyond her ability. Lois had seen proper servants before. Lex had had real talent at selecting servants. She thought back to the times she’d had dinner in his penthouse. The servants were prompt, capable and well-mannered. None of them would ever call Lex a derogatory name. And they’d known enough that if Lex was treating her as someone important, then they would also. Now that she really thought about it, she feared that she’d spend the rest of her life thinking of Lex as ‘the one that got away.’ Yes, Lex had been especially interested in her. If only someone else would have been behind the attack on Superman. If things had gone differently, then maybe she could have married Lex instead of that stupid shit-kicking husband of hers.

She suddenly realized that she hadn’t even thought of Clark for a couple of days now. Had he forgotten about her as well? Probably, she thought. Clark really wasn’t her type. What had she seen in him? He probably went back to Kansas the moment she disappeared and was shacking up with some stupid, blonde, buck-toothed farm girl. He really never did figure out how to live in the big city. He never understood her needs as someone that came from a sophisticated, upper-class environment.

She decided that she might as well get started before that stupid cow-woman forgot that she was there to take care of Lois. When Lois got to the shower she turned it on and stepped in quickly. Unfortunately she’d not waited and the water was still cold. She jumped back out of the shower and, in her haste, slipped. As she fell, her head bumped the counter and she saw stars for a moment.

Then she felt a wave of despair. Where was Clark, she thought. She was lonely and needed him to get through this. Then she remembered her thoughts from a few minutes ago. “What’s happening to me?” she said aloud. Then she hung her head and thought for a moment. I’m not that person. I love Clark. He’s the best thing that ever happened to me. He must be in a lot of trouble, or he’d have rescued me already. She went over her thoughts from a few minutes ago. Where were those thoughts

coming from? She stood and looked in the mirror. There was probably going to be a bruise on her forehead. She continued to stare at her own face in the mirror for a long time. “Hold it together, Lois,” she said to her reflection. She almost said more but remembered that she was almost certainly under surveillance. She ended up simply shaking her head and carefully getting into the shower.

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Chapter 11: Plans

The first thing that Lex noticed when he entered the holding chamber this morning was that Superman was awake. Lex couldn’t help but smile. This was the first time in over a week that he wasn’t going to have to wake up his playmate. It also meant that he could allow himself to thoroughly enjoy their time together. “So how are we doing today?” Lex asked, as he approached his enemy.

Superman didn’t respond. The fact that he was awake meant that today would provide an opportunity for physical recreation. He’d come to relish the feel of Superman’s flesh giving way beneath his fists, and had missed that more than he’d expected the last few days. Lex stopped near the door just long enough to put on the special gloves. He walked up to the man in blue, grabbed his chin and lifted it so that he could look in his face. It seemed clear that skipping the beatings for several days had restored some of his strength. Then Lex glanced up toward the ceiling and noticed that the Kryptonite was lower than it had been since they’d started using the automatic system. It looked like the Kryptonite was at the lowest position of the allowed range of automatic travel. He returned his eyes to Superman. “You look better this morning,” he commented. “Let’s see if I can help with that.” And Lex punched him directly in the eye.

Superman let out a groan of pain that made Lex smile. Yes, this was going to be an excellent morning. If the Kryptonite was that low, there wouldn’t be any reason to hold back. Lex punched the fallen hero a few more times. Superman was definitely healthier this morning. The last time he’d beaten him up this thoroughly, Superman’s face had been a bloody mess by the third blow. This morning, there were a few skin tears and some swelling, but nothing like what he’d seen before.

Within a few minutes, the more healthy look was long gone. Superman liked to wear red, and Lex loved to accommodate him by making sure that he was wearing plenty of his own blood. After several more minutes, Lex decided that he was satisfied with this morning’s activities. Besides, he had a meeting in less than an hour. He knelt down beside his enemy who was now slumped heavily in the chair. After this many days chained in the same position, Lex wondered if he would even be able to walk if freed. Not that that was going to happen. “Can you hear me?” he asked.

Superman didn’t respond, Lex he retreated to the water that had been kept nearby since the first time he’d needed to rouse Superman. The sap startled when Lex threw the ice water in his face. “Are you back with me now?” he demanded.

“What do you want?” Superman asked wearily, spitting out blood.

“I thought you might like to know how Lois is doing. I never realized how demanding she could be. After seeing her interact with her maid — did I tell you that she had a maid — I’m even more convinced that she was destined for much more in a mate than a Kansas refugee. Why, just this morning I saw her chew out her housekeeper for not responding quickly enough. Then Lois — quite properly — called this poor woman a stupid cow and barred her from eating as a punishment for not serving Lois quickly enough. All in all it was a wonderful performance. I couldn’t have done better myself.”

Lex watched carefully for a reaction. Superman didn’t say anything, but Lex realized that he was shaking his head very

slowly. “You doubt my word? Well, of course you do. So, I thought after all this time you would enjoy hearing her voice.”

Lex looked in the direction of the control room. “Play the recording,” he said loudly.

Lois’s voice came up. “Come in. What took you so long? And what’s wrong with you? You look like you just got out of bed.”

Then Martha’s voice. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I was asleep when you called. I’m having trouble adjusting to the schedule without a clock to help me keep track of time.”

Lex watched Superman’s face as the recording continued. After Martha’s assessment of, “Evil bitch,” the recording stopped.

“Did you enjoy hearing Lois’s voice?” Lex asked, mockingly.

Superman took a moment to gather himself. “What have you done to her?” he finally asked, barely above a whisper.

“Done? Nothing. I’ve just allowed her to see what kind of life she could have. I think I’ve found the real Lois Lane. Perhaps you need to listen more carefully and you will come to understand her as I always have. Fortunately I’ve made arrangements for the recording to play in a loop for your listening pleasure.”

Lex was surprised to see Superman glaring at him. That was more energy than he’d shown since that first day. Lex turned and headed out of the chamber. “Start the loop,” he said as he headed out. He heard Lois’s voice start up again. Still... something about the way Superman looked left him a little uncomfortable. For the first time since Superman’s capture, Lex felt a sense of danger. He knew that if Superman were to escape, even the big Boy Scout might be tempted to kill him. But Zee had his own reasons for hating Superman, and Lex knew that the scientist would kill Superman before he would risk the hero regaining his strength.

After arriving back at his office, it took a few minutes for Lex to compose himself. That last look from Superman had upset him. He’d spent the walk from the chamber back to his office reviewing the steps that were in place to contain Superman. First there was the chamber itself. Then there was the suspended Kryptonite with the emergency button to drop the Kryptonite to the floor if Superman looked to be ready to cause trouble. And, of course, the gunmen in the shooting stations with their guns full of alternating Kryptonite and armor piercing bullets and their orders to shoot immediately if Superman broke free.

He was in no danger from Superman. But Lex was having trouble getting past the look on his enemy’s face. For the first time since he’d been a captive, Superman had not looked like a defeated man. Lois Lane had certainly been the right button to press. Lex had to wonder if Kent knew that Superman had such strong feelings for his wife. But that was neither here nor there. The fact that a more defiant expression from Superman could trigger this level of concern meant that it might be nearly time to end this. Yes, he would make tomorrow morning’s visit with Superman extra special.

After a moment he reached for an intercom system on the table next to the phone and pressed the button.

The reply was almost immediate. “Yes, sir?”

“Notify Dr. Mendenhall that I want to see him in my office.”

“Yes, sir.”

While he waited, Lex realized that he needed to review the plan for disposal of Superman’s body. That also meant triggering the second part of that plan that would eliminate Zee as well as everyone else who had any knowledge of Superman’s capture and captivity. As he reviewed the plan and all of the contingencies that it included, he had to concede that it was a good plan.

A moment later there was a knock on the door. Lex pushed the button that would release the door lock. There was a brief buzz and the door opened admitting the older, slightly heavyset

professor. “Good morning, Mr. Luthor,” he said. “You asked to see me?”

“Yes, doctor. Please sit down.” Lex waited while the doctor took the seat on the other side of the desk. “I’d like your report on the Ms. Lane’s status.”

“It’s going very well. Have you seen the video from earlier this morning?”

“I have,” Lex answered calmly. “So is it your assessment that the program is on schedule?”

“Certainly!” The doctor answered enthusiastically. “It’s possible that the program may be ahead of schedule. I knew that this kind of progress might be possible, but I was never able to have such complete control of my subjects in any of my earlier tests.”

“Good,” Lex said. “Now, would you please review the program and Ms. Lane’s progress in detail?”

“She is still in phase one of the program. The goal of this phase is to work on her subconscious to either strengthen or weaken general perceptions that she already carries. In this way, we lay the foundation for later phases where she will be exposed to ideas that are further from her current perceptions.”

“Please be specific,” Lex directed. “What ideas are you introducing in her sleep?”

“Mr. Luthor, you have to understand, it’s not just while she’s asleep. The apartment is a sea of subtle audible and visual cues. Every time she listens to music or watches a video, she is being inundated with the message program. Total immersion in the subliminal signals is at the heart of my program.”

“Of course,” Lex humored him. “Just tell me what ideas your system is planting.”

The doctor paused for a moment, clearly arranging his thoughts. “We know from her background that Ms. Lane is proud of growing up in Metropolis. Like many people from urban environments, we found some indications that she has a certain level of contempt for people with a more rural background. With that in mind we have been reinforcing the idea that individuals with a rural background, particularly anyone who grew up on a farm, as being ignorant, lazy and generally beneath her station.”

“So that’s targeting Mr. Kent. What else are you doing to help her move on from her soon-to-be ex-husband?”

“Since we know she has perfect vision, we are reinforcing the idea that glasses are an unattractive sign of weakness.”

“Please continue,” Lex said.

“We’re leveraging her generally suspicious nature to foster an extreme level of disbelief in scientists. This is the first step to having her dismiss the evidence against you that she discovered after the Nightfall mission.”

Lex thought about what the doctor had told him. “Everything that you have described seems to be designed to generate negative reactions and negative feelings. Is your system limited to inducing negative attitudes?”

“No, sir. Sorry, I tend to group them that way. For every negative issue, there is a positive perception that we are working on.”

“For example?” Lex asked.

“The strongest program that is now underway is to reinforce her enjoyment of the more lavish lifestyle. This is a two pronged approach where we are fostering a feeling of discontent at her post-Nightfall life in Mr. Kent’s small apartment and encouraging a feeling of entitlement of a more lavish life. As you are certainly aware, there is ample evidence of the success of this part of the program.”

“Are you introducing positive ideas that are of a more personal nature?” Lex asked with an emphasis on the word personal.

Mendenhall seemed to pick up on his meaning. “We are reinforcing her perception that she loves the smell of cigar

smoke. In fact we have one sequence that we are very proud of that should cause her to come to associate that smell with arousal.”

Lex couldn't help but to smile at that one. “What else are you doing to alter her perception of me?”

“Originally I hadn't planned to introduce direct positive ideas of you until phase two. But when I saw the friction developing so quickly between Ms. Lane and her maid, I developed a plan to associate you with the ability to select and manage staff. I hope to have video or audio evidence of the success of that part of the program within a few days.”

The doctor paused again. He was clearly nervous and looking for Lex's approval. “Continue,” was all Lex said.

“She already has a strong success drive. Later on, in phase two, we are going to use that as a basis to plant the idea that a success at all costs attitude is the only way to approach life. We believe we can eventually leverage this to the point that she may even come to believe that anything done in the name of success is justified. Naturally, that would be a long term goal. However, in the short term, we believe that her attitudes can be modified so that she is at least ready to appreciate that approach to life and admire anyone that embodies it.”

“You do understand how much is riding on your being able to get the results that you claimed?” Lex asked.

Mendenhall's face grew serious. “Of course I do. But you've already seen the preliminary results with Ms. Lane and her housekeeper. And you've seen the results of my earlier trials. As long as we don't suggest anything clearly at odds with her currently held beliefs, the subliminals are very effective. In this environment, we are able to redefine her currently held beliefs on a daily basis. As long as we make each step small, then, given enough time, we can move her a long way.”

“But some of the ideas you outlined a moment ago, such as those aimed at lowering her opinion of her husband, seem to be large changes in her beliefs and attitudes.”

“They are, but you mustn't look at the destination. Remember that this is a journey. As long as each idea is itself not completely outside the bounds of her beliefs, we can use those ideas to shift her core values. In that way we can achieve large changes in beliefs by many small steps. For example, we can't directly attack her attraction to her husband. Anything along those lines will not work this early in the program. However, we can achieve the same thing, if more slowly, by the less direct path that I described. Since she grew up in the city, she already has a strong predisposition to think less of people from a rural background. That's the lever we use to undermine her feeling for her husband. We aren't introducing an idea that's completely foreign. I'm only reinforcing an existing opinion. Similarly, while we cannot immediately induce positive feelings or attitudes toward you, we can reinforce and even introduce positive feelings of elements that closely associate with you. Then it's a very natural matter for her to transfer that positive association with a person that reflects the trait. We don't even have to push her for that part. Once the groundwork is in place, she will do the rest on her own.”

Mendenhall was very confident of himself. But then, the results they'd already seen were barely short of amazing. “Please go over your projected timetable for the rest of the project.”

“We are almost half way through phase one. As you will recall, the goal of the first phase is breaking ties to her husband and her old life. In her current environment — being a captive — negative feelings are easier to reinforce. Within another week or so she should be disgusted with her husband and will be well on the way to disliking everything about him. I suspect that before she hits a month, she will be to the point where, if she were to gain her freedom, her first act would be to file for divorce. Of course, by that time we will be into phase two of the program.”

“Why so long?” Lex asked. “Based on the evidence I've

seen, she looks to be ready for phase two now.”

“I understand,” the doctor replied. “But at this time, the behaviors you are seeing are very superficial. She's accepting the program, but those attitudes are not yet integrated into her core personality. For example, you are familiar with the exchange she had with her servant this morning?”

“You mean the one where she forbade Martha from eating?” Lex clarified.

“Yes, that one. And while we're on the subject of her servant, I have to congratulate you again for picking a woman with the same first name as her mother-in-law. In the long run we are going to be able to leverage her growing contempt for Martha to reinforce the idea that everything about her husband, including even his mother's name, is beneath Ms. Lane's station.”

Lex simply nodded. When he'd seen the list of prospects for Lois's maid, the opportunity had been obvious. “Continue,” was all he said.

“Yes, sir,” Mendenhall said. “Well, right after that incident, Ms. Lane slipped in the bathroom and bumped her head. There is some evidence that in that instant of shock and pain she lost the programming for a short time.”

“You mean one bump on the head can undo all our work?” Lex asked in anger.

“At this stage, yes. But I can show you recordings from only four hours later, which clearly indicate that the programming had reasserted itself. That's why the program takes as long as it does. By the time she completes each phase, the programming for that phase will be absolutely permanent. So, to your question as to the ability to undo the programming so easily, the answer is a resounding, “No!” Once each phase is complete, then she will have integrated those attitudes into her core personality and nothing will cause her to revert to her pre-programming personality or attitudes.”

“Very well,” Lex said. “What about phase two?”

“That will begin in approximately another two to three weeks. Phase two will reinforce the concept that the role of a woman is to be a good wife to the strongest man she can find. At the same time, we will be building on ideas that we introduced in phase one to strengthen her belief that power and ruthlessness is the ultimate sign of strength and that it is her desire to become the wife of that kind of man.”

“And then?” Lex prompted.

“Phase three is when you will appear and rescue her from her captivity. By doing this, you will be demonstrating both the ability to survive, and establishing her role as being dependent on you. As I explained when I originally outlined the program, you will need to plan the rescue and subsequent flight so that you are both on the run continually for the first few days. She has to believe she is in danger of being recaptured so that she has no chance to go back to her old life. Once the two of you are in-transit, you will have the opportunity to present your argument that the case against you for your involvement in the original Nightfall attack on Superman was all an elaborate frame. This will also be the best time to reveal the death of Mr. Kent. Learning that she's alone while you are on the run will increase her tendency to look to you for support and comfort.”

Mendenhall must have picked up something from his expression. “Mr. Kent is dead, isn't he?”

“No. Superman took steps to remove him before we could act. Will you be able to accommodate that in your conditioning program?”

“Of course,” Mendenhall replied quickly. “As I outlined a moment ago, much of the early program is aimed at lowering her opinion of Kent. If you could provide information of his past relationships, it should be easy enough to plant the seed of an idea that he has been cheating on her. In fact, some of the program that she has been experiencing already has generic

versions of those types of suggestions.”

“I’ll get you the information,” Lex said.

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem. By the time we are done I doubt she’ll even believe he’s worth the time for a divorce.”

“Very well, please continue with your overview of the plan.”

“The program is constructed around the expectation that your escape and subsequent flight will leave you in Europe. Is that still your plan?”

“Yes,”

“Good. So, when you arrive in Europe, you’ll need to show her your evidence of the real story behind the Nightfall mission attack on Superman. My calculations indicate that, by that point in time, she will be more than ready to accept the evidence and that will be the tipping point. By accepting that you were wronged, and knowing that she had been a key player in unfairly ruining the life of the person that has now saved her, she will commit herself to you and the goal of making up for her mistake in wrongly accusing you. Once this happens, she will be yours for the rest of her life.”

“How long will all this take?”

“My original estimates for phases one and two were that they would each take between four and five weeks each. The evidence that I’ve seen so far leaves me optimistic that we will be on the short end of those estimates. If that proves true, we may be ready to begin phase three in as little as another seven weeks. Then, once you and Ms. Lane escape, your time in flight from here to your European destination should take on the close order of a week.”

“And you don’t anticipate a problem with Lois reverting to her old self once she’s removed from the continuous subliminal messages that she’s getting in her apartment?” Lex asked.

“No. As I explained a moment ago, once she integrates a phase of the program into her core personality, there is no going back. However, for the time being, continual exposure to the program is crucial.”

“But you said we were ahead of schedule!”

“I think we are,” Mendenhall said fearfully. “The fact that she’s accepting the program so quickly is a good sign. However, at this point in the process, those patterns are superficial and only reflective of the fact that she is in the immersive environment. For example, we’ve been discussing the way she’s started treating her maid.”

“Yes,” Lex responded shortly.

“If Ms. Lane were to be removed from her environment today, she might retain some of the programming for a few weeks, but at this point in the process, those attitudes will fade without some reinforcement.”

“The changes had better be permanent!”

“They will be, but not this quickly. By the time the program is complete, the new patterns will be firmly established. And, don’t forget that the process will continue even after the two of you leave the apartment. That’s why it’s critical that she not be allowed to return to her old life. The first few months of her time with you will seal the personality changes in place. Within a few months she will be a different woman. She’ll remember the old Lois Lane, but will no more be that woman than you are Superman.”

Clark could feel it. He was dying. Luthor was going to win. Keeping some sliver of positive attitude had been the one thing that had kept him going over the past week. It had been hard enough when it had simply been the pain of the Kryptonite and the once or twice daily beatings from Luthor. He’d always been worried about Lois, but somehow he figured that she would be safe. She was smart and knew what Luthor was. Up until today, his biggest concern was that she would be subjected to some kind of physical torture similar to what he was

experiencing. But Luthor had been attracted to her. Clark had figured that whatever was likely to happen to him, Lois would be safe.

But now it seemed that Luthor was even more evil and resourceful than he and Lois had thought. Listening to Lois’s voice was indeed the worst torture imaginable. That was certainly Lois’s voice. But the tone and words were like nothing he’d ever heard from his wife. What could Luthor be doing that caused her to act like that? Whatever it was, the very idea that Luthor had found some way to affect Lois’s thinking was even more chilling than the idea of torture.

As one more wave of despair washed over him, he realized that despite the recent beating from Luthor, it almost seemed that he was feeling better. Of course, based on his reading, that’s what dying felt like.

The past week had been one continual dose of pain. There had been the “burning inside” sensation that he remembered from the Kryptonite exposure after Nightfall. Then there had been the daily cuts and bruises from the beatings. Today was different. He didn’t feel so bad. That could be because Luthor had been in a hurry, but Clark doubted that was the reason. Luthor was very workmanlike in his approach to the beatings. And now the burning that had been so bad before, was barely noticeable. Clark glanced up to the Kryptonite suspended about his head. The poison was at the lowest level. Clark remembered from the first night, that the Kryptonite at that level had triggered excruciating pain. Tonight he barely felt it at all. More than anything else he felt an overwhelming fatigue.

By the time Clark realized he was no longer going to be able to stay awake, he was convinced that this would be the last moments of consciousness on this planet. He realized that for all the good he’d tried to do, he’d failed the one person that mattered most. Then he surrendered to the black.

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Chapter 12: Endings

For Clark, the most surprising part of waking up was that he woke up at all. The second most surprising thing was the pain. It was gone! No, that wasn’t quite right, it wasn’t just that he was pain free — he felt good.

All this didn’t make any sense. He looked up to see the Kryptonite still in the same place, but he couldn’t feel it at all. And his face didn’t feel torn up. He’d experienced the super-speed, almost magical, healing when he’d been recovering from the building collapse, but it hadn’t been working since he’d been in this chamber.

Now he noticed something else. He could hear equipment noise as well as pages of a book turning. He looked up at the control room. Of course, all he could see from his angle was the glass panel overhead. He concentrated on the section of wall just below the glass panel and his x-ray vision kicked on. Well, there was the equipment and there was a single technician sitting there reading a book.

How could this be? Clark looked at the Kryptonite again. It was right there where it had been all along. Could this be some kind of trick? Knowing Luthor, it was always a possibility. If it was, then there was no point in playing along right now and trying to escape. If it wasn’t, then Luthor would be here sometime later. Even those days that he’d skipped the beating, he always came by to taunt.

But if he was going to do anything, he was going to need to get free. Clark checked the technician again and made sure he was still concentrating on his book. Then he concentrated on the restraint holding his left arm. Clark had not tried to escape these chains since his first day here. The restraints were all made out of heavy gauge steel. He carefully moved his arm so that he was stressing the clamp holding his wrist. Then, he very carefully applied just a little pressure. The metal restraint stretched and

bent like wet clay. His super strength was back as well. That meant he could probably escape at any time. But what if Lois had been moved? He needed Luthor as leverage. This was a time to wait, plan and hope this wasn't some kind of elaborate trick by Luthor.

Lex was practically whistling as he approached the chamber. After yesterday's interview with Mendenhall, he'd spent the evening reviewing the data on the unauthorized experiments that the good doctor had performed on his patients before Lex had found him. Lex was no expert, but it wasn't that difficult to interpret the results. All the evidence that he'd looked at supported Mendenhall's interpretation of the data. Lois really seemed to be accepting the programming faster than the doctor's previous patients. However, given the level of immersion that she was being subjected to, the quicker results were not surprising.

And this morning he'd decided something else. Torturing Superman had been fun, but it had not proved to be as much fun as he'd expected, at least not since those first few days. It would probably be more enjoyable if there was some way that Superman could be allowed to resist. Unfortunately, that was simply too dangerous. So, all things considered, Lex had decided that it was time to end this part of the game. Today would be his last "interview" with Superman and it would be Superman's last moments alive.

As he approached the chamber, he saw Zee waiting for him near the entrance. "Good morning, Mr. Luthor. I was told that you wanted me to meet you this morning."

"Yes, Zee. I've decided to terminate this experiment. I wanted you to be sure that the recording devices are all ready."

"They are," Zee replied.

"When I'm finished with Superman this morning, I'm going to want you to drop the Kryptonite. Do we need to set up a signal of any kind?"

"No, sir. Whenever you are with him, we monitor you constantly. If you say anything like, 'Drop it,' or 'Drop it now,' we will be ready and immediately drop the Kryptonite."

"Good," Lex replied. "Did you call in the extra guards?"

"Yes, but I don't think it will be necessary."

"I do," Lex replied shortly. "So tell me the status of the guards."

"Both of the shooter rooms have two guards each.

Furthermore, they've been briefed to be on high alert the entire time you're with Superman. They have been reminded to watch for any indication by you that you want them to open fire."

"Good," Lex said.

"Mr. Luthor, are you sure that you don't want to instruct them to wait until you are out of the chamber?"

"No. I'll get clear if I need to. The fact that I'm here means I'm a survivor. Besides, whatever we do will start with dropping the Kryptonite. Once that happens, I suspect that any command to shoot that I might give will be coming from your control booth."

"Of course, Mr. Luthor."

"Good. So, is he awake?"

"He appears to be. But he hasn't really stirred much when you aren't in the room since the first day."

"Then I guess it's time for me to go in and say goodbye."

"Yes, sir. I'll be in the control room. I will personally have my hand on the drop button."

"Fine," Lex said, his attention turning to the door to the chamber. He left Zee behind and headed for the door. It took only a moment to cycle through the airlock-style door and enter the short tunnel that led to the central chamber. Lex stepped right over to the shelf with his spiked gloves. He would take these with him today. They — caked with Superman's dried blood — would be the new centerpiece of his trophy case. He would have to come up with a suitable story for Lois, but she would certainly

know that they represented his greatest victory.

Once the gloves were in place, he was ready for his final meeting with his guest. In some ways he was going to miss this part, but keeping Superman alive carried an intrinsic risk and Lex was satisfied with the decision to end the hero's life. He turned from the glove shelf and headed for Superman's chair. As had been the case for most of his visits, Superman hadn't bothered to look up.

"Good morning, Superman!" Lex called out loudly and cuffed his enemy across the head.

"Where is Lois?" Superman asked slowly, without raising his head.

"Lois?" he exclaimed. "It appears that I was right in guessing that you care more for the fair Ms. Lane than you like to acknowledge. Does Mr. Kent know how you feel?"

Superman slowly lifted his head. What Lex saw sent a chill through him. This was not the broken man he'd been torturing for the past ten days. Lex started to back away, but before he could take even a single step Superman's right arm ripped free of the restraints as if they were made of butter and he grabbed Lex's left arm. "Where are you holding Mrs. Kent?" Superman asked in a voice colder than any he'd heard before.

"Drop the Kryptonite!" Lex shouted as he used his free arm to reach into his vest. He put his hand on his secret weapon and pulled it out. Lex made sure that his hand was on the correct side, closed his eyes and shoved the device into Superman's face. There was a loud bang and Superman released his grip.

Lex started for the entry tunnel but immediately tripped over one of the chunks of Kryptonite that had dropped from above. As he fell to the floor he twisted to look back. He'd hoped that his flash-bang weapon would have torn Superman's head off. It had been designed to do exactly that. It was a directional charge with a mix of Kryptonite fragments and anti-personnel shrapnel. However, instead of killing Superman, it seemed to have only surprised him for a moment. Lex had managed to get almost to the tunnel when Superman shook off the disorientation from the pocket weapon and started toward him. He would not be defeated by Superman. Not now. Not ever! "Open fire now!" he shouted in a final desperate act.

Luthor's pocket-bomb caught Clark completely by surprise. Fortunately, aside from the ringing in his ears, it didn't seem to do any damage. In the instant he'd been distracted by the device, Luthor had escaped his grasp and was nearly to the exit tunnel. It was time to find out if he was going to be able to walk after ten days tied to a chair. Clark ripped one leg free and was just about to start after Luthor when he heard Luthor shout, "Open fire now!"

Instantly he felt a rain of bullets from above. Fortunately, the invulnerability that had returned proved to be more than equal to the task. Bullets and bullet fragments filled the room and the gunfire seemed to go on and on.

The shooting had to have continued for many seconds, but in far less than a minute, the room grew quiet. Clark looked up and used his x-ray vision to look inside the shooter's rooms. The men had dropped their guns and fled.

Clark tore his other leg free. As he stood, there was tingling and pain as his legs moved for the first time in days. Thankfully the discomfort passed quickly as he raced to where Luthor had fallen.

His enemy was still in the same spot that he'd been when he'd called for the gunmen to open fire. Unfortunately, Luthor had not been invulnerable to the hail of bullets than had been ricocheting around the room. His body was riddled with bullet holes and both his breathing and heart had stopped.

Clark would later feel some level of remorse that his only thought in that instant was that he'd lost his best clue to finding

Lois. Luthor certainly wasn't going to be providing that information. His enemy and captor was dead, and right now, Clark didn't have it in him to feel any regret.

Now his only concern was finding Lois. Clark put on a burst of super-speed and tore through the airlock door and out of his prison. A quick look around revealed that Clark's chamber stood all alone in a large open space that looked like it might be an old abandoned subway station. The structure of his prison chamber nearly filled the space. Everyone had fled, but Clark could hear the sound of people retreating through what looked to be the only exit from this chamber. He started down the chamber at super speed and within seconds he caught up to the people trying to escape.

He almost grabbed the first person he encountered, but realized that with so many people fleeing, he could kill two birds with one stone. He took flight and zipped along the ceiling of the hallway. This group consisted of about a dozen men. Once he was in front of them he quickly collapsed the hallway to prevent escape. Then, before the group had a chance to react, he reversed his path and flew back down the hallway behind them.

It took only seconds for the men to realize that their escape path had been cut off. As the group turned and tried to retrace their steps, they found themselves face to face with Superman. They were clearly terrified at the prospect of facing the still blood-covered, super-powered escapee. Clark took a moment to compose himself as the men backed away. They seemed to be trying to get as far away from him as possible, given the confined space of the collapsed hallway. "I'm going to collapse the hallway behind me and seal you in," he said, letting all the anger and frustration of the past week show. "Then I'm going to go try to find Mrs. Kent and take her to safety. If any of you help me find her, and also tell me the quickest way out of these tunnels, I'll come back and let you out as soon as she's safe. If none of you provide any help..." He paused to let them consider the consequences of his being annoyed. "Well, I'm already in a very bad mood. Whatever else might happen, I certainly won't have any reason to hurry back." Clark paused to let them consider the implications of what he had and had not said. "So, how do I find her?"

About half of the men looked confused, but the other half started falling all over themselves getting the directions to the door that led to where the women were supposed to be held. Women? Then Clark remembered the voice of the serving woman. In less than a minute, the men had agreed on the directions. Since the first step was to go forward, Clark first turned and collapsed the hallway behind him. Then he took a moment to disarm all the men and crush their guns before crashing through — and then rebuilding — the barrier in the front.

Thanks to the detailed directions, it only took a second to find the sliding steel panel that served as the door to Lois's prison. Clark almost burst through the door but realized that it was possible, if unlikely, that Lois might be right on the other side. So he dug into the steel of the door with his fingers and pulled it out into the hall. It was great to have his proper strength back again.

Inside was a very nice luxury apartment. "Lois!" he called out. "Lois Lane?" There was no answer and the lights were dimmed as if it were night.

Clark started to work his way through the apartment when a door flew open and Lois came rushing out. As soon as she saw him she ran to him and threw her arms around him. "You're alive," she whispered. "When you didn't come, I... I was so scared."

"I'm fine. I'll tell you the rest later," he whispered back. "But for now be careful, we're probably under surveillance."

"I know," she answered softly. "But I have to hold you. I feel like I've been losing my mind."

"I need to get you home. Do you know where we are?"

"Is this London?" she asked.

"London? No, we're somewhere under Metropolis."

"Are you Superman?" came a voice from behind.

"Martha, it's all right. This is Superman. He's here to rescue us."

Clark looked at the older woman. As had been the case with Lois, she'd clearly been asleep when he'd broken in. Strange, he'd thought that it was mid-day. "Ma'am, I've just escaped from captivity myself. I'm going to take Mrs. Kent to safety. I'll be back to get you as soon as I can. It shouldn't be more than a minute. I suggest you wait in your room until I can return."

"Yes, sir, Superman," she said before turning and returning to her room.

"Hold on. I'm going to super-speed you home," Clark said to his wife.

As he started to move Lois pulled herself in close. As soon as they had cleared the apartment Lois reminded him why he'd held on through the torture. "I love you, Clark."

A week had passed since their escape from Luthor. Clark's sudden and unexpected escape, combined with Luthor's death, meant that the underground complex had been abandoned quickly, and no one had taken the time to clean up behind themselves. It also meant that when Superman returned with the police to clean out the complex, even though the only people captured had been those that Superman had trapped, there remained an easy-to-follow paper and computer trail.

When the police investigators went through the underground complex, they discovered that Luthor had never left Metropolis after Nightfall. The extensive shelter, less than a mile from LexCorp tower, was vast and well stocked. There were enough supplies to last for years, and even though there was no shortage of ways into the complex, all of them were well concealed. Had Luthor chosen not to go after Lois and Superman, he might have lived there for a very long time undetected.

This afternoon, Clark was at the Planet in front of his workstation trying to finish a story. One element of trying to recover from the ordeal of the captivity was attempting to reestablish some of their work routines. For that reason, both he and Lois had returned to work quickly.

His thoughts were interrupted by the feel of a pair of hands on his shoulders that he immediately recognized as Lois's. "Are you ready to go?" she asked as she kissed him lightly on the ear. "Our appointment with Dr. Klein is in ten minutes."

He leaned back to enjoy the feel of her skin against his. Even before they'd been Luthor's prisoners, they had always enjoyed each other's touch. But in the time since they'd escaped, neither on them wanted to go more than a few minutes — or an hour at most — without the feel of the other's flesh against theirs. He turned to his wife and collected a quick — but not too quick — kiss before answering. "I'm almost done. Give me a minute and I'll meet you by the stairwell."

"Okay, but don't take too long," she said with a smile, then, after one more lingering kiss, she started for the elevators.

She was so beautiful when she smiled at him. As he turned back to his workstation, his thoughts went back to how thankful he was that she was still smiling at him. They had both been appalled that Lois had been subjected to a personality-altering experiment. Notes on Mendenhall and his research were in Luthor's computer. Even more, the entire plan to attempt to alter Lois's personality was also right there. Fortunately, whatever success Luthor and Mendenhall thought they were achieving, didn't seem to stick.

"Clark!" came a somewhat impatient call from Lois, now standing beside the elevator, to remind him that he was taking too long. At that he simply made sure that his workstation was locked

and started her way.

“You looked like you lost track of what you were doing,” she commented when he reached her.

“I did a little,” he admitted as he reached for her hand. “We’re going to be reviewing our cases with Bernie. When I think about Luthor — reprogramming you... well, it just scares me.”

“Me too,” she replied quietly, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. “But we need to go.”

They took the elevator to the ground floor then ducked out of sight. An instant later they were at the same door that Clark had used to go in and out of STAR Labs during the Nightfall Swarm crisis. They waited less than a minute before the door opened to reveal Bernie on the other side. “Sorry I’m late,” he said. “I wanted to make sure that we could get to my office without being seen.”

After they entered the building, Bernie closed the door and they proceeded to his office in silence. Repeated visits by the Lane and Kent reporting team had motivated Bernie to request additional visitor seating for his office. That request had been addressed and his office now sported a small loveseat. Lois and Clark took the loveseat as Bernie went around to the other side of his desk. He hadn’t quite sat down when Lois started, “You said on the phone that you have some new information relating to the time we were held captive.”

“I do. I believe that I finally have a comprehensive understanding of what Luthor was trying to do to you.”

“Did Lois suffer any permanent effects from the conditioning?” Clark burst out.

Bernie’s face turned serious. “No. As you know, I passed all the information about Mendenhall’s plan to several very capable colleagues who are specialists in behavior modification. I’m happy to report that they all reached the same conclusion. Mendenhall’s techniques would look very promising under extremely controlled conditions, but they would not have resulted in the kind of reforming of your personality that he and Luthor were attempting. People’s minds simply don’t work that way.”

“But the way I was acting!” Lois exclaimed.

Before Bernie had the chance to reply, Clark put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him.

“You were reacting to being bombarded with Mendenhall’s personality-altering program,” Bernie said. “Furthermore, you were under stress, and in an environment deliberately designed to disrupt your body’s natural process. The result was that you were especially open to suggestion.”

“How is this sort of thing possible?” Clark asked. “Was Mendenhall really that far ahead of everyone else?”

“Behavior modification, in various forms, has been around for a long time,” Bernie answered. “Some of his techniques were novel and new, but they simply don’t achieve any long-term effect on a person’s core personality. The behavior scientists that I had review the information, have assured me that the thoughts and feelings you were experiencing were all very surface-level behaviors. Mendenhall’s techniques were incredibly effective at short term manipulations, and those results can be very striking. But long term behavior modification is a completely different sort of problem.”

“That makes me feel a little better, but I have to admit to being confused,” Lois said. “Before he rescued me I was... I was feeling abandoned by Clark. I remember being angry.”

“That’s what the program was designed to make you feel,” Bernie agreed.

“But that’s my point,” Lois interjected. “If the short term effects were so powerful, and based on how I was acting I believe that they were, they why didn’t I stay mad at Clark?”

Bernie laughed softly. “That was one element that confused the behavior specialists that I had review your case. They

believed that, based on the information they had about the program, your relationship with Clark should have been strained for at least several days after your rescue.”

“But that didn’t happen at all,” she said, as she gave Clark’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“I’m sure it didn’t,” Bernie said in an almost cryptic tone. “I think I know why, but I can’t check my idea with my experts.”

“What do you mean?” Clark asked.

“Clark, when you rescued Lois, how were you dressed?”

“I was in the Superman suit,” he said. “You know that there wasn’t time to change. Besides, it wouldn’t have been smart to rescue her as Clark.”

“Of course. But that’s the point.” Bernie turned to Lois. “The entire program for driving a wedge between the two of you was designed around what Luthor knew of Clark. But Lois, you aren’t just married to Clark, you’re also married to Superman. The program was designed to work on your feelings for only half of your husband. You should have been experiencing negative feelings about the ‘Clark’ side of his personality, but I suspect you weren’t thinking much about his ‘Superman’ side at all.”

“That’s right,” Lois said. “After the first day or so, I remember being angry with Clark and upset because I was sure he’d gone back to Kansas. I was having all kinds of thoughts about him leaving me to go back to live on a farm. I barely thought of Clark as Superman at all.”

“Exactly,” Bernie agreed. “The program left a huge part of your understanding of Clark untouched. Then, the first time you did see him, he was dressed in his alternate identity. I believe that made it possible for you to throw off the program immediately.”

“So what would have happened if... if Clark hadn’t been able to rescue me and the process would have run its course?” Lois asked.

Bernie hesitated before answering. “Based on the information we have, I fear that had you stayed in that apartment and you had continued to be subjected to the conditioning for two or more months as planned... well, I’m afraid that when Luthor would have appeared, your reaction would almost certainly have been to, um, well, you would probably have been very... um, welcoming.”

“No!” Lois cried.

“I’m afraid so,” Bernie said defensively. “The only reason for doubt is the Clark/Superman factor. Maybe that would have been enough, but there’s no way to be sure.”

“So the programming would have worked,” Lois said dejectedly.

“It looks likely, but it would be only for the short term,” Bernie reassured her. “Once you were out of that environment, the programming would likely have remained in effect for from a week or two up to as long as a few months.”

“That would be way more than too much,” Lois said, as she leaned even closer to Clark for comfort.

“I understand,” Bernie replied. “But the program was very sophisticated. The good news is that the program wasn’t capable of achieving any long-term effects. You would have eventually thrown off the conditioning. Consider this, how do you think you would normally react to Luthor and the idea that he rescued you from captivity?”

“I’d know that he was behind it all,” she said with certainty. “I might go along with him to play for time, but I would never believe that he was anything but my enemy.”

“Then that’s what would have happened over the long term. Any significant change in the environment would cause you to eventually throw off the effects of the subliminals and return to your normal mode of thinking.”

“So I wouldn’t have ended up permanently as Lex’s adoring wife?” Lois asked hopefully.

“No. That element was right there in Mendenhall’s notes if

you knew what to look for. I think Mendenhall was searching for a way to get past the long-term barrier. My friends who know this subject say that without of some kind of real breakthrough, long term personality changes were not going to take hold. And there's no sign that Mendenhall had achieved that breakthrough."

"So you think he was deceiving Luthor the whole time?" Clark asked.

"I have to believe so. As I said, it was all there in his notes. However, unless you are trained in the field of psychology and behavior science, it would be nearly impossible to see the problems in what he was trying to achieve. I reviewed the notes myself and thought Mendenhall was onto something. It wasn't until one of my associates explained the problems to me and showed me how to properly interpret the data, that I realized the magnitude of the problem."

"So did Mendenhall have some kind of death wish?" Lois asked. "Lex would have killed him once I'd rejected his advances."

"I think part of it was wishful thinking on his part. I've spoken to people that know him. He really believed in what he was trying to do. I suspect he was lying to himself as much as he was lying to Luthor."

"Well, I'm glad," Lois said. "I can't image life as Lex's adoring wife. Especially considering what he was trying to do to Clark."

"So have you figured out why that part didn't work?" Clark asked. "Why I'm not... dead?"

"Now your situation was especially interesting," Bernie said, smiling. "But you know that we got the first clue right away."

"You mean when your Kryptonite needle didn't work on me either?" Clark clarified.

"Exactly. That Kryptonite had allowed me to draw some of your blood before, but now, the same piece doesn't affect you at all. If not for your ability to burn a small hole in your skin with your heat vision, I'm not sure we could have drawn blood."

"So what did you find?" Lois asked.

"The key to the puzzle was when we measured your powers. Based on the tests we did the day after you escaped, your abilities are — to the accuracy we can measure — exactly two-thirds of what they were before your first Nightfall mission."

"What's special about two-thirds?"

"At first I wasn't sure. But fortunately I had some of your blood stored from before Luthor captured you. When I analyzed the blood carefully, I found that in the original sample there were three distinct blood groups, let's call them G, R and X. Two of the groups, R and X, comprised nearly eighty percent of your blood and the G group was just over twenty percent. When I analyzed the new sample, the third group was gone and the balance was fifty-fifty for the R and X groups."

"The exposure to Kryptonite killed off the G group," Clark said.

"Exactly. I took a small portion of your original sample and exposed it to Kryptonite. The blood cells in the G group started dying."

"So what does it mean?" Lois asked.

"I believe that the three groups represent three varieties of the cells that give you your powers. Since all of your powers are present, only weakened, I suspect that they all contribute equally to your abilities. It seems clear that the G cells were sensitive to the Kryptonite. When you've been exposed in the past, the reaction of the G cells sends your system into shock. It's why your powers disappear and why you feel pain. Exposure to Kryptonite kills off the G cells. However, since they're gone now, there's nothing in your system to react to the Kryptonite."

Clark shook his head, "I was sure that Kryptonite would kill me."

"It almost did," Bernie added seriously. "The only reason

you're alive is that you were subjected to an almost perfect set of conditions to survive."

"Could you explain that?" Lois asked.

"In the original Nightfall mission, Clark was exposed to the Kryptonite gas. It got into his bloodstream and nearly killed him. Fortunately, there wasn't quite enough to do that, but the overall effect was to substantially change the G, R and X balance in his system. We didn't know it, but you were on your way to becoming immune to Kryptonite."

"But I wasn't immune," Clark cut in. "It really hurt when I first went into that chamber."

"Yes, because you still had a lot of the type-G cells in your system. If Luthor would have tried to kill you with Kryptonite when he first captured you, it might have been possible. There was enough of the sensitive element in your system that it might have killed you from the shock."

"But he didn't try," Clark said, "He kept the dose very low so that he could torture me."

"And in so doing, he purged your system of the remaining G elements just slowly enough to leave you in pain but not kill you. And by keeping the exposure continuous, no G elements were able to regenerate."

"So thanks to Luthor, I'm immune to Kryptonite."

"You are for now. And maybe forever. We should check periodically to see if the G elements reappear."

"What would have happened if Lex just would have left Clark and me alone?" Lois asked.

"I believe that over time the G elements would have regenerated and restored the three-way balance. You would be back to full power, but you would be as sensitive as ever to Kryptonite. And, based on your reactions to the dosages that we know about, I suspect that in your original condition where all three elements were in balance, an intense exposure to Kryptonite would probably have killed you."

"What about those other varieties," Lois asked. "Does the fact that there are the R and X groups mean that there could be other kinds of Kryptonite?"

"Has all the Kryptonite you've seen looked the same?" Bernie asked.

"Yes. I've only seen the green crystal."

"Green!" Lois shouted. "That's why you called that the G element."

"Exactly," Bernie confirmed. "Well, there is another type of meteor rock that Luthor found. There were a few crystals that we believe are Kryptonite but are red instead of green. I ran some tests and confirmed that the red crystal affected one of the components. That is the one that I have been calling the R component. It was interesting though, that your blood didn't seem to react to the red nearly as violently as it reacted to the green. I suspect that the red will have a very different effect and may not even cause you any pain."

"So I'm not out of the woods," Clark sighed.

"I don't know," Bernie said. "The radiation from the red is different in ways other than the color."

"What about the X?" Lois asked. "Does that mean there is another version of Kryptonite that we need to worry about?"

Bernie shrugged. "I just don't know. It could be that one-third — I guess we should say one-half now — of your cells have no susceptibility at all. Or maybe you're correct and there is another kind of Kryptonite out there. Right now I just don't know."

"So what do you suggest that I do?" Clark asked.

"That's up to you. If you'll agree, I think it would be a good idea for you to come in periodically so I can chart your recovery. In the meantime, I'd suggest that you get back to your lives. The two of you have had a very busy year."

"Bernie, did you see the police report on Luthor's Kryptonite prison?" Clark asked.

“You mean that concrete structure where you were held captive?”

“Yes,” Clark confirmed.

“More than that,” Bernie said. “I was part of the team that decommissioned it.”

“So you know that there was a lot of Kryptonite missing?”

“Sure. It looked like some of Luthor’s people came back and collected it off the floor before the police were able to secure the area. There were also some pieces missing from the walls.”

“What do you think I should do?” Clark asked.

“I don’t understand,” Bernie said.

“I’m sure that I’ll be seeing it pop up in criminal hands. What should I do when someone uses one against me?”

“Well, try not to laugh too hard. And after you’re done, I’d like to have them for my studies. Finally, if nothing else, some of them are really beautiful crystals. If the radiation really does prove to be harmless to you and humans, it might make some attractive jewelry.”

They had just finished the dinner dishes when Clark heard the knock on the door. At the sound, Lois had jerked in fright and grabbed for his hand. The fear on her face — a look that he’d become all too familiar with this past week — was like an icicle through his heart. It pained him that she was still so afraid. But the reality was that they both were.

Clark glanced quickly through the door. “It’s okay,” Clark said as he pulled her into a hug. “It’s just them.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice very fragile, as she pulled herself even closer to him. “I hate being so scared.”

“We’ll get through this,” he said softly. “You know what the therapist said. As long as we support each other, and we’re honest and open when we get scared, we will beat these fears. For now, we just have to take one day at a time.”

Lois looked up at him, a hint of tears in her eyes. “I just wish the nightmares would stop. For both of us.”

“Me too,” Clark agreed. “But until we are past all this, Superman stays off night duty. I promise you’ll never wake up alone.”

The knock at the door repeated. “Should I tell them that we need to do this another night?” he asked.

“No,” she said, her voice suddenly strong with the Lois Lane spirit. “We can be afraid, but we can’t live afraid.” Then she started for the door. By the time she reached the door, all signs of the fearful woman were gone. She opened the door and said, “Sorry for the delay,” she said. “We were just finishing the dinner dishes.”

“That’s fine,” Martha said. “May we come in?”

“Sure,” Lois answered. She opened the door wide and let Clark’s parents and Perry into their home.

“Thanks for stopping by,” Clark said as everyone came in. “Would anyone like anything before we start?”

Clark’s parents just shook their heads while Perry answered, “No, thanks. We didn’t plan to stay long. Did you have much to talk about tonight? Based on your message, I got the impression this was going to be quick.”

“It will be,” Lois answered. “We only had a few things we wanted to go over.”

After they were all seated in the small living area, Clark began by turning to Perry. “Perry, this is mostly about you. Now that you know the secret of my identity, Lois and I were thinking that we’d like to talk about some things.”

“You know you can trust me,” Perry offered.

“Of course, but we — Lois and I — clearly weren’t being careful enough about my secret. We’d like your help in not making the same mistake again.”

“Well, I don’t think it would have been so obvious to anyone else,” Perry said. “There were a lot of little things that I suspect

only I saw.”

“What would you say is the main thing that Clark needs to do better?” Lois asked.

“He needs to stay away from you,” Perry said to Lois.

“What?” Lois and Clark said together.

“I mean when you’re dressed as Superman,” Perry clarified to Clark. “Son, when you found out that Lois had been kidnapped, and you had to get Superman’s help to get her safe, you were as transparent as glass. You talked about getting Superman to help, but it was easy to see that of all the things that were worrying you that day, finding Superman and convincing him to cooperate was the least of your concerns.”

“Perry, do you think anyone else at the Planet suspects?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t think so,” he answered. “As soon as you and Martha told me that Superman had hidden Clark in a remote location, I made sure that the Planet staff thought it was my idea. I believe that having them think I was the force behind Clark’s disappearance, kept them off the trail. I was watching carefully the whole time Clark was missing, and I don’t think anyone else caught on.”

“But even if that worked, we need to be more careful. What should we do?” Lois asked.

“First off, no more Superman stories for you,” Perry answered. “Even if the story comes to you, you’ll need to find a way to pass it to someone else. And as for you,” he said looking at Clark. “You need to work harder at establishing a city other than Metropolis as your base.”

“We’d already planned to do that,” Clark agreed. “We just hadn’t gotten around to it yet.”

“Well, son, pick a city and do it. The bad guys know that Lois was the bait that trapped you once, and that will certainly prompt someone to think about doing it again. The sooner you establish that you’re based in another city, the better the chance that no one will try to grab her.”

“Anyone who tries to grab Lois is going to have a very bad day,” Clark said coldly.

Clark’s tone left the room silent for a moment. Perry finally broke the ice. “I understand, but you can’t be with her every minute for the rest of your lives. So you can’t waste any time in establishing another city as Superman’s new home. Have you picked a city?”

“Not yet. We were talking about New York. But we were wondering if Los Angeles would be a better choice,” Clark said. “Back to what you said a moment ago, I want Superman as far from Lois as he can get. If it wasn’t for the time problem, I’d suggest Australia. I’ve heard good things about both Sydney and Melbourne.”

“Son, I don’t know. I don’t think it would feel right for Superman to leave the United States,” Jonathan said.

“You’re probably right. But we don’t need to decide that tonight,” Clark replied.

“But you will need to do more than just move Superman to a different city,” Perry continued. “I’ve given this some thought and I think there needs to be a public break up between Lois Lane and Superman. Anything less than that and even if Superman leaves Metropolis, people will figure you did it to protect Lois.”

“I don’t like it, but I think I understand,” Lois said. “What do you think we should do?”

“I don’t know,” Perry answered. “Lois, either you or Superman is going to have to be the bad guy for this. Either Superman has to be unfeeling of your situation or you need to be angry at the fact that your association with him placed you in danger.”

“It has to be me,” Lois said immediately. “Superman has to be above such things. I can go all bitchy about being held captive and swear that I regret ever hearing of Superman. I can even talk

about the possibility of suing Superman for having put me at risk.”

“Wouldn’t that be more trouble than it’s worth?” Martha asked.

“Sure,” Lois replied quickly. “I won’t really do it, but the fact that I mention it as a possibility will be enough. Then, when I stop writing any Superman stories, it should be clear to everyone that any affection Lois Lane had for Superman is long gone.”

“It will be hard, but I think that is what you are going to have to do,” Perry said. “So what else did you want to talk about tonight?”

“We want to offer a story about Superman, and talk about how you’d like to handle it.”

“What story?” Perry asked.

“The story that Superman is now immune to Kryptonite.”

“What?” Martha burst out.

“Dr. Klein told us that today,” Clark provided. “That’s how I survived his death chamber.” He turned to his editor. “There are still people who worked in that chamber that haven’t been caught yet, and not all the Kryptonite has been accounted for. Anyone who doesn’t know how it ended, is probably going to try something. I — we — want them to have to worry about the fact that they can’t count on Kryptonite to protect them.”

Perry was quiet for a moment. “I can see it,” he said finally. “If we do it right, it could be a great story. You already said that you wanted to do an in-depth account of your captivity. Is Superman ready to give that interview now?”

“Yes. We just need to find someone to write it.”

“I’ll write it,” Perry offered. “I can see it now. Superman searching for the wife of his friend when he gets captured with Kryptonite. It will be great, and I’m sure we can frame the story to set up Lois’s public break with Superman.” He turned to Lois. “Is that all right with you, Darlin’?”

“Yes. Right now, I think that’s a great idea,” Lois agreed.

“We can start on it tomorrow,” Perry said. “Think about what city you want to use as your new base. The article would be a good avenue for that announcement.”

“We’ll do that,” Clark said. “And Perry?”

“Yes?” Perry responded.

“Welcome to the ranks of Superman’s advisors,” Clark said as he offered the older man his hand.

THE END