

Investigate

By [Blueowl](#) <blueowl617@yahoo.com>

Rated: PG-13

Submitted: May 2021

Summary: As a Private Investigator, Clark Kent can make a difference while not needing to worry about answering to a boss or keeping normal business hours, which is important, since he also chooses to make differences in other, more unbelievable, ways. Meanwhile, Lois Lane is dead set on uncovering the truth behind the miraculous and the heinous. How will the world react when such truths are revealed?

Story Size: 102,191 words (569Kb as text)

Read in other formats: [Text](#) | [MS Word](#) | [OpenOffice](#) | [PDF](#) | [Epub](#) | [Mobi](#)

Started in Jan 2018

A/N 1: This has been in my head for a while, and I've finally caved. This is an AU, but it's essentially the world of Lois and Clark, the New Adventures of Superman, except with a different Clark.

A/N 2: Special thanks to Morgana, Chereche, and Mary who helped beta this fic and/or acted as soundboards ^_^.

Prologue

Lois leaned back on her couch and gave her eyes a rest from hours of reading, writing, and rewriting. Papers were scattered around her with frantic scrawl jotted along several margins and portions of text circled for editing and research purposes. Ink smears covered portions of her fingers, even though she had been working on the computer for the last day.

She had finally done it—or at least reached the point of no return. It was now up to him, assuming it was a him.

For months, *years*, she had known there was something going on, but there hadn't been any hint of proof strong enough to convince Perry to allow her to pursue the story—not that she just sat on it, she just didn't work on it officially. That was before Prometheus happened.

"Almost blown to smithereens," Lois muttered to herself. "Not that that's anything new to me. No, being rescued was new." She looked at the article she had written, taking in the sight of the Messenger seemingly levitating off the launch pad. That piece of the story definitely overshadowed the initial bit that involved her almost being killed.

Someone (who she would track down and expose!) had sabotaged the space program by placing a bomb on the Messenger, a bomb that she found but could not stop.

And then he, or it, came.

Not only had this entity whisked her out of the shuttle before taking care of the bomb, it had done so before *lifting* the entire spacecraft into orbit—all without actually being *seen*. Sure, the 'lift off' had been live on international television, but the rescuer had been impossible to see, let alone identify, due to mysterious mishaps with all of the cameras on board. Equipment had become unplugged and cameras that should have caught something had either been turned away, disconnected, or, in a few instances, fried. How it all had happened in a matter of seconds was still anyone's guess.

Being present at the scene, Lois had been able to make out a

blur of earth tones that looked like a momentary smudge in her vision, but it didn't resemble a form she could identify. And when it had moved her, it had all happened so fast she couldn't even be certain that what had grabbed her had held her with hands or just simply wrapped her in a blanket and transported her.

But it *had* happened, and no one could deny it.

After Prometheus, blatant miracles around the world started happening, but there was still no hint of who or what was doing it—or why. The 'minor' miracles that had first gotten her attention still occurred but they were dwarfed by much grander instances—instances that could not be explained away as flukes or impressive luck. Stories began to flood in from all around the world. Everything from people being yanked to safety from an oncoming car by some streak of beige, to the breakdown of the nuclear power plant in Metropolis that had been causing the bizarre heat wave.

Whoever was responsible for these life saving stunts was a god-send, but she refused to jump on the bandwagon that believed it was all supernatural, even though the 'angel' belief eased the public's fears and was infinitely better than the conspiracy theories. She wanted to get to the truth, whatever it may be.

She only hoped the being who was responsible for it all would somehow read her article and be brave enough to respond.

Ice shifted in a half empty glass on the coffee table with condensation pooling around the base. The dull but constant sound of passing traffic hummed through the window behind the couch as a dishwasher echoed from the kitchen.

Clark returned the stack of papers to the table after speed reading it all. It was a very boring text but necessary. City records. Vital to solving cold cases of missing persons or determining trends that could lead to more helpful answers.

He was a private investigator and had been since the startling young age of 18.

Soon after high school, he felt contained, cooped up, and he had to get away. Some people would say he felt that he needed to "find himself," which he supposed was at least partially true. After he started flying and had learned to control it – thankfully, with help from his dad – he was compelled to use the ability. As for exactly why, maybe, like a bird, it was in his nature.

At the time, his parents were not too pleased with him leaving and refusing the scholarships he had been offered, but he was an adult (albeit 18) and had saved up enough of his own hard-earned money to purchase a passport and a ticket to China. Even though he could have just flown over, he was extremely mindful of how that would raise questions if anyone were to ever look into how he had gotten into the country. So he played it safe, knowing that once he was there, he would have free reign, as long as he was careful about time-frames.

Adjusting to life in China wasn't that difficult for him, although it helped that he didn't need to eat. He often did find work, however, doing odd jobs for people – particularly where heavy labor was concerned. He never stuck around for more than a week in any given location, immersing himself in the culture and language just well enough for him to get by before moving on. After wandering the coast, he branched into the mainland and into the rural areas, pleased by his progress — although he wasn't yet sure what he was aiming for.

A few months in, he understood several dialects and could speak two well enough to convince a native that he had been studying the language for a few years. Another month in, and he had half a dozen down pat, spurring him on to learn more.

In the middle of his fourth month while working for a native man, the purpose of his wandering finally came into focus. One evening, the man's daughter, Daiyu, went missing. Wanting to help, Clark went out to look for her. He spoke with neighbors and looked in all the locations the family thought she could be, but

only when he started pressing deeper did he find a trail—by eavesdropping.

“We just got another, about eight with a very pretty face,” a man by a pub whispered.

The age caught Clark’s attention, as well as the disturbing tone of ownership. He quietly followed the men and was horrified by what he stumbled upon.

A market. A market that sold girls and women like pieces of meat, often times to become wives to men they had never met, far away from the homes they knew. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), he didn’t see Daiyu among those held captive, but he couldn’t ignore what he saw.

Not exactly sure what he was doing, he patiently watched how the people within behaved and interacted with one other as he came up with a plan. It was eye opening to see how well kept so many of the men were. If they were in a coffee shop or walking down a street, no one would ever imagine they were involved in human trafficking. With a nod to himself, he bolted back to his suitcase back at the farm and quickly donned business-like clothing he had that was similar to what he saw other ‘buyers’ wearing.

He knew it was likely there were more places than just the one he discovered and he hoped he would be able to find them because it was possible Daiyu had been taken there. So he straightened his back and entered the alleyway.

After giving the password he had overheard other buyers give, he was escorted in.

He didn’t need to look through any more walls to be further sickened, his ears told him enough. He needed to do something. He needed to save these people and stop these monsters.

Clark had no moral dilemma with quickly and subtly pickpocketing the ‘customers’ as he passed within reach of them. Super speed really was handy, though he took special care to not be spotted.

Secretly loaded with cash, he approached one of the men standing watch over some scared women.

“I would like a long term arrangement,” Clark said, repeating what he had heard one man say and hoping he was convincing.

“Well, as you can see, we have a lot to choose from,” the man said proudly as he walked down the row, motioning to the women and children cowering along the wall. “Any of these are up for such things.”

“Very well, but I’m looking for something in particular,” Clark said, walking past each with seemingly the same care as the ‘salesman’.

He wasn’t sure how he contained his rage, but he somehow did, memorizing each face he saw – not that there were many he could see, as most kept their heads down.

“Oh, no problem, we’ll be getting a new batch tomorrow. Clean and fresh, virgin,” he said. “So until then, you could have one you see here at a discount and come back tomorrow to—”

“I’m not interested in returning tomorrow. I want a gem today,” Clark said, inwardly gaping at his daring, but the feeling was fleeting.

He was going to end this, and he was not going to just let this sorry excuse for a living being have any say in the matter.

“Where is this new batch currently? If I can go there now, I will pay you well,” Clark said, pulling 3000 Yuan from his pocket and casually folding it between his middle and forefinger like it was just a card.

The man appraised Clark, taking in his glasses, clean shaven face and overall well off appearance.

Not knowing what he was looking for, Clark gathered every ounce of willpower to not waver under the older man’s gaze. Unknowingly, Clark made his eyes sharpen and his presence stretch from him like a tangible thing.

The girls along the wall whimpered or stilled.

Finally, the man grinned. “Well, as they say, money talks!” He held out his hand expectantly.

Clark offered the 3000 Yuan, allowing the man to seize it, but he didn’t immediately let go. “I have best find an unblemished flower for myself there, or I’ll return and find you. Neither of us would want that.”

The man laughed nervously, and Clark let go. Promptly, the man told him of a warehouse on the other end of town.

He left with a nod, taking another 5000 Yuan from other men on his way out. Laden with a remarkable amount of funds, he sped to the other location and scanned it, quickly finding that the trafficker had told him the truth.

Clark frowned, looking into the building from behind the cover of clouds and the darkness of the night. He found Daiyu, but he knew he couldn’t just rescue her and leave all the other children and women to a horrible fate, so he did the only thing he really could.

After quickly stashing the majority of the cash, he made his way to the city’s public security station (police station).

“I need to talk to the chief of security as soon as possible, please,” he said to the officer at the front desk.

The man looked at him, unimpressed.

“Reason?”

“I know two locations of where human trafficking is taking place, right now,” he answered, placing his hands on the counter. He quickly read the name badge which had ‘Zhang’ engraved on the metal plate.

Zhang frowned. “How did you come by such information?”

“I was looking for a lost girl, overheard some guys, followed them, and then saw....” His mouth went dry.

“Follow me,” Zhang said. “Chan, take over here, will you?”

“Sure,” another man said, quickly taking his place as Clark followed Zhang.

People glanced his way but didn’t question him as he followed Zhang into what he quickly concluded was an interrogation room.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

Clark quickly pulled out his wallet and retrieved his passport. “Clark Kent, sir.”

Zhang looked down. “American? Hm, you sure of what you saw?”

“One hundred percent,” Clark answered firmly.

“Very well. Please take a seat. The chief will be in shortly,” Zhang said. He closed the door behind him.

He didn’t have to wait long before he heard voices from the other side of the false mirror.

“You know Americans, seeking adventure and exaggerating,” an officer said.

“I don’t know. He saw something. Call it intuition or whatever you want, but I think we should at least hear what he has to say. Who knows, maybe this is the break we’ve been looking for those missing girls,” Zhang said. “The look in his eyes when he was talking to me ... whatever he saw disgusted him.”

“Very well,” a third voice said.

The door opened.

“I’m Chief Wang Wei Chee. You have information?” the man said, stopping on the other side of the table.

“Yes, sir. I know the location of two places where human trafficking is taking place. There are at least two dozen women held against their will, one of whom I personally know. She’s a daughter of a farmer I’m working for. We need to hurry,” he explained, before giving them the two locations.

“You speak very good Mandarin, Clark Kent. I saw you entered the country just a few months ago. Did you take language classes?” he asked, jotting down the street names.

“I’m self taught, actually,” Clark answered.

He nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll check these places out. We of

course take such things very seriously, so in the meantime, you will stay here,” he said, already turning to leave.

“At the second place, you should find the farmer’s daughter. She’s just turned 9, and her name is Daiyu Jiang,” Clark quickly told him.

Chee paused before giving a nod and closing the door behind him.

Roughly an hour later, the chief deputy came in and gave him some food, thanking him for coming forward with such vital information. After some gentle prodding, the chief deputy shared that they had raided both locations after they discovered he was correct.

By the end of the night, over one-hundred-and-seventy women and children had been saved and several dozen men had been arrested. Not only that, but they found documents detailing where other locations were, which eventually led to the end of half a dozen other rings in the coming weeks.

Impressed by Clark’s actions, the chief asked him his age before immediately promising to look into giving him work as a private investigator as soon as he got a degree and turned 25, that way his nationality wouldn’t be an issue. He went a step further by writing out a letter of recommendation so that Clark could begin taking the needed steps to obtain his education. Clark promised he would consider it but made the chief swear to keep his name out of the reports, stating that he didn’t want a target painted on his back. It was clear that whoever ran this human trafficking operation had a great deal of pull on the streets. The chief agreed.

And that was where it all truly started for Clark.

He knew what he wanted to do and how he was going to do it.

He was going to be his own boss and work as a Private Investigator, and that’s exactly what he did.

With the letter of recommendation, he got his first professional job, foregoing college, and from there it slowly grew. He quickly learned he had to conceal his age, at least in the beginning, because very few people took an 18 year old seriously, but after his ‘resume’ expanded, as well as his knowledge and confidence, it didn’t matter.

He traveled, solving cases across China, then through Mongolia, Russia, and Kazakhstan, including a case involving a diplomat’s son.

That case was special because he obtained his first false (but ‘provable’) identity with the help of the diplomat, enabling him to finish the case.

Vasily Borodin.

He would use this name occasionally for future professional needs.

Gaining a wider repertoire of investigative techniques, he cut down and around the continent. He learned nearly a hundred languages those first two years, branching into Europe where he closed a handful of cold cases and helped save a woman at her breaking point in Paris. By the time he was pulling out of Europe and heading south, he had found nearly one hundred missing persons, solved over a dozen previously unsolved murders, and had helped bring more than fifty evil individuals to justice.

And then he went into Africa.

Throughout the years, he had never slipped in noticeably using his abilities in public, and he did end up using them at least once a month to help avert disaster. Fortunately, all those times he had been able to act without drawing anyone’s attention, making it look as if the saved individual was just extremely lucky.

But then an instance of impossibility and a moment of certainty occurred.

He was in a more violent place in Africa, the Congo, looking into a trail of missing diamonds and miners, when he happened upon a group of armed mercenaries. They were corralling the people of a small village, separating the men from the women and

children. Clark didn’t need his vast, real world experience to know what they were going to do next.

Lining up the village men, the mercenaries raised their weapons – and fired.

There was no convenient way to make it appear these men’s lives were saved by happy happenstance. No amount of breath would blow this danger away, at least not completely. So Clark moved. Fast.

He caught all the bullets in a blink of an eye and kept moving, afraid to stop. He slammed into the would-be murderers, knocking them back and causing many to lose their weapons and a few to even lose their shoes. He then shot back into the brush, and watched, heart hammering in his chest, unable to believe what he had just done in front of so many people.

The mercenaries fled, not caring what they left behind, including a case of ammunition and several other cases full of supplies, such as medicine and food.

The villagers cried, relieved and overjoyed, saying a spirit of their ancestors must have protected them.

The village men took the weapons, the first one proclaiming they would prevent anything like this from happening again, as it was clear their ancestors had provided the means to do so. They just had to see it through.

Clark solved his case a few days later, but he was still reeling from what he had done.

He had saved those men’s lives and had rescued their families —and his actions had been seen.

But it was okay.

The people weren’t afraid, and there was no possible way it would be linked back to him.

So maybe, *maybe*, he could do more things like that.

He had already been saving lives in secret for years, but never had he done so in plain view of those he was saving, interfering with those who would have claimed their lives.

It was exhilarating, frightening, and humbling.

But it was a thrill he was familiar with. He felt it each time he brought a lost child back to their family, each time he was able to give an answer to a grieving soul, and each time he solved an ‘unsolvable’ case.

And now he knew he could do more.

He traveled all the way to the cape of South Africa, spending a little over a year in Africa altogether.

In the spring of that fourth year, he bought a ticket and traveled to the bottom tip of South America, hunkering down for a month in Argentina and immersing himself in another branch of languages. The main language was a dialect of Spanish, but there were dozens of others to learn as well — pockets of less spoken languages, languages at risk of dying out.

He strove to learn as many as he could, thriving on the human interaction he was experiencing and becoming grounded in the humanity that reminded him again and again why he did what he did.

He had long since learned that cruelty was a constant around the world. Evil people existed everywhere, and sometimes the good guys didn’t win.

But there was good. There was beauty and peace, despite the brutality and horror that also existed.

He didn’t know how many times a family had allowed him to stay — a complete stranger — on their land and under their roof. He had long since lost count of how many meals he had been served and how many job offers he had been given. And when people learned what he did for a living, their praises alone were as good as gold.

And so he traveled north, bouncing between Chile and Argentina until he slipped into Uruguay, and ping-ponged through Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru and Brazil — his passport now extremely thick and heavily used.

There were a few close calls that year, but like the incident in Africa, no one had actually seen him; granted, he couldn't be completely sure if that young boy in Brazil had been fully unconscious when he pulled him out of the river.

He continued north, gaining additional experience and closing more and more cases, his name becoming known to not just those he served. In Central America, he confronted cartels and made contacts in nearly every level of infrastructure and government until he finally returned to the U.S..

He had of course returned in secret over the past five years, sharing with his parents all of his most rewarding experiences while glossing over the less glamorous. His parents were proud of what he was doing and accepted his decision to not further his formal education, in part because they saw he didn't need a declaration on a sheet of paper to get cases—not that they had felt he would amount to nothing without a degree, they just knew a degree often helped in life.

In time, more people in certain circles knew of him, including those from both upstanding and disreputable backgrounds. He was the man who got the tough cases done. Everything from the surreal to the hopeless, from the forgotten to the infamous.

Clark Kent would get answers no one else could.

Always.

He bounced around the U.S., building his base of contacts even more as he took cases from average Joes to secretive generals.

And that was when his life took an unexpected turn.

He received a call from a woman named Patrice Van Der Car, administrative assistant to General Burton Newcomb of the Department of Defense. She asked Clark if he would be willing to meet the General at an old metal ore refinery just outside Baltimore city limits that evening at 9pm. She emphasized that it involved a matter of grave importance.

Normally he would have been very suspicious, but, though he was still weary, he knew Newcomb was an upstanding man with a good heart due to research he had done for a case a year prior that involved a missing soldier.

Thus, Clark agreed to meet with him and, later that night, was grateful that he had.

Newcomb wanted to hire an investigator (outside government interference) to verify the existence of a dangerous renegade in his wing (which was made up of roughly 3000 people), and, if present, catch them. The reason for this was due to a variety of disappearances (military and civilian) over the last few months and troubling rumors of a secret creation of a 'unique' division with questionable ideals.

There were three people the General suspected may be responsible, but he couldn't determine which one was guilty, and he had no one within he could trust or was frankly willing to risk. And so, after hearing about Clark and some of the rather dangerous cases he had solved, the General knew he was worth a chance.

Clark was warned it would likely be a long commitment, but that the General would accommodate almost any request from Clark to aid in his investigation and would pay twenty percent more than his normal fee.

"Do you know what this division's mission is? Its purpose?" Clark asked.

"I can only tell you once you have agreed to see this case through and after you have sworn to never reveal what you learn from the investigation to anyone I do not clear. I have already taken the liberty of starting the necessary checks on you, due to the level of clearance this will entail, but you must understand that once you begin this, there will be no going back. You will likely learn things you would have preferred never to know."

"If this is as serious as it sounds, I will accept that knowledge, whatever it may be," Clark said.

"Very good. I admit I was uncertain about asking for you when I learned of your age—twenty-three, my Lord—but your experiences and recommendations speak for themselves and now that I have met you, I know you are the man for the job," he said, holding out his hand.

Clark took it.

"Thank you, General," he said.

"This is my direct line," the General said, handing him his card. "The files are in my car. Burn them all once you have gone through them. None of the documents I give you can remain. We cannot allow these files to fall into the wrong hands, understand?"

Clark nodded as he followed him, noting how the General didn't say anything against taking notes. "Once I get through what you have for me, I'll get with you to discuss my strategy."

The General turned to him before removing the first box from the car. His expression, if it were possible, was even more solemn than it had been a minute before.

"Kent, I feel I should also warn you, one of these folders may ... hit a little close to home for you."

Clark raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"Aspects in the X-Files TV series are not too far from the truth. We, the human race, are not as big as we think we are."

He turned away, grabbing another box of files, as Clark inwardly reeled. It wouldn't be the last time that night.

Within the safety of his apartment, he could not read fast enough, devouring all the boxes of files provided to him, including Project Blue Book—a 'terminated' program whose goals were to determine if UFOs were a national threat and to analyze any UFO data. It was near the end of the Project Blue Book file stack when he came upon the folder labeled "Smallville Incident, 1966"....

If he had been human, he might have hyperventilated. As it was, his heart was hammering in his chest so loudly he couldn't hear anything else.

It was him. The thing they had detected crashing in Smallville back in 1966.

He read through the rest of the files, the question of fate now no question at all.

He flew to Smallville immediately after burning the files, save one.

After a brief conversation with his parents, Clark confirmed the spaceship that his father had buried was no longer where it should have been.

Which meant the government, on some level, knew about him.

He had to get his vessel back and he needed to determine just how much they knew, as it was clear they knew more than he did. Until that moment, he hadn't even known he was ... alien.

He felt conflicted. On one hand, he wasn't at all surprised, and perhaps on some level he always suspected or even known, but on the other ... how could he be an *alien*? He looked just like a human! And yet ... how could he be?

But identity crisis aside and even without counting his desire to get his vessel back, Clark knew he had to help the General. If even just a quarter of what he had inferred from what he had read was true, General Newcomb was completely correct to be concerned.

The things he had read sent up red flags and, from his years of experience, he knew they needed to act before it was too late.

And slowly, a plan began to take shape.

He called the General four days later, late in the afternoon. It wouldn't do to call him less than 12 hours after receiving over a hundred documents.

The plan was risky, particularly where it came to his secret, but if it worked....

"I can make the necessary arrangements, and I agree it will be best for you to go the route you've proposed, even though it will postpone investigative progress in the beginning by a few

months,” the General said before growing slightly incredulous. “There are two of your requests, however, that I must ask you about. The first, your degree of choice ... Astrophysics? With the contacts you’ve provided and mine, I can get it for you, but you’ll actually need to know it. You won’t be able to fake it without someone in this group noticing.”

“I know it, sir, admittedly self-study, but I’ll willingly take a test from any university if you feel it necessary.”

“It may be. I’ll let you know.”

“And my second request?” Clark asked, already having an idea of what he was referring to.

“No blood tests or shots?” the General asked incredulously. “You do understand that that’s standard procedure when entering the military.”

Clark took a deep breath, hoping the General would be able to accommodate his odd request and not press too much.

“It’s ... against my religion,” he said somewhat sheepishly.

The General raised a disbelieving eyebrow but said, “Very well. I’ll make it work.”

Clark hid a sigh of relief, even though he knew the General knew he was hiding something. Hopefully he just thought he was afraid of needles. “Thank you, General.”

“As for you attending Officer Training School, as soon as you have a certified degree — either by your means or my own — you will be entered into the next OTS class. You do understand that, if you do this, you will become an active member of the United States Air Force. Depending on how this investigation goes, you will very likely be serving for the next four years at least. You will become a genuine officer with all the responsibilities therein.”

“I understand. The commitment is worth it if it means we can prevent what you fear and what I frankly suspect.”

“I’m glad you are willing to see this through. Once you have given your oath, I will place you where and as you requested. I have kept my suspicions close to the chest. They still trust me, so implanting you will likely be the easiest part of all of this.”

The General was right.

After receiving his diploma, a Bachelor’s degree in Astrophysics from ETH Zurich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich; German: Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich), he went through OTS.

Taking the General’s recommendation, he aimed to be the best, and he was, graduating top in his class (not that it was all that important in the long run — much like high school). At times, it had been hard to keep his abilities under the radar, but the months flew by quickly. Before he knew it, he was a second lieutenant and had received his first assignment.

The first year was ground work, though after the first six months, he knew he had gotten their attention. He also suspected who was in charge of it. Of the men the General listed, Lieutenant Colonel Jason Trask was clearly the mastermind, even though he hid behind another.

Clark fed what he learned to the General and gathered evidence wherever and whenever he could as he got closer and closer to the group, and then he was invited in.

“You come highly recommended, Lieutenant Kent, and you majored in astrophysics, exactly the expertise we are looking for,” Trask said before shifting forward. “You are up for reassignment soon, correct?” Trask asked.

“Yes, sir,” Clark said, standing at ease in his blues.

“I have spoken with General Newcomb and I learned something interesting. I’ve worked with Newcomb for years, and although our methods differ slightly, we both know where the other stands, and that’s the side of the United States — and the side of the human race.”

Trask watched Clark’s reaction carefully, and Clark responded accordingly.

He lifted his chin ever so slightly, his eyes sharpening.

“I understand,” he said. “And I accept the position you wish for me to fill. When do I start?”

Trask grinned. “I knew I would like you, Kent. You don’t ask unnecessary questions and I can tell you really do understand. As for when you start ...” he said as he stood up. “You start now.”

It was worse than Newcomb had feared. Trask had an entire task force and extremely loyal followers. For five months, Clark painted himself as the most loyal and devout, pouring over their intel and giving them his estimates of where some of their artifacts had come from (at least what region of space by taking what they knew of the object’s entry trajectory). He was never so thankful for his natural aptitude in math.

Most of what they had seemed to be space junk. He seriously doubted the races that created the items even knew they had crashed to earth. With most not having any substantial propulsion system or even a hint of an advanced form of navigation, he suspected the people who made them weren’t even around anymore (due to the length of time it would have taken the vessel/equipment to travel from the nearest system in any given region). Most reminded Clark of Earth’s own space probes, sent out to take pictures of the other planets in the system and to simply learn, never expecting them to return. It made him wonder if any of Earth’s space probes would eventually be found by other sentient species.

However, not all vessels were as simple.

The day he was escorted to the warehouse would forever be seared in his mind, and it was the last of that case.

“This is one of our most valuable finds, Kent. And we have several eyewitness accounts of it’s entry into the atmosphere and a few of it’s landing—although it had been too far at the time to allow for prompt recovery. Which is why we do what we do. I believe this vessel carried a living being, one that very well may still be alive on Earth. I believe this entity may be a scout and that an invasion is just a matter of time,” Trask said, walking him around the blue spaceship beside a blue and red orb that resembled a planet.

“It was found buried in a field several miles from where we know it had landed, meaning either the entity moved and buried it themselves, or someone of Earth aided the being for some reason.”

Clark nodded, deciding to take a chance. “I remember my parents mentioning people from the government going around asking questions when I was very young. They hadn’t seen anything to report, but they did find it strange. They were glad when they left.”

“Understandable. I know those field operatives back then could be ... disconcerting,” Trask said amiably. “But back to the matter at hand. How do you feel about this find? What does this tell you? What is your threat assessment?”

“Whoever made this vessel is a great deal more advanced than we are, so I am concerned about their intentions. A people with this sort of tech could take this planet, if they had enough ships. And if what you suspect is true, they are likely much smaller in stature than us, or have the ability to shapeshift, which is handy in space travel,” Clark theorized.

“Those were my thoughts as well.”

“What do you hope to do?” Clark asked.

“Capture and question them and then eliminate them as a threat.”

“Playing devil’s advocate here, what if they turn out not to be a threat?” Clark asked.

“Whoever suggests such a thing is a threat themselves, Kent,” Trask returned seriously.

“Of course, but there will always be optimists, foolish as they are.”

“True, and we are prepared for them. They will be re-educated or eliminated. We can’t fully protect the people of Earth if we are not first committed to protecting humanity from within.

There will be unfortunate losses, and we all will likely be asked to make sacrifices, but the continuation of the human race is worth it.”

“I agree.”

“Soon, Kent, I will take up a higher position, and those with less fortitude to do what is necessary will either step aside or be removed. Newcomb suspects us, I am certain, but he is wise enough to not interfere because as ‘optimistic’ as he is, he knows where the line must be drawn. I respect him in that regard, although I still wish things were different. If he were more willing to make the tough choices, he could have helped us a great deal, but perhaps in his own way he has. He did send us you, after all.”

Clark forced a genuine looking smile.

“Is there anything I can do in the immediate future to better help facilitate our position?”

“Actually, there is. I believe you are ready, and no one would expect a lieutenant. From this point on, Kent, I’m going to need you more than ever before. Things will be asked of you, and you must always remember why we are here, what the end goal is.”

“I understand, sir. What is my task?”

“You will receive a package at fourteen hundred hours. You are to plant it at the north east side of the Pentagon without being seen and then leave by seventeen hundred hours today.

Unfortunately, there are people that don’t understand our responsibilities, and they’re in our way.”

“I’ll get it done.”

“I know, Kent. Good luck.”

Kent left immediately, knowing they finally had enough for Newcomb to act.

With Newcomb aware of the plan, he received the package and deactivated the bomb before planting it where Trask had indicated.

And then Newcomb’s forces and other government officials moved in.

In the meantime, Clark dashed to the warehouse.

As he approached his ship and moved to touch the orb, he heard someone come up behind him.

“I knew you would be here,” General Newcomb said.

Clark didn’t move, wondering what else the General knew and how he could have missed him.

“We are going to begin moving all of these things in three hours. Whatever isn’t accounted for will be deemed destroyed due to Trask’s criminal actions. I expect you to report at my desk tomorrow at 0740.”

Clark blinked as Newcomb then simply turned and left.

As soon as he was very certain he was gone and had verified there was no tracking device on anything he wanted, Clark instantly vanished to Smallville with the ship and orb, not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

He didn’t know what Newcomb knew exactly, but it seemed that he was on his side.

His parents were understandably concerned but also knew they could do nothing but hope that the trend of good news would continue. The fact Trask and his goons would no longer be a problem was a huge relief and worth their initial fears over Clark becoming an officer. Learning more about Clark’s origins was just a bonus. Knowing he was now safer in the world was better.

After eating a very late dinner with his parents and hiding his ship in the barn’s makeshift cellar, he returned to his apartment with the orb, grateful he had been wise enough to wear thick gloves the first time he had touched it. He wasn’t sure why, but something had told him he shouldn’t touch it directly until he was absolutely safe.

The moment he did in Smallville, it glowed and a word popped into his mind. Krypton. The name of his home planet. Unfortunately, that was all he was able to get from it, but he hoped there was more it would share one day.

The next morning at work held an odd atmosphere.

Apparently there was a shootout between Trask, his men and those of the authorities (military police). A number of people from work were missing, and the reason was immediately clear to Clark. It was later confirmed.

Trask and the majority of his men were dead.

With his blues as sharp as ever, Clark straightened and entered the General’s office at the directed time. The last eighteen months had passed quicker than any other eighteen and he wondered what would happen during the rest of his commission.

He still had his commitment to the Air Force, case closed or not.

He closed the office door behind him and reported in as ordered.

“Please sit, Clark,” Newcomb said. Clark did so, subtly doing a scan of the room for the third time.

“There are no recording devices or the like in this room, and rest assured the walls and door are soundproof. I have also told my secretary and the MPs outside that we are not to be disturbed. What is said here will go no further, but I want you to be as upfront with me as I am with you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Newcomb shifted slightly, looking thoughtfully at Clark.

“I must say, Jonathan and Martha Kent were quite resourceful and wise. To report someone had left you on their porch with nothing but a blue blanket roughly a month after they actually found you.... And they no doubt had some sway with the judge. To grant a couple sole custody of a baby in less than six months of fostering is practically unheard of. I do wonder, though, did you have the same aversion to needles then as you do now?”

Clark forced himself to remain passive, but it was a feat to do so.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, already coming up with plans and back up plans. He could help his parents disappear nearly as easily as he himself could disappear. They already had emergency backpacks in case they needed to leave in a hurry, having prepared for such a scenario years ago.

“Nothing, only to tell you to keep doing what you’re doing. You have done more good than most people ever even consider doing their entire lives. You mean us no harm, and I believe I am right in saying you consider yourself one of us. To me, you’re just an immigrant who has been an American citizen for as long as you can remember. I will not demonize you because of your birthplace, wherever it may be.”

Clark cleared his throat to fight back the sudden rising lump. “Thank you, General.”

“Now, for the matter of the rest of your commission. We have a few options. My higher ups know of your vital contributions to the investigation and know why you became an officer to begin with, so if you would prefer, you can be honorably discharged at the end of your current duty station. You could instead, of course, complete your commission like any other officer and then return to being a PI full time, or you could do the third option,” he said, counting off on his fingers.

“Third option?” Clark asked, wondering where this was going.

“We both know you have unique abilities. Now I’m not sure what exactly you’re capable of, but I wouldn’t be a very good general if I didn’t try to use all of my men’s capabilities to their fullest. I know you are not a military career man. I know I would only have you to the end of your commission, but for the next two years I would like you to be part of a special forces division. Not for combat,” he quickly clarified. “But for things involving Search and Rescue. Recovery. The experience you gained in your travels alone makes you qualified to be a unit’s guide. How many languages do you know?”

“Er ... I’ve lost count to be honest. Over two hundred.”

Newcomb blinked. “Fluently?”

“Yes. If I include languages I can get by in it’s closer to five hundred.”

“Well, if we ever need a translator I know who I’m going to call,” he said, amused.

Clark smiled uneasily.

“Alright, first question, do you want to complete your commission?”

“I do want to complete it. It’ll lead to fewer questions later I think, but I’m not sure if I should work with a unit. To be honest, I’m ... faster on my own.”

“Alright, I suppose before we go any further you should lay out what exactly you can do.”

Clark combed his fingers through his hair, clearly nervous.

“Hey, if I wanted you studied you wouldn’t be here right now, and if anyone ever thinks about doing something like that they’re going to have to get through a whole armed battalion. And that’d just be the beginning, so there is no need for you to be afraid.

After all, without you, I would be dead right now.”

“What?”

“The bomb Trask had planned to explode outside the Pentagon yesterday. I would have been leaving at that time. I can’t be sure I was included in his list of targets, but I would have been there. And thanks to your warning, I’m here instead of the morgue. On that subject, I was surprised when you told me you had already diffused the bomb. I don’t recall anything in your history that said you could do that. Am I correct in assuming you can do this because of your abilities?”

“To put it simply, yes,” he said, glancing at the General’s desk, deciding on a path. “You have a bag of dark chocolate in your top drawer.”

“You can look through objects?”

“Yeah. I could also smell the chocolate so knew which direction to look. I try to only look when I have a reason.”

Very intrigued, Newcomb smirked. “So heightened senses and being able to see how a bomb is wired without opening it. What else?”

Clark took a deep breath. “You sure you want to know everything?”

“Just give me things one at a time. I’ll let you know if I’m about to have a stroke.”

“Alright,” he said, growing a little more calm as he allowed himself to chuckle at the General’s comment.

He glanced around the room before simply leaning forward and grabbing hold of the bottom rim of the heavy wooden desk.

“Watch your legs, please,” Clark said, carefully lifting the desk straight up until it was above their heads.

Newcomb leaned back, staring at Clark who was also seated, but with his arm extended up at a slight angle, effortlessly holding the several hundred pound desk.

“Well, I knew you had somehow taken your craft the other night, now I know.”

Clark smiled and put the desk back down before leaning forward and taking a sticky note. Holding it out away from himself and the desk, the General looked on curiously.

Suddenly, the corner of it burst into flames, earning a surprised but interested hum from Newcomb before Clark blew it out and dropped its frosty remains on the desk.

“You must be handy at camp outs.”

Clark laughed, becoming more relaxed. “I’ve caught bullets before.”

“Caught bullets? As in, fired from a gun, bullets?” Newcomb asked, now growing as excited as any reserved general could.

“Several guns actually. Happened in Africa a few years ago. Stopped some mercenaries trying to kill all the men of a village.”

“How did they react?” Newcomb asked, chuckling.

“They ran away. As for the villagers, they thought the spirits

of their ancestors had saved them.”

“They didn’t see you?” he asked, a little confused.

Clark shrugged sheepishly. “I’m pretty fast.”

“Faster than bullets?”

“Yeah. I’ve never clocked myself precisely, but ... I can break the sound barrier if given enough space.”

“And I’m sure next you’ll tell me you can fly as well, right?” Newcomb asked, amused.

Clark pressed his lips together apologetically.

“Lord Almighty.” Shaking his head but grinning, he took a deep breath.

“You understand why I don’t tell anyone. The only others who know all this are my parents,” Clark put in.

That gave Newcomb pause. “No one? No one from your childhood or in your travels?”

Clark shook his head. “I’ve wanted to, but it’s never ... It’s always...” He trailed off with a shrug. “It’s not an easy secret.”

“The important ones never are.”

“I want to use my abilities to help, and I am willing to help find those MIA or the like, but I also don’t want to endanger anyone in any way,” Clark said after a moment.

The General nodded, leaning back in his chair in thought before nodding to himself.

“No one will ever learn this secret from me, but one day the world may discover the truth. Hopefully it won’t happen for a very long time, but we can’t ignore that possibility. As such, I cannot give any hint that the military knew of your abilities in any way. It would not be good for the United States or for you if it was learned that we knowingly had ... well, a demi-god working for us.”

Clark frowned.

“I know you probably don’t like that term, but let’s be real here. At any other moment in history, if any civilization or group of people saw what you could do, they would label you as that. Which is why we must tread carefully. If you ever become publicly known, you will instill fear and wonder, so we must always have control of your image—for everyone’s protection, including yours.”

Clark nodded slowly. “My father has always been afraid that one of two things would happen to me. I would either be captured and dissected like a frog or turned into a weapon,” Clark admitted.

“Understandable fear. So I believe we have only one course we can take while safely utilizing your abilities in secret.”

“And that would be?...” Clark asked.

“A new position. Special Field Support Officer. I’ll need to clear it with a few other generals, but that should give us free reign to implant you into different units when needed for search and rescue or to allow you to go in alone for certain other missions, such as a liaison to lay groundwork for our people to enter an area. I understand you don’t want to engage in combat, so we will limit the chance of such as much as we can. Besides, knowing what I do now, I don’t want you in combat. It would be too risky.”

“I agree. I’m not sure what I would do if placed in that situation. I don’t think I would be able to restrain myself if it meant the possibility of one of our own being killed—or anyone being killed for that matter.”

Newcomb nodded, deep in thought.

“There are a lot of things you can help us with without exposing your full capabilities. Give me a week and I’ll have a path for us to take.”

“Alright, General. And thank you. When I ...” Clark paused for a second, trying to find the best words. “When I learned what I could do, I never thought I would be able to join the military or really join any group like this. Sure, there are things I can’t tell those I serve with, but I’m part of something that’s doing what I wouldn’t be able to do by myself. I’ve never really had that before, feeling like I belong—not even growing up.”

“Alien or not, you’re an officer, and when your commission ends, you will be a veteran; but even without those things, you’ll always be an American and an inhabitant of the world. Although you weren’t born a human, you were raised as one. Besides, I’m sure your parents will agree, you’re a Kent and always will be.”

“Generals must all take motivational speech classes,” Clark commented with an appreciative smile.

“Nah, it’s just a superpower only those who make general have,” Newcomb stated. “It’s often joined by uncanny intuition or ungodly defiance.”

“I take it you have both?”

“Only when it counts,” he bantered.

“Of course,” Clark said amiably.

Newcomb smirked. “The future is going to be very interesting with you, Kent. And better. I’m certain of that.”

Clark smiled as Newcomb gave him a nod of dismissal.

Chapter 1 – Kal-El

The new Special Field Support position took hold, allowing for specialists to ‘float’ among certain units and provide additional support in situations requiring their skills, specifically in local knowledge and languages. Recon, search and rescue, and a number of other mission objectives used the SFS officers, including preparatory missions in which they lay the groundwork for follow up missions in an area.

The SFS division wasn’t fully operational until over a year after Clark had begun filling the role—acting as a proof of concept for the Air Force, and it quickly became an invaluable resource. Soon, recruitment opened an entirely new incentive for well-traveled Americans to join the military so this need could be filled.

It was around this time Clark took some leave to officially visit his parents (he occasionally made quick secret visits when he had the free time) and enjoy a well earned break from traveling.

“It’s so nice that you were able to get some time to come home for a good visit, Clark,” his mother said, giving him a hug.

“Yeah, I have been moving around a lot, even for me,” Clark admitted. “So is there anything you need help with, Dad?”

“Actually, yeah. The tractor is being a little sluggish, so could you let me know whether or not something’s gotten into the lines again?” Jonathan asked.

“No problem. Do we want to do it now before lunch?” Clark asked.

“That’s a good idea,” Martha said. “I’ll have lunch ready by the time you get back. Now go on you two.”

All but shooed out by Martha, Clark and Jonathan headed out to the barn.

“So is it making a noise like last time or just sluggish?” Clark asked as they came to the tractor.

“Just sluggish, so hopefully if it is something in the lines it won’t require a serious repair,” he said. “I was planning on flushing the lines but when you called and told us you were taking leave...” He shrugged and smiled happily at his son who turned his gaze to the tractor’s engine.

“Well, it looks like it’s the lines,” Clark said, shifting his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

Jonathan sighed. “I had hoped it had been my imagination. Oh well. Thank you, Clark,” he said, but stopped when he realized Clark wasn’t listening to him. “Clark?”

Clark lifted his hand, asking for silence. “I hear something.” He tilted his head. “The storm cellar.”

He disappeared, reappearing above the trapdoor of the cellar in the barn, prying the door open.

Light streamed up from beneath, surprising both Clark and Jonathan.

“What on Earth?” Jonathan asked, quickly joining Clark to stand above the entrance.

“It must be coming from my craft,” Clark said, going down

the stairs after setting the cellar hatch down.

He was partly right. It was the globe, which was secured to the nose of the craft.

“Careful, son,” Jonathan cautioned as Clark approached the glowing orb.

“It’s ... strange. I feel like it’s calling to me,” Clark said, reaching out.

His fingertips touched the surface and light erupted before coalescing into a figure. Clark and Jonathan both leapt back, startled, as a man robed in white came to stand before them with an ‘S’ crest on his chest.

“My name is Jor-El. And you are Kal-El, my son. The object you possess has been attuned to you. That you now hear these words is proof that you survived the journey in space and have reached your full maturity. Now it is time for you to learn our heritage. To that end, I will appear to you five times. Watch for the light, listen, and learn.”

The figure made of light collapsed and disappeared back into the globe, but before Clark or Jonathan could say anything, the area around them seemed to shift and change.

They knew it wasn’t real, but a projection, a projection overlaying all that was currently around them....

Jor-El stood before a waist-level console, waving his hands in the air above it. Attached to the console was a large view screen displaying multi-colored lights. To one side was a long work table, strewn with odd bits of metal and plastic. On the other side was a large, plain pedestal where an egg-like, transparent capsule rest.

“Time grows short and we continue to search. The immensity of space is both a blessing and a curse. In that near infinite variety there must be some place suitable,” Jor-El explains. “Hope and desperation drive us in equal measure.”

A tall, elegant woman with porcelain skin and auburn hair came to his side and gestured to the screen. He shook his head sadly.

“Lara works by my side. She is tireless and endlessly patient. Considering what is soon to come, this is my greatest consolation: that we are together.”

A tremor suddenly rocked the lab as the console flared. Jor-El took Lara in his arms and they waited until it subsided.

The scene faded, leaving the cellar just as dark and musky as before.

“Clark?” Jonathan asked gently, concerned.

Clark swallowed and stepped toward the orb, carefully, tenderly, removing it from its place on the ship. The orb remained dark.

The moment Clark and Jonathan came into the kitchen, Martha knew something had happened, and when she spotted her son’s alien orb gripped tightly in his hand, she knew things would never be the same.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“The orb, it had a message, a holographic recording,” Jonathan said when it was clear Clark wasn’t ready to talk. “He said he would appear to him five times.”

“Who?” Martha asked.

“Jor-El,” Jonathan said, ignoring the odd lump now growing in his throat. “Clark’s father.”

Martha looked at Clark, whose eyes glistened with unshed tears, and quickly pulled him into a hug.

“Let’s sit down,” she said after a moment.

Clark set the globe on the table before him as they all sat down. Martha put her hand over his. He gave her an appreciative smile before looking back to the globe in deep thought. Jonathan cleared his throat and quickly gave Martha a run-down of what they saw and heard from the globe.

“I never knew it was anything more than what it seemed:

maps of Earth and Krypton,” Clark said after a shared moment of silence.

“But why now? It’s been over two years since you got it and the ship back,” Martha said.

“Jor-El did say it had been attuned to him and that hearing his words would only happen if he survived the journey and reached full maturity. Maybe full maturity for him isn’t eighteen – or twenty-three like doctors are saying now – but twenty-five or so,” Jonathan guessed.

“That could be,” Martha agreed. “Honey, how do you feel about this?”

Clark exhaled slowly. “A bit of everything. I’ve always wondered where I came from and why. So many questions. But now I know my parents’ names *and* what they looked like. I even know I have four more messages that I’ll receive. I know so many others who will never learn the reason behind their start in life, but I will.” Clark looked up at Jonathan and Martha, gratitude shimmering in his eyes. “No matter what I learn from the globe, I am grateful for how my life has turned out.”

Blinking back tears, Martha squeezed her son’s hand as Jonathan placed his hand on Clark’s shoulder.

“Do you remember them?” Jonathan asked softly.

“No. I mean, I don’t think so. Snippets of images come to mind now, but after seeing what we did, I don’t know if they’re imagined. Wishful thoughts.”

“What are they of?” Martha asked.

“Lara.”

He couldn’t say ‘my mother’. Lara was a stranger, and his mom was sitting next to him.

The day passed slowly; solemn emotion, anticipation, and question of the unknown lay heavily in the air.

It happened just before dinner: the glow from the orb. Gathering in the living room, Clark tentatively placed his hand on the strangely warm surface with his mom and dad beside him...

Jor-El appeared.

“This is the second of the five times I will appear. You may wonder that I speak your language, and not my native Kryptonian: I don’t. That is another property of the object.”

On a gleaming white work table, Jor-El and Lara conducted delicate work on a helix-shaped object of thinly-twisted metal (or what appeared to be metal) using instruments whose purpose and application the Kents couldn’t even begin to guess at. With a probe, Jor-El touched various points on the object’s surface and was rewarded with corresponding musical tones. Above the object itself floated a holographic depiction of the helix.

“Unmanned Kryptonian probes have explored every corner of the known galaxy and beyond. For thousands of centuries, we have received data back from those probes. I have every confidence that, given enough time, we can achieve the conversion to a manned vessel. But, will we have the time?”

Then another tremor came, longer in duration and far more violent than the first. Jor-El and Lara grabbed the table for support until the shaking ended. When it finally subsided, both immediately turned to the capsule on the pedestal. They breathed a sigh of relief when they saw it still intact, but the viewscreen above the nearby console suddenly blared in warning. Jor-El helped Lara up, and they both approached the console. As before, Jor-El wove his hands above it, and it responded with new patterns of light. Jor-El frowned at the readings before they both looked again to the capsule.

“There is an ancient Kryptonian saying: ‘On a long road, take small steps.’ Precision and care are our watchwords. Yet, we still have far to go.”

The scene faded, leaving the Kents in silence.

They didn’t speak about it afterwards, none of them knowing what to say, but Martha and Jonathan supported Clark with their presence as they went about their normal routines on the farm.

Clark even helped his dad fix the tractor before they repaired the stubborn gate by the barn and went into town to pick up some fresh produce for Martha the next day. The day almost felt normal, but they knew it was all just an effort to help time pass more quickly. To help fill in the void that would be there otherwise. Waiting for the globe to wake up and tell them more.

And then it did.

“There is no longer any doubt. The chain reaction has begun. As panic spreads, the population awakens, too late, to its fate. Our future is inevitable.”

Jor-El and Lara endured another tremor. When the shaking subsided, an urgent ringing alarm began to sound. Jor-El struggled to his feet and did something at the console that turned the alarm off. Lara joined him. A second, different tone resounded from the console, blinking in sequence.

“At last the computers have located a suitable destination: a planet physically and biologically compatible with Krypton whose inhabitants resemble ours, and whose society is based on ethical standards which we, too, embrace in concept, if not always in deed.”

The pattern of light dissolved to be replaced by the image of Earth floating in space.

“The inhabitants call it, simply, Earth.”

Martha wiped the tears from her face as Jonathan gripped Clark’s shoulder tightly.

Finally, Clark spoke. “They sent me here to live.”

Martha and Jonathan both nodded, agreeing with that deduction wholeheartedly. The looks on Jor-El and Lara’s faces were unmistakably of fear and hope, drenched in determination to save their child no matter the sacrifice.

“I wasn’t abandoned.”

Martha enveloped him into a hug as he felt an ache he never knew he had bleed away and certainty fill him.

He had been wanted.

Wanted enough to be saved.

Loved enough to be set on a path that gave him a chance at life.

Clark would later say he was numb, but that would be an oversimplification. Shock would have been closer to his emotional state, that and awe, as he reflected on all that he had learned.

If he was understanding what the globe had shown, his biological parents had saved him from a world cataclysm.

He may well be the last of his kind.

But with such horrifying and depressing thoughts came questions.

What had caused Krypton’s earthquakes? Why did it take so long for the population to become aware of the grave situation? Had other families been like his parents? Scrambling to save at least one member of their family? Had any succeeded? What is the state of Krypton now? Was he alone?

Once again, Martha and Jonathan huddled beside him as the globe lit up later the next day. He touched it.

The helix, the core of the hyperspace drive, had been attached to the rear of the ship.

“We have installed the hyperlight drive and tested it the best we can. So much is unknown,” Jor-El said as he and Lara unhooked something attached to the console. It was the globe with Krypton’s map on its face.

“Contained within the sphere is the navigational computer that will guide the ship through the maze of hyperspace, as well as this account of our final days.”

Jor-El carried the globe to the ship and set it into the mounting designed for it. Once in place, it changed to display the continents of Earth. Jor-El moved to the capsule. He touched its surface with the probe and the mist within dispersed.

“All is in readiness. We have selected the ship’s exact

destination on Earth and programmed it into the computer.”

Jor-El lifted the capsule off the pedestal as Lara opened the main compartment of the ship. Jor-El placed the capsule inside, revealing an infant boy swaddled in blankets. Lara lay a kiss on his forehead before stepping back.

“Kal-El, our child, the last son of Krypton,” she said.

Another tremor began.

Clark placed his hand back on the globe as it went silent again. Jonathan and Martha gave Clark a moment, but then, to their surprise, the globe began glowing again.

Jor-El and Lara stood over the ship.

“I try to picture where you are now when you hear this last chapter. What do you look like? Are you alone? What have you become? Lara and I will never know, but that you should live to experience this ... that is enough. We are content.”

Jor-El began to seal the spaceship door. Lara tenderly touched the capsule’s surface and young Kal-El reached out to her. The ship’s door closed soon after. There was no time. The tremors resumed.

“We give you to Earth, to a realm called America, and a place called Kansas. Remember us, but do not regret our passing. All is fate.”

The view suddenly shifted as the craft left orbit, showing Krypton behind it in space: beautiful, alien, at peace. And then it wasn’t. In a green flash of brilliant light, Krypton blasted apart. Dust and space debris shot out, nearly catching up to the spacecraft, until the craft’s hyperlight drive engaged and set off into the blackness of space.

The globe went dark.

“Oh, Clark,” Martha whispered as she and her husband both held him close.

Eyes tightly closed and fist against his mouth, he was unable to completely hold back a sob as a memory resurfaced with long forgotten sensations.

He was in the capsule. Confused and scared, but worst of all, alone. Metal plates closed above him, blocking out all light. He wanted to get out, he wanted mama.

It suddenly got loud, and everything was shaking so hard. He cried out, and suddenly swirling colored lights appeared before him as his mother’s voice echoed around him.

A lullaby, but he couldn’t understand the words. Kryptonian?

He fell asleep and the memory diminished into reality.

“Jonathan?” his mother asked, frightened and concerned.

“I don’t know. Flashback?” Jonathan guessed.

Clark opened his eyes.

“Clark?” his parents both asked, kneeling beside him.

He was on the floor and the table had been pushed aside.

“I remember being in the ship,” he said, sitting up. “I remember leaving.”

He let out a shaky breath. “At first it felt like I was being buried alive, before everything began to shake and it got real loud. I’ve never been that ... scared before, not like that. But then something came on to distract me, and a lullaby. After that, I guess something made me fall asleep.”

He got back on the couch, finding the orb beside him.

“Are you going to be alright?” Martha asked, putting her hand on his knee.

Clark nodded. “It’s ... a lot to take in, but yeah. I just ... I suppose it doesn’t matter now. Krypton is gone and I’m here now,” he said.

“I think from the words he left you, he wouldn’t want you to focus on what happened or what might have been,” Jonathan said.

“You’re doing great things, helping so many people, and it’s because of what they did that it’s possible,” Martha added.

Clark straightened and smiled softly. “Remember us, but do not regret our passing,” he quoted.

The following days passed swiftly with the truth of his origins settling in his mind and heart. He was grateful for the messages from his father and exceedingly thankful to his parents for saving him. Since learning the truth, he felt whole, emotionally better than he ever thought he could feel. He knew where he had come from, understood why he had shown up in Schuster’s Field. The not-knowing was no longer an invisible shard in his heart, constantly jabbing at his subconscious, on some level making him question his purpose, even his worth – because now he knew.

He was on Earth to live.

In the place his birth parents had specifically selected within a galaxy of countless worlds.

And so he was going to live, ensuring Jor-El and Lara’s legacy would outshine Krypton’s destruction while personifying all the good Jonathan and Martha Kent had instilled in him.

“Clark, what time are you going to head out?” Jonathan asked as he joined him in the living room.

“Well, I need to report in by noon the day after tomorrow, so I was thinking tomorrow after lunch, unless you would prefer I stay for dinner.”

“I think you know how your mom would answer,” Jonathan countered with a smile.

“Hm, you’re right. After dinner it is then,” Clark said in mock surrender.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, she’ll be fixing one of your favorites, meatloaf and sweet potato,” he said.

“Oh, definitely,” Clark said, grinning.

“Well, I have some things I need to pick up in town. I’ll be back in an hour or so, son,” he said, heading out.

“Okay, Dad,” he said.

He went up the stairs soon after, but as he approached his room, he saw a familiar light coming from behind the door.

The globe.

Did it have another message? But his father had only mentioned five.

Entering and coming to a stop before the bed, he instinctively reached out his hand. The orb rose from the mattress and closed the distance to his hand before he could gasp in surprise. Once he turned his hand over so the globe could rest in his palm, a stream of light shot forth and formed into his mother, Lara.

“Mother?”

“My son, I wish I had more than one message for you, but we are short on time, so I must trust that this will be enough. I must believe everything we have done and are doing will be enough.”

She took a deep breath to calm herself and Clark was suddenly struck by how difficult it must have been to do what they had knowing they would never know if they had succeeded. They could only hope.

“I try to imagine what you are thinking, seeing me as an image of projected light. What do you wish to know of your heritage, to understand of yourself? So I have compiled knowledge of Krypton I feel pertinent and most beneficial to your existence now. Within the globe is a crystal containing this knowledge. Like the core of the globe that has been attuned to you, this crystal will impart its contents to you when you are mentally ready, but not as mere projected images. It will be on a deeper level.

“Kryptonians are telepathic, to the point that many in the ruling class reserve verbal speech for ceremonial purposes only. Your father and I were not able to determine if the people of Earth have a similar ability or not, but it may be something they can perceive if they cannot actively participate, such as sending thoughts out.”

Clark blinked. Telepathy? He had never even thought to try. Attempting to do yet another thing that would set him apart from humanity ... but it could be something useful, especially if he needed to inform his parents of something but verbally couldn’t

because of present company.

“In any case, the crystal will be able to link with your mind when you are approximately twenty-seven Earth years old. The process will require a recovery and processing period, so make any necessary preparations before engaging the globe at that time. Everyone responds to Absorption differently but expect three to five days of discomfort, in which you will not desire to do anything other than sleep.”

She smiled sadly. *“Included in the crystal are some of our happier memories together, as well as engineering specs of your craft’s hyperdrive. Once your mind adjusts to the influx of information, you will have a sizable understanding of Kryptonian technology as well as our world and family history. I hope it will serve you and your new home well.”*

She quickly wiped her eyes free of offending tears that were threatening to leak out and continued a little more calmly, albeit slowly.

“You left Krypton as the Heir to the Noble House of El, descendant of peacemakers and peacekeepers, generals and inventors. You will always carry this aspect, whether you are aware of it or not, but you are more. You undoubtedly carry another name now, one of Earth, and have taken on attributes of those who helped shape you into whoever you are in this moment.

“I earnestly pray that as you watch this now your life has been good and safe, that you have a family and grew up in love. However, whether you have or not, please know that your father and I love – loved you dearly. We only desire for you to be happy and to live a long, full life. So don’t neglect your future because of your past. I want you to know that you owe us and Krypton nothing,” she said firmly, moving out her hand in a short but abrupt gesture of finality.

“You are free to decide your own destiny. So should you, by some miracle, encounter other Krypton survivors, and they attempt to hold anything over you, remind them that you are the son of Jor-El, former Head of the Kryptonian Imperial Council – who had tried to warn the ruling bodies of the coming doom but was mocked and ridiculed – and thus, you invoke the Right of Vindication. Any House will have to bow to your following words for one instance, as their forebears were all guilty of negligence in not pursuing the truth – in either proving or disproving Jor-El’s theory – and thus damned Krypton and her people.”

Her eyes flashed in anger, disgusted by her own people’s blindness and arrogance.

“It pains me to tell you that though Krypton was destroyed by a natural disaster beyond our control, Krypton’s people were ultimately condemned to their fate by choice.

“So seek the truth in all things, my son, so that you may live and live wisely. That is my only command to you.”

She smiled, sad and earnest, hopeful and worn. She looked back at something and nodded before facing him once more.

“Goodbye, my beloved child, my hope.”

Her form then froze before fading out into nothingness.

A slight cough sounded by the door. Clark turned to find his mom watching, both sad and proud.

“How long were you there?” Clark asked.

“Since the moment she said she hoped their efforts will be enough,” she said as she put her hand on his arm.

“You heard most of it then.” He exhaled heavily. “I wonder why I will have to wait until I’m twenty-seven to use the crystal.”

“I imagine to ensure that your brain has fully developed to cope with whatever the crystal will do,” she suggested softly, looking at the globe still in his hand.

He lifted it up to his face, trying to peer into it. He then lightly jiggled it, but they heard nothing.

“I can’t look into it. I was hoping to be able to see the crystal. Whatever this globe is made of, it’s dense,” Clark said. “I wonder how I’m supposed to get the crystal out.”

“You’ve learned a lot this past week. I think patience is what’s needed now,” Martha lightly warned, recalling how the crystal would be mentally strenuous.

“Yes, you’re right. I’ve learned more than I have ever hoped about my past. More than I could have ever expected. I can wait while I get back to living my life. I’ll turn twenty seven toward the end of my commission anyway, so I couldn’t ask for better timing.”

Martha smiled proudly at him.

“Thank you, mom. I can never fully express it. I am so lucky, so blessed.”

“You have blessed your father and me just as much. And we are just as thankful to your birth parents as you are. They were truly selfless and hearing your mother just now, I know we would have gotten along well,” Martha said. “If your parents could see us now, I’m sure they would be happy with all of us.”

Clark’s heart swelled with joyful contentment. What more could he want?

The next two and a half years were full of life saving missions, and not just of soldiers. Most of the larger missions involved natural disasters, in which Clark helped the units coordinate with the locals themselves while other officials dealt with those in government. It was astonishing how much smoother operations ran with Clark on the ground.

“I want your search team to comb through this area here,” Clark directed before motioning to the devastated locals to approach him. **“Take these shovels and help the soldiers dig here. I’m sure there are people to be saved below. Don’t give up, we cannot stop,”** he said in their tongue. **“Have I ever lied to you?”**

Many shook their heads and took the shovels eagerly.

The village had been flooded and the storm surge had ripped away the straw roofs and ruthlessly flattened the walls beneath. Unfortunately, due to the terrain and primitive infrastructure of the region, organized help wasn’t able to arrive until after 36 hours had passed and hope for the existence of survivors trapped in rubble was practically zero.

“Should we pull a search and rescue dog from over there?” an Army Corporal asked, indicating another collection of wet, ruined, unrecognizable homes.

“No. Any survivors there need to be found first because of the rain coming in a few hours. They run a higher risk of drowning due to the direction of the runoff. Anyone still alive here has a bit more time in that regard. Let the dogs sniff out that area before moving them up here,” Clark said certainly, his eyes scanning the field of seemingly endless debris. He suddenly pointed to a mound against a blown over tree. “Start digging here. Large debris sometimes provide pockets for survivors.”

Corporal Anders didn’t question him and set out to do as he was instructed, but the look on his face revealed his doubts. As Anders walked away to direct the search team to the pile of rubble, Clark heard him mutter to another soldier beside him.

“Not that I’m complaining, but he hopes to actually find survivors still? I thought this was purely a recovery operation.”

“We’ve learned not to question him. Some people call him the ‘miracle magnet’,” another soldier beside him said. “You see how the locals respond to him?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a reason for that.”

Clark tuned his ears away, focusing on the area beneath them. How he wished he could just go down and get the survivors himself, but there were many reasons why he couldn’t – although if things were extremely dire, he had intervened personally in the past before like when he had lied and said he had heard tapping (even though the person was dead to the world and actually minutes from certain death) and another time where he shoved an

I-beam aside before anyone could realize, but those were close calls.

But right now, in this moment, he needed patience.

He nodded to himself, subtly looking over his glasses down to the debris filled mud. Their heart beats were still strong and he could see that they were not bleeding too heavily. The victims had superficial wounds for the most part, other than a compound fracture in one man and a broken leg in a woman. The two teenagers were just bruised up. Miraculously, the tree trunk had offered just enough support with the surrounding debris to provide space and help form an air pocket with a chimney (of sorts) to fresh air, otherwise they would have long since suffocated.

He looked over them again. Oh how he wished at least one of them would try to make some noise. ‘Yell out! Bang something!’ he wanted to tell them. But they were exhausted, dehydrated and afraid to use up the last of their energy. Besides, they didn’t really have anything to clang or hit. It wasn’t like they were in a concrete and metal building that would carry sound. They were primarily surrounded by mud and broken wood, not ideal materials for making noise and unfortunately very well insulated. Clark wondered if they would even hear him if he shouted.

He peered back through the earth at the teenage boy who was the least injured and the most alert. If the kid could draw attention to that area by some miracle, it would save them all a great deal of time and would prevent Clark from risking his secret. If not, hopefully one of the search teams would happen upon them before too long.

“L.T.!” a sergeant suddenly called out to him.

L.T. was short for Clark’s rank: Lieutenant.

Clark hurried over to the other search and rescue team, relieved that the boy he knew was in that area would likely be saved soon. He was more critical than the group pinned near the tree, which was why he had directed the dogs to that area early on in the search. It of course helped that there was a logical reason for his choice, but even if there hadn’t been, he knew he would have risked the questions and ever growing mysticism around his person.

“The dogs just flagged this spot, we think there’s someone alive under there,” Sergeant Matthews said unnecessarily because the two search dogs were digging excitedly alongside a number of rescuers.

Grinning, Clark quickly took stock of the location. “This is near where the central building stood,” he said before turning to the locals gathering due to the commotion. They were made up of those who couldn’t help due to their inexperience or physical condition. “**Stay back. There may be someone down there,**” Clark said.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled the young injured boy from the rubble to the cheers of everyone nearby.

“Alright, we have more areas to clear,” Matthews said, re-establishing order before looking to Clark for direction. Clark had been the reason why they had found the critically injured boy in time – another hour would have been too late.

“Hey! I hear something!” a rescuer shouted elsewhere.

It was near the group of four buried survivors Clark had been looking at before.

“Send a dog up!” Clark ordered, relieved things were going their way without his direct and obvious intervention.

“Gladly, L.T.,” Matthews said.

Clark was there as they pulled out the mother and her son.

“How did you know they were there?” Clark asked the corporal from before.

“I heard a noise, sort of a call for help,” he said, riding on the high that always came upon saving someone.

Clark turned to the mother and son while the other two survivors were being pulled out.

“Oh, thank you, thank you. You heard me, you heard me,”

the boy said, just as happy as Corporal Anders.

Clark quickly translated.

“I’m so glad you called for help. Did you hear us working above you?” Anders asked, taking advantage of Clark’s ability to enable them to fully communicate.

“**No, it still sounded like before, but something just told me I should shout. That it would help,**” he said.

Clark translated again, just as stunned by the boy’s words as the others around him but for a different reason. Was this coincidence? He had been looking at the boy, hoping the boy would do exactly what he eventually did do simply because it would help.

His thoughts went back to what his mother, Lara, had said in the recording over a year before. Kryptonians were telepathic. Was this a demonstration of that ability? He had tried and failed to ‘mentally talk’ with his parents, but perhaps it wasn’t as direct as a conversation? Perhaps it was on a subconscious level? Perhaps he and the individual he was more or less ‘thinking’ to had to be under some level of stress?

Or perhaps he was making something out of nothing.

He would need to be mindful, however, just in case.

The rest of the day was slower. There were no other survivors to be found, but the fact they had pulled five from certain death when most had believed they would find no one made it a successful mission.

For the last six months of his commission, Clark trained future SFS officers, teaching them as much as he could about how best to support their adopted units (units they were assigned to assist). The key was knowing when to blend into the background (so you weren’t in the way, especially in combat—they didn’t need or want to be worrying about where you were, etc.) and when to break out and take control (interacting with locals and providing insight into the region). Sure, deployed units were often educated on what to expect culturally from people living there and the like, but SFS officers had actually been in the area before and knew the language.

As for the incident involving the rescued boy’s timely call for help, Clark was unable to determine whether it had anything to do with his untrained telepathic ability or was merely a coincidence. Nothing like it had occurred since, but he didn’t know if that was because he hadn’t been in any similar situations again or if there really was nothing more to it.

He briefly mentioned it to his parents, but since he couldn’t recreate it or make anything like it happen again, it eventually faded to the back corner of his mind. Life was busy enough without constantly wondering about one event that had several reasonable explanations. After all, a new stage of his life was about to begin.

Burton Newcomb stood in front of Clark at the end of his last day, both wearing their sharp blues. Over the years, Clark’s ribbon rack had grown to be quite respectable, especially when one realized he had only served for four years. The General’s breast was of course covered in service medals and dwarfed Clark’s.

“Well, Lieutenant, it’s been a great four years. I wish I could have you stay, but I think we both know you’re meant for bigger things. Where are you going to go first?”

“Home. There’s something I need to do with one of my family heirlooms,” he said, deciding that was safe to say in case there were any listening ears.

Burton smiled knowingly, having been fully brought into the Kent family fold two years prior. “And after?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I think I’ll take a break from traveling as much. I’ll try to settle in a city maybe. There’s never a shortage of things to investigate in areas like that.”

“Well, if you ever need anything, just let me know.”

“The same goes for you, General. You know I can get

anywhere you need me to be in a hurry.”

“I will, but only if absolutely necessary. Stop by whenever you wish though.”

Clark smiled and gave a parting nod. Life was good.

Clark stepped into his bedroom in Smallville with his parents behind him. Martha had the globe and slid a chair beside the bed while Jonathan moved another chair into the room for himself.

“Do you know what you need to do?” Jonathan asked as Clark sat on the mattress.

“No, but I think it’ll tell me once I touch it,” Clark said, indicating the globe.

“Alright,” Jonathan said as he and Martha sat down.

“Ready?” Martha asked, after privately sharing a nervous glance with Jonathan.

“Yeah, I’m ready. I’ve been looking forward to this for years,” he said, holding out his hand.

She placed the globe in his hand and it immediately began to glow. Suddenly, it rose from his palm and a beam of light shot from the bottom of it onto his skin, materializing a thumb sized, deep blue crystal. The globe rose higher and waited for him to grasp it with his other hand. It then dimmed and the crystal lit up, producing a small image of his mother above it.

“My son, if you are seeing this you have successfully activated the crystal with your intent to carry out its Absorption. When you are ready, close your fist around the crystal. This is my final gift to you, Kal-El. May the knowledge within be useful to you and keep you from repeating Krypton’s mistakes. Please take heed and know our love is forever with you.”

Her image faded and Jonathan slowly took the globe from him as he moved his feet onto the bed and laid back. With a nod to his parents, he closed his hand and brought the still glowing crystal over his chest.

The light went out, just as Clark stiffened and gasped before his eyes rolled up to the back of his head. He went limp.

Images. Thousands of images, still and in motion, flashed and played in his mind’s eye.

Language, heard and seen, rushed through him, garbled yet sharp, with a mixture of dialects. However, comprehension manifested, his years of practice in picking up foreign languages no doubt helping him grasp it all faster than he would have otherwise.

Time was immaterial. It could have been weeks or years, though it certainly couldn’t have been seconds.

Pain ebbed in waves, burning sharply behind his eyes while the rest of his skull throbbled with tight, clenching agony.

There were scenes of people gathering, snippets of wars and in-fighting with names and dates that were meaningless to him. But with each passing tidbit, things began to make sense. Dawning understanding came and a deeper appreciation for being raised on Earth and in America surged higher than he could fly. His parents hadn’t lived under an official monarch, but they may as well have been due to the self imposed rules of their society, and not a very stable one. His parents had been Nobles, members of the upper class who took turns ruling in a delicate dance with the Council to keep the masses in line but happy enough to not rebel. Despite how far ahead Krypton had been technologically, they had been eyeball deep in a caste system that was positively medieval –if not worse– and such a rigid legal system that was so complicated that only the most skilled lawyers could have any hope of navigating it.

Faces of dozens of people suddenly flashed before him. Members of the House of El. His mother had not exaggerated. He did come from a long line of peacemakers and peacekeepers, generals and inventors, but it was the last face that stood out to him most.

The founder of the House of El: Kal.

His name literally meant ‘light’, the opposite of heavy, but in use could mean ‘making things light’ or ‘having endless strength’.

Born a peasant centuries before the Council had been formed, Kal had ended the reign of a tyrant who had killed his son and had rallied the people to rise above the tyrant’s allies. After the dust settled, Kal was elevated to a Noble, an eternal servant of the people, and was given the surname, ‘El’, the word for Hope.

Briefly, a chant echoed in Clark’s mind, and he instantly knew this had been the call of the masses following his ancestor: ‘Strength in Hope, Hope in Strength.’

A sensation Clark rarely felt surged within him. Pride. His name meant something and sided with the very same things he had sworn to protect, even before joining the military: Freedom and Life.

But then the history of the Kryptonian people came more into focus.

Centuries passed, and with each generation more discoveries were made in all branches of science and knowledge, feeding a people’s ego and sense of knowing all. Technology grew, compounding the effects of arrogance and convincing so many that their society was infallible – for how could they not be after all they had accomplished? In the end, while disease was essentially eradicated and hunger was a forgotten pain great grandparents told at family gatherings, children became the product of carefully selected genes whose aim was to better ensure a family’s foothold in politics and power.

By the time of his birth, he was the only known noble child who had not been genetically engineered to serve a specific purpose....

“The Kryptonian people have forgotten the meaning of life and the importance of freewill and self discovery,” Jor-El stated as an image of him and his wife solidified in Clark’s mindscape. “Family is gone, it is now simply a means to an end—to hold or obtain power.”

“So you have been removed from the Council?”

“Yes, though it is just as much due to that as it is to my warnings. They just needed another thing to count against me, to paint me as a lunatic.”

“Will we have enough time?” Lara asked worriedly.

Jor-El stilled. “Now that my responsibilities have been shed, we may.” He smiled, his eyes holding the most amount of tenderness Clark had seen from him. “There is hope.”

Clark suddenly woke, but it was not the energized sort of awakening, but groggy and sore, which was a new and bewildering type of awareness for him. The room was dark, but he could hear his father snoozing in the chair beside his bed.

He slowly sat up and blinked when his stomach gave a loud gurgling noise.

“Glad to see you awake, son,” his father said, waking up with a chuckle. “And I think you may be hungry.”

“I must be. How long was I asleep?” Clark asked.

“Almost three days. You were **out**. You mumbled things a few times, but mostly you were still,” he said, silently inviting Clark to share whatever he may have experienced.

“I don’t think I’m finished taking it all in, but it showed me a lot,” Clark said, opening up his hand that held the crystal.

He stilled. It was no longer vibrant blue but completely clear, as if it had been emptied.

“Are you up to going downstairs to eat?” Jonathan asked.

“Yeah. Is mom up?” he asked, stretching.

“She’s downstairs, about to prepare breakfast.”

Clark smiled and got to his feet. Jonathan led the way to the door.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever been hungry before,” Clark commented.

Jonathan laughed. “Well, then you’ll enjoy breakfast even

more than usual.”

They made it downstairs where Martha quickly gave Clark a hug. Soon after, Martha prepared the eggs, bacon and hashbrowns, and (between bites) Clark told them everything he had learned from the crystal thus far.

“I’m so glad you know more about where you came from. I must admit, I have always wondered about your origins,” Martha said after he had finished. “Knowing brings a great deal of peace.”

“I know what you mean. And knowing more about how their society was . . . I’m so glad I was raised here, with you two.” He shook his head. “Such oppression and arrogance despite so much greatness.”

“It’s a good lesson, to never lose focus of what matters and what doesn’t,” Jonathan said.

Clark nodded before grimacing and placing his right hand on his temple. “I think I should head back to bed.”

He slept for another two days, assimilating the remaining information stored in the crystal which was predominately the knowledge of their basic technologies and his parents’ final work—his spacecraft. Accompanying that was a memory of his father playing with him as they waited for something to set on the ship, the view seemingly from a camera near the ceiling.

“My little Kal. Are you ready?” Jor-El asked playfully before tickling him. “Should we go and get Mama?”

Giggling, baby Kal-El seemed to nod so Jor-El scooped him up, holding him chest down on his arm and ‘flying’ him out of the room, including sound effects.

“Chu-chueee!”

Clark wasn’t sure what his father was imitating, but his baby self certainly enjoyed it.

The camera angle changed, this time overlooking a kitchen-like area that could have doubled as a laboratory.

They soon found Lara, who was in the middle of fixing dinner. She quickly caught on to their little game and put the heat under their food on idle before ‘hurrying’ out of the room. The view changed again.

“Oh, no, Kal-El is going to get me!” Lara cried.

Jor-El flew him after her, both of them enjoying their son’s laughter.

The scene abruptly ended, leaving Clark with a sense of loss that was only tempered by what now was.

His parents, who found time between their preparations of saving him, did not spare a moment in doing everything they could for him, even play – something he knew their society sadly did not see much point in.

The crystal didn’t give him much time to think on it much further and returned to showing him the development of the spacecraft a blink later.

He wouldn’t be able to remake much of what he was taught, simply because he didn’t have access to the materials and means of the processes needed, but he understood. He was looking forward to utilizing what he knew when Humanity approached such technologies. As much as he loved helping people, he doubted he would be a private investigator forever.

Besides, he wanted some more laughter in his life too.

Chapter 2 – Super

Metropolis was like many cities he had passed through in his travels, and yet there was something that drew him in unlike any other place on Earth.

He had re-entered life in the civilian world several months ago. He had started out with small, simple cases to get back in the swing of investigative work. Fortunately, especially with his name still well respected and known in certain circles as an investigator, he fell back into the groove quickly.

His first substantial case involved a scientist, Samuel Platt, whose ‘estranged’ wife was convinced he had been murdered. She

hired Clark to find the truth because she feared her husband had been correct. The space program called Prometheus was in danger, and if that was the case, so was she and her daughter – her daughter who needed the project if she ever wanted the chance to walk again.

In the end, he was able to determine Platt hadn’t committed suicide but was murdered by a superior in the project, a Dr. Baines. But Baines wouldn’t see her day in court, for a convenient helicopter accident killed her before Clark could involve the authorities.

Oh, yes, Clark knew there was something bigger going on, and he had his suspicions, so he pressed on. Which led him to the Messenger on the night of the launch. The Messenger was the space shuttle that would deliver Prometheus’s final provisions as well as team of scientists, technicians, and station maintenance staff.

It was very fortunate that he had followed his gut, for soon after he arrived, roughly thirty seconds before launch, he heard a woman’s voice in an area that should have been void of people.

“I have to warn them!” she cried as the thrusters were fired.

He looked through the rocket structure to find a woman frantically slicing through wires behind a panel she had just pulled free.

His eyes quickly spotted the reason for her impromptu destruction of vital, space-faring machinery.

There was a small bomb embedded in some explosive putty on the wall.

He didn’t allow himself to hesitate.

Thanks to his time as an SFS officer, he knew how best to avoid cameras and relocate people without harming them while moving at, literally, breakneck speeds.

He turned specific cameras away from where he was moving so there would be no chance of his form being caught on film. He fried the rest with a quick zap of his heat vision and accepted that the world would likely discover he existed no matter what he did next—but at least they wouldn’t know what to look for.

An instant later, he reached the bomb and determined he had enough time. He grabbed the woman, carefully wrapping his arms around her while placing her head between his shoulder and neck to prevent whiplash before zipping off the Messenger and depositing her in the grass near mission control. Without pausing, he shot back to the Messenger.

Using his abilities and knowledge of explosives, he quickly and safely defused the bomb and left its remains on the floor beneath the explosive putty after verifying he had not left fingerprints or anything else that could be used to find him. He certainly didn’t want to deprive the authorities from possibly finding those responsible for this near tragedy. With any luck, he could gain a lead on who was responsible through his many contacts.

He pulled back, about to leave the area now that he knew the danger was over and because he could hear people moving toward the level he was in.

“Attention, colonists, the mission has been scrubbed. Prepare to disembark,” a voice boomed over the P.A..

Clark correctly assumed it was the launch commander.

He could hear the crew cry out their deep dismay and bitter disappointment. A few even began to cry, despairing over the mission failure and how the space station itself was now at risk as vital equipment to several of its systems needed to arrive before the month was out. So many medical discoveries that likely would have occurred within the next few years would now be set back an indefinite amount of time—assuming it happened at all.

Clark’s thoughts went to Mrs. Platt and the fact her late husband, Samuel Platt, had been killed over trying to save Prometheus—and his daughter’s hope to walk.

And then Clark knew. He couldn’t just leave.

He swallowed, knowing there was no going back after this but doing nothing ... he couldn't, wouldn't, do that.

He moved, flying out before positioning himself within the base of one of the still smoking thrusters so he couldn't be seen.

Verifying all the hatches of the Messenger were still sealed, he pushed aside any second thoughts and pushed up.

It was freeing, in a way, to do something so public, and yet it was terrifying.

He heard the gasps of disbelief first, from the station and then Mission Control, and then he heard a cacophony of voices from within the ship raised in rambling astonishment.

"What's happening?!"

"Are we lifting off? We've got to be lifting off!!"

"How? The thrusters are dead now!"

"This is too slow and steady to be the thrusters. What on Earth is doing this? This is impossible!"

Clark pressed on, going higher and higher until the sky around him darkened and he left Earth's atmosphere.

Finding the station wasn't difficult, and he soon docked to it, although he had to wait until Mission Control got over their stupor and opened up the docking clamps. Apparently witnessing the impossible made them uncertain about what to do.

After assuring himself the colonists had safely disembarked to the station, he returned to Earth, knowing the General would instantly know it was him and that nothing would ever be the same again. He could hear his dad now, worried about how the world would respond and cautioning him on future activities that further displayed his existence. Oh, he knew his parents were proud of him and would be relieved to know he had diverted disaster, but they would be concerned. Afraid for him. They knew how the world could be, how unforgiving, fearful, and judgmental. And so did he. He grew uneasy, going through everything that had just happened and each of his actions, afraid that even though he had been very careful about not being seen or leaving something behind that would point to him, he might have missed something.

But he hadn't. As the days wore on, the media continued to be mystified by what or who had taken the Messenger up to the appropriate orbit and helped it dock to Space Station Prometheus, not to mention handled the bomb and removed the investigative reporter, Lois Lane, from the shuttle beforehand.

His parents were both relieved and thrilled for him. For so long they had watched as he wrestled with himself in trying to decide between what he wanted to do and what was safe to do.

Now it seemed there wasn't as much to fear as they all thought.

And so he started doing more. Donning a set of old painter's clothing, dull brown and unimportant if destroyed, he stopped holding back. He continued to be unseen, but he no longer feared how the public would react to the results of his actions, in part because it was predominately being viewed positively.

At first, it had been downright weird and somewhat worrying when groups of people began theorizing it was an angel or some supernatural force that had taken pity on humanity. But then he saw how it was impacting the general public.

They were happy when they heard about the 'miracles'. It gave them something to be thankful for and reminded them that not everything was bad in the world.

He was careful about not doing too many things in Metropolis, so he still traveled, occasionally weeks at a time, trying to do at least three major things overseas every week.

And then the bizarre heatwave struck Metropolis.

After a week away in Smallville and occasionally flying beyond the States to spread out his rescues, he expected the autumn winds to have given way to snow in Metropolis, but instead he found boiling heat and not a soul wearing a jacket or even long sleeves. It was really bizarre, but he supposed the

weather could be strange sometimes.

Entering the precinct to find Inspector Henderson, Clark was grateful for his invulnerability though not as much for his superior senses. He could tell everyone was miserable in the heat, and the smell of sweat in the air was palpable.

"Kent," Henderson greeted him the moment he spotted him.

"Inspector," Clark returned, wondering if there was something urgent or if Henderson was just full of coffee as he often was.

"Got another case for you, if you're available," he said.

"I am," Clark assured as Henderson came beside him.

"Great. I've got a real head scratcher for you," he said, leading him into his office and closing the door. "The father, Mr. Tibs, has inquired if there's been any progress on finding his son, Gregory." He handed Clark a plain manila folder creased with age. "Cold case, fifteen years. Tibs heard through the grapevine that older cases are being reexamined and a few have been solved."

Clark opened the file and began skimming it. "No body, but murder suspected." He looked up. "Any other reason why you want me to look at this one specifically?"

"There is a possible tie to another cold case, but a new pair of eyes on it is needed. In the initial investigation, one of the detectives was too close to it so may have been seeing what they wanted instead of what was."

"Who was the detective?"

"Detective Hubert Drake. Unfortunately, he passed away about five years ago, but he did help train me."

"How was he too close?"

"His daughter was dating Greg, so he knew him. Not well, but he had a few discussions with him and the like before he disappeared. They had a budding amiable relationship from what he told me."

Clark nodded, glancing down at another page. "I'll start looking into it."

"Thanks. Here's the father's card. He said he's willing to pay for your time."

Clark pocketed the card.

"If you need to speak with anyone who had been on the case before, let me know. For those still around, I have most of their contacts."

"Alright," Clark said, already mentally going to work on the case.

There was a problem. It wasn't normal. And it was too dang hot to think properly.

Lois shifted in her desk chair, hating the dampness of her clothing pressing into her back when she happened to recline too far in her seat.

This weather, why was it happening? Nowhere else in the country was suffering from any sort of heat wave, so why Metropolis?

That morning's press conference with the mayor, and incidentally with Lex Luthor, Dr. Edward Saxon, and Dr. Goodman, had very nearly been completely unhelpful. They had only learned two things. One, the scientists were baffled. And two, LexCorp had the means to provide the needed power for the city and that it passed its safety inspection with flying colors. Small mercies.

Lois dabbed her neck with a wet cloth, trying to think of a new angle, a new perspective that could help her get to the truth.

The building's air conditioning unit was being pushed to its maximum capacity and the bullpen still felt like a sauna. She could hear Perry bellowing into the phone for more fans. Many of the staffers already had small personal fans on their desks, but they did precious little to keep them cool.

Even Cat, wearing a bikini, was suffering. How was a woman to write about this heat wave when all she could think about was a

tub of luscious chocolate ice cream?

“Jimmy!” she called, a thought coming to her.

“Yes?” he asked, rushing over.

“Get me a map of Metropolis and get me as many different sorts of maps as you can of the same area, only of city buildings, roads, sewers, gas lines, power lines, everything you can find involving underground utilities and the like. I want to compare things, particularly with a heat distribution map.”

“Sure thing,” Jimmy said eagerly.

‘There has to be a reasonable explanation other than Jack Frost taking a random vacation!’ Lois thought.

The case was certainly cold for a reason, but Clark pressed on, going through every evidence report and photo. He concluded similar things the initial investigators had, but the events also hinted at something more. Greg was a good kid with high prospects. He had a college scholarship lined up and was still deciding whether to become a lawyer or doctor. According to the interviews conducted at the time, Greg had had an analytical mind tempered by the desire to help people. He had the ultimate goal of either becoming a judge or a neurosurgeon; he just hadn’t been sure which path suited him more.

Clark shook his head. It was such a shame. The kid certainly had had a sound foundation for becoming anything he wanted. So what had happened?

He had disappeared the night before graduation, oddly enough. His girlfriend, Mayson Drake, had been the last known person to see him, and that had been at a bus stop.

He didn’t feel he would get anything useful at the moment from interviewing people who had been interviewed fifteen years prior. Accounts given after a few months were rarely useful to begin with, let alone ones recounted years later. He put the papers down and headed to the library to go through the city’s records and old newspaper articles.

He found it quickly and instantly knew this was the case Henderson had mentioned being possibly linked.

Two girls had been found murdered around the same time Greg disappeared. Normally that alone wouldn’t suggest a link, as Metropolis is a big place and crime is unfortunately common throughout, even – or perhaps especially – fifteen years prior, but one of the girls had been attending the same high school as Greg.

She had a rough home life, which included suspected physical abuse, and had barely been allowed to graduate due to her grades. It was really sad, and the second girl’s situation hadn’t been much better.

He made a few notes, including the names of the girls’ parents. According to witness accounts, counter to what most people would suspect, it was the first girl’s mother who was possibly abusive.

Clark paused, wondering if another avenue would be worth looking into first. It wouldn’t be the first time where abuse at home led a minor to even more irreparably tragic situations.

He would need to check police records for any human trafficking arrests.

This had stink all over it, and it wasn’t because she was sweating.

The new Lex Corp Nuclear Power Plant was at the heart of the highest temperature level, and the aquifer far beneath the surface almost perfectly mirrored where the elevated surface temperatures were, which meant the nuclear plant was responsible for the heatwave.

Lois frowned.

How could this have been missed? How could engineers not connect the dots? This was huge! Was this an honest mistake or was there a conspiracy? It could certainly be linked to money. The power plant was expected to easily make a multi-million dollar

profit in the first year alone.

She needed to understand more of how the plant was releasing the heat exactly and if there were any negatives to the city and aquifer, other than causing ridiculous temperatures.

He got a possible lead and quickly followed it, going to Metropolis’ Correctional Facility.

“He’s all set, Mr. Kent,” the officer said.

“Thank you. Shouldn’t be too long,” Clark said.

“Hope you get what you need.”

Clark nodded his appreciation and entered the interview/interrogation room.

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me, Mr. Crowder,” Clark said, taking a seat across from the inmate.

The room was cold and stark. The walls had been painted a dozen times over, and the floor had grooves where chairs had shifted over and over. There were even worn areas on the table where hands of hundreds of inmates had touched the surface.

“Can’t hurt me,” he said gruffly. “So you want to know about the sex trafficking going on ten plus years ago?”

“Yes, and if you remember any faces specifically.”

He shrugged. “There were a lot of people, to be honest. Who are you looking for?”

“They’ve already been found, actually, I just want to know if they were involved in the trafficking in any way. It’ll help with a different case.”

“If this helps you, will you inform the judge of my assistance?”

“Of course,” Clark agreed, “But it will take time for anything you tell me to bear fruit, assuming it’s truthful.”

“I understand. So what do you have?”

Clark opened the folder and laid out some photos, four out of six of them being dummies: known people who had no ties to trafficking or the like at all.

“Do you recall if any of these young women were victims or accomplices in the trafficking fifteen or so years ago in Metropolis?”

Crowder carefully looked at the photographs. “Hmm. This one looks familiar,” he said, pointing to the girl who went to high school with Greg. “Yeah, I remember. She was one of the newbies. From what I remember, she was found dead though.” He glanced up at Clark. “I heard she was going to cause trouble for a ring. Something involving a boy who she had talked to or something. He supposedly convinced her to rethink her decisions. To warn you this info is third or fourth-hand, so I have no idea if this is even close to the truth, but young love, especially one sided, often causes trouble.”

“I’ll take any information. Like you said, it can’t hurt me. Do you know anyone I should ask who might know more?”

“George Stin might know something. He’s a lifer though. Not sure if he’ll want to bother helping you.” He paused and looked back at the other photos. “I don’t recognize any of the others. Sorry.”

“No problem. Thank you for your time. You’ve actually been a big help.”

“Hope you get what you’re looking for,” he said, standing up.

Bill Henderson would never underestimate Kent after that day. In just over a week, he had cracked open yet another cold case and had gathered enough evidence to lead a felon to admit to participating in an assault and got him to identify others involved, including one who was still living free.

And that was where they were at. They had a search and arrest warrant and were about to knock on the front door of the suspected human trafficker and murderer. They had the house surrounded and had only driven unmarked cars into the neighborhood.

“You set?” Henderson asked Kent.

“Ready,” he said.

Henderson knocked on the door.

The door opened, revealing a fifty year old or so man. “What do you want?”

Henderson held out his badge. “I am Inspector Henderson. Are you Mr. Jeffrey Grant?”

“Yes,” he said, straightening.

“We need you to come with us. We have a warrant for your arrest,” Henderson said.

“For what?” he asked angrily.

“For the first degree murder of Gregory Tibs and human trafficking,” Henderson answered.

Grant instantly moved to slam the door and dashed backwards. Kent quickly prevented the door from closing, allowing Henderson to go in. Kent entered right behind him.

“You’re not taking me!” Grant shouted.

The next ten seconds were both the fastest and yet the slowest ten seconds of Henderson’s life. Henderson, Kent, and another officer rushed after him.

Henderson saw the gun too late, but Kent was already in front of him.

“Kent!” Henderson shouted as the gun went off several times.

Kent kept moving, tackling Grant to the ground, providing Henderson with the opening he needed. Henderson kicked the gun from the man’s hand, expecting Kent to keel over any second.

“Kent! Kent! You okay?” he shouted.

“Yeah, I’m fine. He got my vest,” Kent answered with a grunt, getting up as they cuffed the fuming man.

“Heavens on Earth, Kent, why did you do that? Your head could have been blasted off!”

“Nah, he was aiming at your head, not mine,” Kent answered simply.

“You’re unbelievable,” Henderson said, heart in his throat as he spotted the four holes in the PI’s jacket. Those would have hit him, and one very easily could have hit his head due to how he had been positioned.

“You sure you’re okay? You’re going to have bruises at the very least,” the other officer said, his eyes wide.

“I’m fine,” Kent said, stiffly bending over to help them lift the would-be cop killer to his feet as the officer began stating his Miranda rights.

Henderson locked eyes with Kent, his gratitude beyond words.

The remains of Greg Tibs were recovered the following week soon after the interrogation of Jeffrey Grant. The truth that was revealed was a sad account of the kind efforts of a young man being stamped out by a cruel pimp who viewed people only as a means of profit. The only solace was knowing a family now had answers and could lay their loved one to rest.

“This will become a disaster if it’s not stopped! A *meltdown*, do you hear me?!” Lois shouted, standing at the front desk of city hall. “We have proof that’s causing the heat, and Dr. Goodman here can explain everything. Where’s the mayor?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lane, but the mayor has already gone to the plant for it’s opening,” she said apologetically.

“We need to send word to them! They cannot allow it to become fully operational!” Dr. Goodman exclaimed. “I’ll make some calls, Ms. Lane. You go over to the plant directly and convince them to at least hold off until other scientists can look over the evidence,” Dr Goodman said, a number of officials within earshot understandably growing alarmed at the claim of a coming nuclear meltdown.

Lois didn’t need to be told more and dashed out, catching a cab in record time.

“To LexCorp Nuclear, and there’s a fifty in it for you if you

floor it,” she said.

“Whatever you say, lady,” the driver said, happy to make some extra cash.

They made it to the nuclear plant in minutes. She paid him in seconds, including the promised tip, and slammed the car door behind her before rushing to the entrance.

Flashing her press pass to security, she rushed in, approaching all the other members of the press as Lex Luthor stepped up.

“Let us wait,” he said, putting his hand on the main power switch, “no longer.” He closed it, fully initiating the sequence for the core to go fully operational.

“Stop!” Lois shouted, forcing her way through to the front.

“I’m afraid that stopping is not one of the options, miss,” Luthor said, slightly bemused that a reporter would interrupt such an event.

“I have evidence that your plant has a leak in the core and it will meltdown if fully engaged. This plant has been the cause of the heatwave! The leak has been heating the aquifer water under Metropolis. Dr. Goodman, the physicist you and the mayor know by the way, is contacting the Environmental Impact Committee and their scientists this very moment to review the evidence. We must shutdown the reactor due to the leak.”

“Believe me, there’s no leak,” Luthor calmly countered as someone came up and whispered in his ear. “We’re on-line, the fuel rods are hot,” he said, pleased as he and people around began to clap.

“We’ve got to shut it down!” Lois shouted, disgusted by the arrogance of this man ignoring her claims; she didn’t care who he was or that she had been hoping to interview him, she knew she was right!

“We can’t shut it down. Once the sequence has been initiated, it’s physically impossible. It’s one of the safety features,” Luthor said just as a security guard rushed in and an alarm went off.

“There’s a breach in the containment chamber,” the guard stated, frantic. “The cameras—”

There was a large metallic moan and more alarms began to blare.

“Meltdown?!” someone cried, frightened. Many others screamed.

“No, this isn’t a meltdown,” a man beside Luthor assured. Very likely one of the plant’s engineers.

“Sir, the core is cooling! The sequence ...” a man by one of the system panels breathed, unable to believe what he was reading.

“What?!” Luthor shouted. “That’s impossible!”

Lois heaved a sigh of relief, though she was just as curious to learn how this miracle had occurred. Had the mysterious savior of the Messenger made another save?

Before she could think more on it, several more people entered the already crowded control room. She instantly recognized the city’s Chief Health Inspector, a member of the Health and Safety Board, and a number of other high ranking, concerned individuals with Dr. Goodman. Lois smiled. This was a good news day in more ways than one.

It was nice being friends with Inspector Henderson at the precinct. Solving a number of cold cases paid dividends to say the least – as well as saving the man’s life.

They were still trying to determine who exactly could have made the bomb that had been placed on the Messenger, and unfortunately they seemed to have hit a dead end, but Clark now had a list of possible suspects who could have made it (oddly enough several of them were companies based in Metropolis). But that wasn’t the only benefit of being Henderson’s friend. He knew the authorities were trying to figure out what/who was responsible for saving so many citizens. Currently, they had zero leads, which was a huge relief after the nuclear meltdown fiasco.

He was grateful that he had been within earshot of City Hall

and managed to oversee what was going on within LexCorp Nuclear Plant from high above in the clouds. Of course, as soon as Luther flipped the switch he, had had no choice but to intervene.

He had long determined that he didn't need to worry about leaving fingerprints unless the material was covered with a putty-like material or lightly greased or dusty because he, for whatever reason, did not excrete oil from his skin and very rarely ever produced sweat. It was very handy in many situations in the past, particularly when super-feats were necessary.

Of course, there were still cameras and possible eyewitnesses to worry about.

So he moved quickly, entering the facility, breaching the inner doors, disrupting the security cameras, and giving a number of guards and scientists a great scare when he physically removed them from the room surrounding the containment chamber. Without any pause, he then reentered, barred the doors, and then entered the heart of the power plant.

The act of preventing the magnetic locking arm from engaging with the fuel rods had been a little challenging, but in the end it was no match for him. It was extremely satisfying to hear the metallic snap above him and the sound of the entire nuclear core shutting down as the alarms continued to blare.

He left two seconds later, leaving city officials and the like to make their best guess as to what had just happened.

The press ate it up, crushing the LexCorp Nuclear Power Plant by pushing for an in-depth investigation, as they suspected a cover-up or outright negligence by the plant's engineers and project management. To have such a design flaw be so overlooked was horrifying and unparalleled, incomprehensible really. The only thing that had the public's (and officials') scratching their heads more was how the catastrophe had been stopped.

Huge machinery doesn't just stop and shatter for no reason. It was obvious something physical had prevented the rods from engaging, and the only thing anyone could determine was that whatever had caused this was the same thing that had saved the space station. But the question remained, what or who was this? And why were they intervening?

Their continued dismay was an immense relief to Clark, so it was a huge, alarming surprise to receive the newspaper the next morning and find the front page article entitled:

Super, But Not Supernatural

In it, Lois Lane outlined all the 'evidence' proving the miracles were being done by a physical being and that they were not only doing large rescues, but smaller, unreported deeds as well, including a number of saves he had done long before Prometheus. She had also somehow gotten first person accounts, including the boy in South America he had pulled from the river and a few others who had managed to recall someone rescuing them in their time of need. The article was alarmingly and amazingly thorough and well thought out. There was clearly a reason why she was the top reporter for the Daily Planet.

She had even left a message at the end of her article directly for him.

'And so I close this article with a message to our secret hero. Please, whoever you are, whatever you are, and why-ever you are, please show yourself to us. Your actions have spoken for you, and you have proven, at least to this reporter and I'm sure to many others, that you are here to help. Please let us thank you for the thousands of lives you have saved, myself included. We know you exist now, and we are not afraid. I trust you know where to find me if you wish to talk. Thank you.'

He put the newspaper down, contemplative.

Could he do what she was asking? Allow people to see him?

He couldn't do it as Clark, that was obvious, but perhaps ...

What was he thinking? Was he actually considering any part of this? Why should he do as she asked? He didn't owe her or anybody else anything, and yet ... how much easier could things

be if he was able to show his face? If he was able to talk to people? If he could work *with* police and rescue teams instead of *around* them **and** without hiding his abilities?

But how could he? Wouldn't people discover who he really was?

But who would think Clark Kent could do these things? There was camouflage in the mundane—or as mundane as a PI and former SFS officer could be at any rate.

Maybe this was possible. Maybe there was a way to do this.

Maybe. ...

He needed to talk with his parents.

Lois trudged up to her apartment. It had been nearly two weeks since she had written the article and still nothing. Maybe this person didn't read the newspaper. Maybe they didn't read at all. Maybe they didn't even watch the news, which did make her wonder how they had learned about the nuclear power plant.

They had to have learned about it somehow, but there hadn't been enough time to learn by word of mouth alone, unless they had a contact within City Hall or the nuclear power plant when the alarm was initially sent out, but she had no idea how to verify if that was the case.

Discouraged, she started unlocking her many door locks.

She didn't know what else to do. Four more notable miracles had occurred over the weekend and still no one had seen any hint of the individual. The only thing she seemed to have accomplished was create a nickname for their hero, thanks to her article's title: 'Super, but not Supernatural'.

Thus, the public had dubbed him: Superman.

She sighed and entered her dark apartment, robotically securing all the locks on her front door before turning on the lightswitch which – didn't work.

"Great," she muttered, taking a step toward the kitchen where she kept her flashlight and candles, but then she noticed something.

Something was different. Something wasn't quite right in her apartment. It was *too* dark. All of her shades had been drawn.

And then she saw a figure in the corner, draped in shadows. She quickly raised her purse, her hand closing around her pepper spray.

"I read your article, Ms. Lane," he said, unbothered by the can aimed at him.

"What?" Lois asked.

That can't mean what she thinks, can it?

"I apologize for startling you, as well as for breaking into your apartment, but I didn't want to risk being seen by anyone but you," the man said.

"You're him? I hope you can understand that I need you to prove it," Lois said, knowing some maniac pretending to be the hero was more likely than the actual person coming as she had asked.

He disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the room, still shined in darkness.

Lois' heart started hammering in her chest, but it wasn't from fear.

"I-I ... Thank you for saving my life before," she said, forcing herself to remain calm.

She couldn't believe he was actually there!

"Glad I could help."

She glanced around her apartment before going forward and taking a seat at the couch.

"Would you like to sit?"

He hesitated, and even though she couldn't see his face, she could make out his uncertain posture.

"It's alright. If you prefer to stay where you are, I don't mind," she said. The fact he was actually in her apartment and talking to her was more than she ever could have hoped.

She shifted back slightly, trying to get a better look at him without being obvious. She could tell his hair was dark and slicked back and what little she could see of his clothing was a little strange. The slippery looking fabric was tight against his arms and frame, reflecting the light that managed to reach him from the window. It appeared to be sapphire.

"I'm not entirely comfortable doing what you suggested in your article, Ms. Lane, but you are correct in saying people already know I'm here. And I must admit I've been thinking about how much easier some things would be if I could actively interact with officials during emergencies."

"Well, I'm glad you're considering it at all. Can you explain why it's difficult for you though? I mean, I can guess but I would rather not assume things," she managed.

"What would your guess be?" he asked.

"Honestly? I think you're afraid of something, and considering what you can do, that could include the government, how the public will react to you, etcetera, which is all understandable. However, I think it has more to do with *why* you can do what you can do than anything else." She fell silent as he tilted his head a little, but, as he wasn't denying anything yet, she went on. "Forgive me for being blunt, but were you developed? A government program?"

"Some things might have been easier if that was the case, but no. I was born this way. I just wasn't ... born here," he explained.

"Born here? Do you mean ... ?"

"Earth."

Lois blinked. She supposed that made a bit more sense than a science experiment, but ... an alien?

"I hope you haven't seen E.T.," she blurted, earning a snicker from her visitor. She blushed but was relieved he hadn't taken offense.

"So where were you born?" she asked.

"Krypton, but I'm not ready to say much more than that. You can still ask me questions, I just might not answer."

"Why not? I mean, you're not a felon from your planet, are you? I'm just saying that if you don't answer certain questions, people will assume the worst."

"No, I'm not a felon. I'm more of a ... refugee. I'm the only Kryptonian who made it here as far as I'm aware, and I've searched. Krypton ... doesn't exist anymore."

Lois slowly nodded, now getting a fair idea of why he didn't want to talk about it.

"How much of this do you wish to be on the record?" Lois asked, deciding he must have known she would wish to write an article on him.

"If you could omit the portion where I broke into your apartment, I would appreciate that."

Lois grinned, noting the clear, bright humor in his voice. "Of course. As for the rest?"

"Anything I answered you may use. And for the future, unless I say otherwise, it's on the record. Fair?" he asked.

"Very fair. Thank you," she said, before fighting back a gasp as he stepped forward into the light.

Most of his features were still too shrouded in darkness for her to describe him adequately to a sketch artist, but his clothing, his uniform, was clear. She could even tell there was a cape connected along his shoulders.

"What's that?" Lois asked, motioning to the large 'S' symbol on his chest.

"My family crest," he answered.

Lois smirked. "Ironically fitting, considering what people are now calling you, wouldn't you say?"

He smiled softly. "Yes, I was surprised when I heard."

"How do you feel about being called that?" Lois asked.

Superman straightened. "Honored and humbled. When I started doing this, I didn't anticipate ever becoming widely

known. I worked hard at not being noticed, but then I couldn't ignore Prometheus."

"Do you like the name though?" she pressed.

"Yes. After hiding for so long, and frankly more than a little uneasy about ever being discovered, I am relieved that it has turned out this way. For my adopted planet to name me something in a positive light, not from fear or hate ... I am grateful."

Lois smiled, undeniably drawn to his heartfelt answer.

"Then let me be the first to tell you that we are grateful for what you've done, Superman. Thank you."

Superman smiled. His features were still difficult to make out, yet she could tell his smile was warm and genuine.

"So what are you going to do now?" Lois asked.

"I'm not sure to be honest. I suppose it'll depend on where and how I'm needed next," Superman said.

"That is something I've been wondering about. How do you know when you're needed?" Lois asked.

"I have pretty good hearing and, though I'm not sure why, my hearing picks up on calls of distress if I'm within a few miles."

"That's amazing! Are all of your senses like that?"

"Yeah, I—" He paused and tilted his head.

"What is it?"

"Someone needs help. Goodnight, Ms. Lane," he said, vanishing a split second later with the window closing gently behind him.

Lois smiled softly. "Goodnight, Superman."

She completed the morning's article within an hour.

Chapter 3 – Debut

Every single person who had the money had a copy of the Daily Planet open while those who didn't read over their shoulders. Metropolis was in awe and the world in wonder.

SUPERMAN SPEAKS

An image based on Lois' description of their secret hero sat boldly beneath the title. It had been drawn by an ecstatic sketch artist very early that morning and had barely made the deadline, but it was there.

Limited light gleamed off his dark, slicked back hair, and his chin and nose stood out in the darkness, but the emblem on his chest was what drew the eye. A beam of dim light fell upon a large red and golden yellow 'S' on a shimmering dark blue fabric.

The governments of the world continued the scramble to assess a threat level, but what could they do? They still had no idea what his capabilities were exactly, and it didn't seem that he meant any harm. In fact, everything they were finding stated the exact opposite.

People everywhere were speaking excitedly about proof of Life beyond Earth and about what they had read and seen from the article.

Many were touched by how hesitant and humble the being they had named Superman was and how they hoped he would become comfortable enough to let them see him. For most, it was another sign that he truly was there to help; after all, someone who can move that quickly without being noticed could have killed all the world leaders and taken over if they had really wanted to.

"Lois, this is astounding," Perry said. "I hadn't been too sure about the ending of your last article, but it sure did pay off."

"Well, for a while there, Chief, I was beginning to become unsure too, but then he showed up when I least expected it!"

Suddenly, Jimmy ran in. "Chief, something's happening at the Lexor Hotel!"

They ran out and turned their attention to the TV screens as someone turned up the volume.

"The fire started approximately fifteen minutes ago, and the fire department has ordered the surrounding buildings to be evacuated. The blaze is not contained, and there are an unknown number of people trapped within the 57 floors."

Plumes of purplish black smoke and massive tongues of hot red flames billowed out of dozens of windows near the middle floor of the building. The news crews were kept a fair distance back, so they couldn't see much, but they could see figures waving from several windows.

Suddenly, a loud crack of a sonic boom cut through the roar of the fire as a red and blue blur whipped in front of black soot and orange flames.

"It's Superman!" someone shouted as he zipped through the top-most flaming window.

A whooshing sound echoed forth from above and white smoke shot out from windows, floor by floor, intermittently, as a red and blue blur began depositing injured people onto stretchers and within reach of emergency personnel nearly a block down the street in less than a minute.

As the fire was swiftly cleared from each floor by Superman, the sound of burning waned and cheering rose before the flames were finally extinguished completely from the building.

Everyone in the newsroom was silent, and the people on the street waited with bated breath.

"He's coming out!" a voice cried out.

And he was, exiting out the front door with a bundle in his arms, but the danger had not yet passed.

Suddenly, the firemen pulled back, waving and shouting out warnings as a portion of the building facade fell, smashing onto the ladder of the firetruck that had been approaching the building with a water hose before Superman's arrival. The firetruck began to twist, and those present could only watch in horror as it began to tip over toward Superman and the clustered firemen who had been battling the fire on the lower floors.

Shifting the bundle to one arm, Superman once again disappeared in a blue and red blur before coming to a sudden stop beneath the falling firetruck and *hovering* several feet off the ground with his free arm lifted up. The ladder landed on his raised hand and instantly stopped before he pushed it by floating over, gently guiding the firetruck back onto all six wheels.

The crowd and all of the emergency personnel burst out into applause and cheered even louder than before as Superman touched back down.

He straightened and seemed to take a slow calming breath before turning and approaching the fire chief who was just beyond the righted truck.

Paul Mohr was a gruff man who had over fifteen years of experience fighting fires, but he felt like a little kid as the red caped man stopped in front of him. However, Paul couldn't help but stare as a small corner of his brain thought it strange that this being was shorter than him.

In a daze, he held out his hand, and Superman took it in a firm but painless grip.

"Thank you," Paul said automatically, taking in the sight of ash smudged across the side of Superman's forehead before looking down at what was blinking up contentedly from Superman's bent arm.

"I got him from a bassinot in room 5124, where I found a woman. She's in Ambulance 32," Superman answered as the infant reached out a little hand and took Superman's thumb.

Not waiting for a reply, Superman started walking to the ambulance. Paul quickly fell into step beside him with everyone on the street watching.

"I know you will check beforehand, but floors 35 and 36 will need to be reinforced before you can have men go higher. The structural supports on the east side were severely damaged," Superman said.

"Uh, I'll be sure to let my people know. Thank you," Paul said.

They made it to the ambulance and paused just beyond the ambulance doors.

"My baby, is my baby safe?" the woman on the stretcher's edge asked the paramedic from behind an oxygen mask, just now coming to.

"We will check with the firemen as soon as we can, ma'am," the female paramedic answered before turning around to see who had approached.

"Superman!" she gasped.

"Ma'am," Superman greeted, stepping forward.

The paramedic moved aside, allowing the mother within to reach and take hold of her son, who Superman carefully relinquished.

Sobbing out a heartfelt 'thank you,' the woman all but leapt off the stretcher and hugged Superman, even as she held her now bewildered child.

Shyly pulling back, she wiped her eyes and held her baby tightly.

"You're welcome," Superman said before giving a nod to Paul and the paramedic, ignoring the flashes of light from cameras behind them. And then before anyone could think of what to do, he stepped back and shot up into the air with a smile, leaving a sonic boom in his wake.

The next two days were fairly quiet but busy. News stations everywhere were holding interviews with practically every single person who had been on the street when Superman had put out the fire. The mother with her infant had been interviewed the most, though Paul Mohr was a close second.

Superman had done a few other rescues, but they were all quick saves that didn't give the media much to bite into. However, the governments of the world had started responding.

Many were positive, welcoming and thanking Superman for his actions. Lois was heartened by the overwhelmingly positive responses; however, there were a handful of countries that warned they would fire upon him if he entered their airspace.

Lois shook her head in dismay as she headed out to talk with one of her best contacts, always on the lookout for a story.

She waited for Earl to come out the back. Fortunately, she didn't need to wait long. Earl was the janitor of police headquarters and had long since provided her with tips on upcoming cases and the like, knowing her investigative skills would help the police serve justice in the end.

"Anything new?" she asked.

"Just two things. There was another reference made of 'The Boss' by some thugs brought in earlier today. They seem to be getting more organized, but these were caught by Superman and left for the police. As for the second new thing, it's more of a new-someone-. A private investigator has moved into town and has helped solve a few cold cases. He's also helped out Henderson with a small, more recent problem and has become his friend. Anyway, from what I've heard, this fellow is really good, and I mean *really* good. Thought you might want to know in case you ever needed help on one of your investigations. Never know when you might need a little help," Earl said with a shrug, knowing how independent Lois liked to be but feeling he should put it out there anyway.

"And this someone would be ...?" she asked, realizing this person was responsible for the handful of stories a few other reporters had taken, most being recently solved murders.

"Clark Kent."

Lois nodded. "Alright, thank you. I'll certainly keep his name in mind, especially since I know how difficult it is to get on Henderson's good side."

Earl laughed before going on his way.

Clark sighed to himself as he stepped from the cab and made his way up to the main entrance of LexCorp.

He didn't like LexCorp. Even from the small number of

investigations he had done in Metropolis so far, something was very off about the company. He couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly, but the red flags cropping up were definitely worrying.

He didn't allow himself to make assumptions, however. He relied on proof, although sometimes proof started out in the form of coincidences. For when one encountered enough coincidences, they were evidence of something more.

"Hello, I'm here to meet with Mr. Luthor at 10:45," he said to the woman behind the front desk.

"Mr. Kent?" she asked, scrolling through that day's schedule. "I.D. please."

"Of course," he said, pulling out his identification card and PI license for good measure.

He was investigating the murder of Miranda Fairchild.

Her body had been found in Hobbs Bay a few weeks before, and Clark had been given the case by Henderson. With so many more recent cases cropping up, it was deemed the department would be able to better use resources by hiring Clark instead of devoting one of their swamped detectives to it.

He had come to LexCorp to interview Lex Luthor because Miranda had been an ex-employee and apparently had had a romantic relationship with him in the past. Clark was working on getting a broad picture of who Miranda used to be and who she interacted with so hopefully he could determine a motive or find who may have wanted her gone.

Right now, the only substantial lead was her work in perfume and, ultimately, chemistry.

She had created a pheromone that made people fall madly in love with almost any individual they were subconsciously attracted to. She had even 'tested' the pheromone at the Daily Planet (which had caused outlandish and unfortunate incidents for many of the employees there). Which brought up another person he needed to interview—Lois Lane, since she wrote the article that identified the source of the Daily Planet's dramatic heartbreak hours before Miranda went missing. Perhaps someone there had suffered something they felt unforgivable and had decided to exact revenge against Miranda? Possible.

"Mr. Leet will escort you to Mr. Luthor," she said, motioning to a large burly man behind Clark.

"Thank you," Clark said, before falling into step behind the building's security guard.

After a long elevator ride and a walk to a shiny entry room, they stopped outside a large and elaborate looking chamber.

"Wait here, Mr. Kent," Mr. Leet said before continuing into the chamber and disappearing behind a door within.

Having long since put aside certain scruples while on an investigation, Clark allowed his hearing to expand beyond the area he was in.

"Mr. Leet, I gather my guest has arrived?" came Luthor's voice.

"Yes, sir, he's outside," Leet answered.

"Well, let's see if his reputation is deserved or if he's just as clueless as the rest of the police department here. I do hope for a challenge," Luthor said.

"You want him to be on to you, sir?" another voice asked. He had an English accent, and by the deep gravely tones within it, Clark didn't need x-ray vision to know the man was older.

"What fun is the hunt if prey don't know of the danger that lurks?" Luthor asked.

Clark frowned, the red flags he had seen were solidifying into puppet strings that played Metropolis.

Mr. Leet and Mr. Luthor entered the room, followed by the aged Englishman.

"Mr. Luthor, thank you for taking the time to see me. I know you are a very busy man," Clark said, offering his hand.

"No problem, and thank you for investigating Miranda's

murder, Mr. Kent. I know the police department unfortunately doesn't have the resources to conduct a proper investigation," Luthor answered, shaking his hand like any proper business man. "If there is anything I can do to help bring those responsible for Miranda's death to justice ... nothing would please me more."

Clark nodded, noting how calm and sincere the man appeared as well as how even his heartbeat sounded. He was an exceptional liar.

"Thank you," Clark said as Luthor motioned to the chairs for them to sit.

"Would you care for something to drink?" Luthor asked as he sat on a leather chair across from the couch and side table.

"No, thank you," Clark said, taking a seat on the couch.

"As you wish. Nigel, you and Mr. Leet may go," he said, waving the Englishman away in dismissal. "Now, how can I help you? I assume you have questions for me?" he asked as Mr. Leet and the apparent butler left the room, back where they had just stepped from.

"Yes. And some may be rather personal," Clark warned.

"As I said before, if there's anything I can do to help, I'll do it. And if that happens to be answering a few difficult questions, so be it."

Clark gave an appreciative nod. "Very well. I understand you and Ms. Fairchild were romantically involved two years ago?"

Clark asked, getting straight to business.

"Yes, though I broke up with her after three months. She was ... impulsive, with alarmingly wide mood swings and well, I cared for her a great deal, but I couldn't see myself making a life with her, so I ended it," he said apologetically.

Clark was a little surprised by how much he felt he should believe the man just then. It seemed Luthor had truly felt something toward Miranda at one point.

"And when she began working for LexCorp?" Clark asked.

"I hadn't even known she was working for my company for over a year. LexCorp has many divisions and departments. She was hired outside my immediate realm of knowledge, as I allow my department managers and the like to operate without my direct influence. I don't believe in micromanaging. Anyway, she worked in the Cosmetic and Pharmaceutical — also known as C&P — Division as a chemist. She did well there, and then she reached out to me. Imagine my surprise to learn she had been so close to me for so long without my knowing. She of course wanted to know if I wanted to 'give us another chance'. I said no but assured her I had no problem whatsoever with her staying with LexCorp. I had thought she could be professional. I was wrong."

"She didn't take your answer well?" Clark asked.

"She started leaving me messages, telling me she was working on a very special project. I later learned it involved perfumes."

"From the incident at the Daily Planet?" Clark prompted.

"No, she came to me before that. She wanted me to fund a separate branch devoted to her new 'product'. She offered to demonstrate it, but I declined, stating she had to go through the proper channels placed in her department and that I had been very lenient with her behavior but I couldn't any longer. I told her I would order the termination of her employment if she didn't start handling things the way she knew she should." Luthor sighed. "She stormed out. And that was the last time I saw her."

Clark nodded. "And that was the fifth of this month?" he asked, recalling the police report.

"Yes."

"Do you know any of her friends or who she spent time with outside of work? Who was her immediate supervisor?"

"I don't know what she did outside of work, but Daniel Harper was her supervisor. He oversees the lab and takes any breakthroughs to the next step."

Clark nodded and jotted down the name.

“Do you know if anyone knew about what she was working on?”

“No, not until after the article from the Daily Planet. Which does remind me, an agency from the government sent a team out to check for any of her work in the C&P Division, but they couldn’t find anything. I don’t think she did her work on my property. I don’t know if they found anything at her home.”

“Thank you. The compound she made could be considered a chemical weapon, so I’m not surprised the government would look into it. A city affected by it . . .” Clark said, shaking his head.

Luthor nodded, his eyes grim. “Sodom and Gomorrah. A city without restraint.”

“Indeed. Do you recall anything she may have said that you feel may be of help now?” Clark asked, deciding it was time to wrap things up.

“No, I wish I did, Mr. Kent, but I don’t.”

“Well, thank you for meeting with me and answering my questions, Mr. Luthor. You have been a great help,” he said, standing up.

“If there’s anything you think of that I can do to help, don’t be afraid to ask. Miranda wasn’t perfect, but she deserved better than what she got.”

“She did,” Clark agreed, shaking Luthor’s hand.

He headed out soon after. Unfortunately, Luthor didn’t say anything of note after he had left.

Lois needed a break, so she decided the best way to alleviate her recent frustrations over a story’s slow progress was to investigate the new PI at the precinct.

Clark Kent.

He was interesting.

Very interesting.

He was a prior military officer, Air Force officer to be precise, who had spearheaded the new Special Field Support Division. He had a very respectable rack of ribbons and no doubt would have had very little trouble making it to colonel and possibly beyond had he decided to stay in the Air Force. But he had completed his commission and was honorably discharged, returning to his previous career as a private investigator. A private investigator with a degree in astrophysics. Interesting, yet baffling, choice.

As for his accomplishments as a PI, she didn’t have too much on them yet, but it was clear he was good at what he did. Maybe he was worth seeking out if she ever hit a dead end.

Granted, the chances of that happening were very low. She was Lois Lane, one of the best investigative reporters the Daily Planet had ever seen – possibly the best.

She put down the folder on Clark Kent down. Much of her findings were matter of public record, one just had to know the correct channels, but she couldn’t help but feel there was more to Clark Kent than even his thorough background stated, his chosen degree notwithstanding.

He had traveled a great deal before joining the military—it was why he became the first SFS officer and why he had helped instruct the first few groups of that division.

Why did he travel? She supposed he could just be one of those adventurous types, but the amount of traveling he had done was downright epic. Was he looking for something? Or was his curiosity as insatiable as her own? Maybe even hungrier? And why had he chosen astrophysics as his degree? She didn’t see how that would help with his travels much, other than perhaps navigating at night.

She shook her head. He was a PI, and like herself, he probably hated to leave any mystery unsolved. Was it really all that strange that he traveled the world and solved mysteries as he went instead of remaining in a city like her to solve mysteries that surfaced like groundhogs?

Well, one thing was for sure, she hoped their paths would cross in the near future.

He was getting more comfortable in the suit. He didn’t feel as self-conscious, and it was nice to interact with rescue personnel. It reminded him of his time as an SFS officer, although instead of primarily orchestrating rescues and organizing triage centers or shelters with the locals after disasters, he was directly alleviating issues personally.

He was flying over Metropolis when he suddenly heard an odd high-pitched whine, which was then followed by a horrendous crash.

Quickly redirecting himself, he shot to the sound and found a car smashed into a street light that was now beginning to tip. Upon landing, he righted it and released some heat vision to weld back the broken portion so it would remain upright until the city could replace it.

“Superman?” the driver gasped, dazed and in pain. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure, but there’s something under your engine that shouldn’t be there,” he said, opening the door. “You have whiplash, and your right knee needs to be looked at by a doctor. Your ligaments there have torn, I’m afraid.”

“I’ve called for an ambulance, Superman,” a pedestrian said, stopping at the edge of the sidewalk as if afraid to trespass but eager to be close.

“Thank you, sir,” Superman said, causing the man to beam.

Superman turned back to the injured man but frowned as a whine reached his ears again. He whipped around, startling the crowd that was beginning to grow. His eyes scanned the area, trying to determine where it was coming from while ignoring the concerned faces around him. Less than 2 seconds later, a distant boom was heard.

He disappeared in an instant, screams and cries growing louder.

It had been a bomb—small, probably hidden in a bag, Clark figured. His experience in the military told him as much. The damage, however, was not small, decimating several shops on one side of the street while chucking debris into the store fronts on the other side.

Shooting about, he moved large debris and relocated the injured into the road, forming a kind of triage area before transporting the most grievously injured to a hospital that was fortunately very close. He came back twice more, emergency personnel arriving not long after he had delivered the first patient.

“And you didn’t see anyone near the bag?” a policewoman asked as she helped a man with a laceration.

“No, I just thought it was odd, since I saw it when I had left the store an hour earlier,” he said, before turning his attention away from the officer in surprise when he noticed Superman’s presence.

“It was detonated remotely, officer,” Superman said.

“Remotely?” she asked, quickly facing him.

“There was another incident on the corner of Main and 6th that I think is related to this. I—” Superman cut himself off.

There was that whine again followed by a distant explosion.

“Hobbs Bridge. Send units,” he stated, before vanishing in a blur.

A second blast followed right next to the other he had just heard as he came upon the bridge, destabilizing the far end of the structure. He reacted automatically.

His hands gripped the bottom of an I-beam as another portion of the bridge came to rest on the back of his shoulders. He held it, preventing the crumbling bridge from immediately collapsing into the river. Hundreds of people clamored off, several leaving their cars while others skidded their way back onto stable ground. Fortunately, the concrete of the four lane bridge held together on

the structural support long enough for everyone to get off, but the bridge was a lost cause and eventually even Superman couldn't keep it in place.

As it and the cars left plummeted into the water, he flew up, searching for any unfortunate souls who might have fallen into the water. Miraculously, there was no one, but it was chilling to know that things would have been very different had he been a second later.

"Superman!" a man shouted from the far side, waving his arms in hopes of getting his attention. "Superman, another bomb!"

Clark was startled to realize it was Inspector Henderson and quickly landed.

"Where?" he asked, quickly scanning the immediate area even though he just had.

"The subway, at E Avenue junction. A backpack. I just got it over the radio. They're evacuating now."

Clark nodded and immediately went, reminding himself to keep a wider ear out in the future. Granted, with that whine, his attention had been in the frequency range higher than their radio chat.

People were being ushered across the street, away from the subway's entrance by police. He landed by the highest ranking officer he saw.

"People aren't joking when they say you're fast, Superman. Henderson just told me you were on your way," the senior officer appraised as he put his radio down and got to business. Superman appreciated how professional and direct he was—his voice hadn't even stuttered at seeing him. "Well, we've finished clearing the area below and the bomb squad is on their way. The city has also initiated an emergency shutdown of the entire subway line."

"Good. I see the bomb," Superman said, looking slightly down and to the right after glancing at the officer's name badge. It read Freit. "I would guess it's similar in size to the one that went off on Lexington Street."

Officer Freit nodded and glanced at his watch. "That's our guess as well, so the buildings on that side are being cleared now and should be empty within the next three minutes in case it goes off and damages their foundations. The bomb squad is ten minutes away."

"I'm not sure we have that much time," Superman warned. "Most of the others went off less than five minutes of one another."

"Do you think you can diffuse the bomb?"

"Yes, but if they activate the trigger beforehand, there won't be time to diffuse it."

"Trigger?"

"For the other bombs, I heard a high frequency before they went off. I believe they're being detonated remotely instead of from a timer."

Freit's eyes widened in alarm. "Could the people responsible be watching? Why haven't they detonated the bomb yet? Could they be waiting for the bomb squad?" He frowned. "Or you?"

Superman stilled in dawning horror. Things were occurring rather too coincidentally. "If they're waiting for me in hopes of harming me, they will be disappointed. And if you're right, I would like to attempt to defuse the bomb now so others will not be at risk."

"You want to go down before the bomb squad arrives?"

"If you would permit it," he said.

Hesitantly, Freit nodded but raised a hand, requesting Superman to wait. Pressing the button on his radio, he asked for the status of the evacuation. However, before he got a response, Superman heard a familiar whine.

Freit saw the alarm on Superman's face before he disappeared, his blur shooting down into the subway tunnel. He and everyone who had seen Superman's expression braced themselves.

"Dispatch, Superman has entered the sub—"

THUD.

Shouts of surprise and alarm erupted as smoke plumed out from the entrance, but the entire street instantly fell silent when a figure marched up through it and into the clear air. He stopped in the sunlight and stood, as if being blown up was just a minor inconvenience.

His uniform was filthy, but he was astonishingly unharmed with his red cape billowing behind him as Officer Freit slowly approached.

Lois stepped out of the cab and quickly paid the driver before making her way up the street where yellow tape blocked off a large portion of the area.

"Ms. Lane, right on time," Henderson said, waving her over, which informed the officer's near to let her pass.

"Thanks, Bill, what do you have for me?" she asked, grateful for the friendly professional relationship they had. There were very few reporters that were allowed so close to evidence. However, she had proven herself multiple times and knew when to publicize news and when to wait.

"Officially? Nothing beyond the obvious, but unofficially, there is something we just discovered that is pretty alarming," Bill said, subtly ensuring everyone else was out of earshot as he led her to the edge of the fallen bridge. "Cameras. There were video cameras, not part of the city's system or any other known system, placed on and near the bridge. They covered multiple angles."

"Cameras? Why?" Lois asked.

"The explosion was radio controlled, as were the other three, activated from unknown points of origin within a two mile radius of each site. Also, the bridge had two separate bombs placed on the north end. The other went off within a second before Superman arrived," he said, not answering Lois' question. "Superman left the backpack bomb site to come here and if he had been any later, everyone that had gotten off the bridge wouldn't have made it."

Lois frowned. "You think someone orchestrated all of this to test Superman?"

"My friend in forensics covering the subway site informed me that, on top of finding cameras, they found microphones along the street. Special microphones. The sort used by sports stadiums that allow for the audience to better hear what's going on at a particular location on the field."

"So you're saying that someone waited for Superman to arrive, watched and listened for the best moment, and then detonated the explosives?" Lois asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes, and if they were listening as we believe, they would have learned that Superman can hear the high frequency signal used to trigger the bombs. One of the officers stated Superman told him he could hear it not long before a bomb was triggered."

Lois' eyes widened. "Has anyone told Superman?"

"We haven't gotten the chance, but I have asked a few officers to inform him that I need to speak with him on something and to come find me as soon as possible," he said.

"Well, if I see him before you get the chance, I'll tell him what you've told me and let you know," Lois assured.

"Thank you. To know that someone is out there, not afraid to hurt anyone to get to him...."

"Yes, it's absolutely horrible," Lois agreed, already making plans on how to find the person responsible.

Lois dug through the paperwork diligently, trying to find any possible correlation between the bomb sites that could provide any sort of clue to who was behind obviously testing Superman.

The more she thought about it, the more her blood boiled.

Here was a man, who was selfless beyond imagination and expected nothing in return for saving lives, being tested.

Disgusting didn't even begin to describe how despicable it was.

"Good evening, Ms. Lane, I'm Murray Brown, Galactic Talent Agency, and I'm hoping you can help me. You see, I'm looking for the big guy, Superman, and since you interviewed him, I figured you could tell me how to find him or maybe give him a message for me?" he asked, stopping in front of her desk and breaking her from her thoughts rather abruptly with his loud tie and obnoxiously tacky suit.

"Well, you figured wrong," Lois said, barely glancing at him.

"I'll leave my card just in case," he said, handing her his card.

"You're a talent agent?" she asked, looking up from the card with one eyebrow raised.

"Artists' representative," he clarified.

"And you want to represent Superman?" she asked incredulously.

"Let me tell you something, cookie. Those buns of steel are money in the bank," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine, if I happen to see him, I'll give him your card," she promised, waving him off while mentally adding 'and I'll tell him about your sense of fashion and overall sleazy demeanor.'

"Thank you, Ms. Lane. Quality control, that's Murray Brown's middle name."

She shook her head as he left with a bounce in his step.

"And you're really okay?" Martha asked again.

"Yes, mom, I'm fine. I just wish I could say the same for my suit. I feel really bad. . . . You had just made it last month," Clark said, motioning to his ruined uniform folded on the table in his parents' living room.

His mother waved his guilt away. "It's no problem, dear; I have plenty of material. I'm just relieved to know you're okay."

"Have they learned anything about who could be responsible?" Jonathan asked, concerned about another aspect of what had happened.

"Superman spoke with Henderson a few hours ago, and they found cameras and microphones, but they have no idea who could have orchestrated it all yet," Clark admitted, ignoring his mother's expression when he spoke about himself in the third person.

"What?! Clark, someone is clearly after you! They probably hoped to have killed you," Jonathan said, horrified.

"I know; I had already begun to suspect a set up before I came to the last site."

"Honey, what are you going to do?" Martha asked.

"The same thing I always do. Investigate and get to the bottom of it."

"And Superman?" Martha asked, torn between her motherly concern and the pride she felt at what she was certain would be her son's answer.

"I'm not going to let this dissuade me. I'll be more careful and mindful, but I can't let this stop what Superman does."

"And you're sure there's no remnants of Trask's group left that might have done this?" Jonathan asked.

"I'm sure Burton would have notified me if he suspected anyone, but I'll pay him a visit in the near future anyway," Clark assured before sighing, his mind wandering to other concerns.

"What is it?" Martha asked.

"I don't know, Mom, it's hard to explain. It doesn't have anything to do with the bombs, but more with everything else. Part of me feels silly for voicing it, and thus sort of complaining about it, but I had prepared myself so much for a negative response that what has happened instead is Why are you trying not to laugh?" he asked suddenly, which prompted Martha to give up and release her chuckle.

"I'm sorry, honey, but you're talking about the memorabilia, aren't you?" she asked.

"I'm an action figure! I can't believe how quickly companies moved. I mean, doesn't it take time for these sorts of things to be made? My emblem is *everywhere*. It's unbelievable, really."

"Well, you know, if there's a chance to make a buck, you can always bet a few people will take it," Jonathan said, slightly annoyed by the world's greedy nature.

Clark paused, before looking thoughtful. "That's money Superman could be using."

Jonathan blinked. "Now be careful, Clark. Do you really want to enter into a legal battle? Is that something Superman would do?"

"No, but he also wouldn't allow his image to be abused either." Clark suddenly smiled. "And I think I know exactly who to go to help with this. If I do it right, there won't be any court dates and everyone will be happy."

Jonathan and Martha glanced at each other, not sure if they should be worried or not.

"Don't worry, it'll work out well."

They nodded, hoping he was right.

Chapter 4 – Connections

Lois sunk into her couch, kicked off her shoes and picked up her chopsticks. She had left work late and was starving; although, after glancing at the four boxes, maybe her eyes had been bigger than her stomach. . . . Oh, well.

The smell of pepper steak quickly filled her apartment as she opened the first box. Taking her first bite, she reached for her drink but was suddenly interrupted by a knock at her . . . window?

Jumping to her feet, she instinctively grabbed her purse in preparation to swing it as she looked toward the sound.

Cautiously, she approached her window and, gathering her courage, yanked the curtain aside while raising her purse in case she needed to swing.

Her eyes took in the red and blue with the central yellow 'S' and instantly felt herself flush in embarrassment as she fumbled with the latch.

"Superman, hello!" she greeted, hoping her voice didn't sound too frantic.

"I apologize for startling you once again, Ms. Lane, as well as interrupting your dinner. I didn't realize how late it was and should have called beforehand. Would it be better for me to return another day?" he asked, briefly glancing beyond her.

"No! No, of course not. And don't apologize. I'm glad you stopped by," she said in a rush, stepping back and waving him in while trying to picture him using a phone. It just seemed strange for some reason. Never mind the question of how he would get her number; it was unlisted.

Smiling, Superman glided in and gently landed on her floor.

She tried not to stare at him while doing her utmost to take in every feature she hadn't been able to see the first time he was in her apartment, particularly his face. She had seen a few photographs of course, including one of him coming out of the nearly blown up subway, but none had been close up, and seeing someone in person was almost always better than seeing them in a photograph.

Despite knowing he was from another planet, she couldn't help but try to pinpoint a nationality he looked closest to, but she couldn't select one. It was as if he was the perfect blend of several, each balancing the other. And his dark brown eyes . . . who knew eyes could be dark and handsome all on their own?

She mentally slapped herself, grateful only a few seconds had passed.

"And actually, Superman, I have a few things I need to talk to you about, so if you would like to join me for dinner – I mean, I ordered way too much, so if you would like some, you would be doing me a favor if you ate a bit. Otherwise, I'll have leftovers, and leftovers for me is never good because I never remember I

have them until after I've ordered another meal, and ... I'm sorry, you must have come for a reason. Would you like to sit?" she said, halting her rambling and fighting back another torrent of words.

"Sure, and yes, since you're offering, I wouldn't mind some Chinese. I haven't gotten the chance to eat much today. I technically don't need to eat, but I like to," he said, taking the offered spot on the side chair beside the couch.

Lois returned to the couch and opened the other containers before handing him a spare set of chopsticks, inwardly beside herself with glee that Superman was actually going to have dinner with her.

"Thank you," he said before glancing down at his options. He raised his eyebrows a bit, amused. "I see what you mean by the amount of food."

"Yeah ... but it all looked so good, I couldn't not get it all," she defended. "But anyway, shall I go first?"

"Go first?" Superman asked.

"Be the first to talk. Henderson wanted me to talk to you about something," she clarified, mentally patting herself on the back for getting back on task and maintaining a semblance of professionalism.

"Oh, I gather this is about the bombs?"

She nodded. "Henderson found something rather alarming."

Superman nodded, grim. "I know. I ran into Henderson a little bit ago. Someone set up cameras and microphones at all of the sites, no doubt to see how I would respond."

"Whoever is responsible for all of this must be extremely powerful," Lois noted worriedly. "Do you think it could be the government?"

Slowly, he shook his head. "I don't think so. I think we're looking at someone else."

"Why do you think that?"

"Off the record, the explosives were not military grade. They were too sloppy. Sophisticated in detonation, yes, but I doubt the government would have utilized such an old design, especially if it was to test me. There's also the fact that civilians were placed in harm's way. I'm not saying the United States government – or any government for that matter – has never done anything questionable, but to harm civilians when there are less damaging ways to get answers from me.... No, whoever did this is extremely confident about not getting caught and isn't concerned about political fallout or loss of human life."

Lois nodded in agreement. "Well, I've investigated organizations who thought they were pretty slick, and I caught them. I'll do the same thing here."

"Thank you, Ms. Lane, but please be careful. These people obviously don't care if they hurt anyone, and I doubt they will just let you reveal them if they realize what you're doing."

"I'll be careful, Superman, no need to worry about me," she said, touched by his concern and happy he didn't suggest that it was too dangerous for her. "So, your turn. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, I have been thinking about something for a while, and I finally realized I need help with it," he said, causing her to shift forward a bit.

What on Earth did Superman need help with?

"I've watched how people have responded to me these last few weeks, and I'm mostly reassured, but ... I've also seen my emblem being sold and other memorabilia concerning me and ... I'm not opposed to people making money, and I don't plan on taking anyone to court over this, but I also can't ignore the fact it's money that I should have some say in. I hope you understand what I'm saying."

Lois nodded slowly, wondering the extent of Superman's concerns and monetary desire.

"So ... you need help with the legal aspect of getting rights?" she asked.

"Partially, but more on helping me organize and publicize something. A foundation, I suppose. A place for that money to go which will then—" he paused for a moment, shrugging. "I want at least some of the money that's being made to go somewhere meaningful and useful. I would like some of it to go to hospitals, schools, shelters, things like that. I can't be everywhere at once, but with this, then in a way I could."

Lois stared, amazed.

"What?" he asked, suddenly a little nervous.

She shook her head. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You are literally the strongest being on the face of the earth and you choose to also be the kindest," she said.

Superman blinked. "I highly doubt I'm the kindest, and there's more than one sort of strength. There are people I know who have endured more than I can ever comprehend, and yet they persevere. To me, they're stronger than I'll ever be."

"I suppose that may be true, but there's not a whole lot of people who would seek to do what you're wanting."

"I don't need a whole lot of money," he said, unconcerned. "But anyway, would you happen to know anyone who could help me?"

"Actually, maybe. This guy came around," she said, reaching for her purse by the edge of the table and pulling out the business card she had been very close to throwing away earlier that day. "A bit timely, although I'm not sure I'd suggest you going with him for what you want to do, but it's proof there are people out there interested."

Superman slowly nodded, reading the rather flashy and eccentric business card before looking up at her.

"Well, at least I know he likes what he does."

Lois snickered. "His card is nothing compared to him, let me tell you. But if nothing else, you can see what he's offering exactly and you can go from there. As for other help for your foundation, I can convince Perry to run a piece in the Daily Planet. Free publicity, letting companies out there know about it, and I imagine you'll probably get straight donations before too long."

Superman blinked before looking thoughtful. "I might need to find more people than I thought to help in this."

"There is a lot to consider, and depending on what and how you want to do things, this could be a full time job for more than one person," Lois agreed.

"I think you're right," he said, apparently coming to a decision. "Thank you, Ms. Lane. I knew coming to you was a good idea."

Lois beamed before growing a little solemn, suddenly wondering how many people he really had that he could go to for help. "Is it hard? I mean, being you? I imagine being in a world where there's no one else like you...." She looked down, realizing how random and personal her question was in that moment.

"Sometimes, but I like to think I have more things in common with humans than differences. Off the record, I have a higher body temperature and a slower heart rate than humans, but the only physical difference is what I can do—at least as far as I can tell. And emotionally, I have feelings just like everyone else."

Lois slowly nodded, quickly connecting the dots. "Hiding among us must have been easy."

Superman shrugged. "Hard to find someone you're not looking for, and even when you are looking, it's still difficult, as you discovered."

She smirked after finishing another bite. "The search became a long project spanning several years, and most of it I had to do in secret. At first, Perry didn't believe there was anything to find so didn't allow me to use any Planet resources."

"What tipped you off initially?" he asked, very interested.

"Tales of miracles. The first was when I had investigated something in the Congo a few years back. Villagers spoke of a

spirit who had saved a nearby tribe from mercenaries roughly two years before.

“I managed to track down several from the tribe, and they are now providing a great deal of stability in the region. Anyway, I learned about how they were saved. Stopping bullets and forcing the aggressors away in a gust of wind? Definitely a story, especially when all the witnesses I spoke to told the same story, were sane and had nothing to gain by making anything up – granted, I spoke through a translator, but still. I can read body language, and they were earnest and honest, completely convinced a spirit of their ancestors had saved them.”

Superman cleared his throat self-consciously. “You’ve been tracking me longer than I thought.” He shifted a bit, putting down his chopsticks. He was finished eating. He looked at her questioningly. “Why didn’t you include that in your article?”

“What, the incident in the Congo? I didn’t want to risk disrupting what they had. That area is turbulent enough as it is without encouraging governments to go in and begin questioning people. I know that boy that you had saved from drowning in Brazil was visited by some officials after my article. Thankfully, it was friendly and served in showing I was speaking the truth about you, but beliefs in Africa are a little different. I don’t think it would have gone as smoothly, especially when officials learned exactly how that tribe was keeping aggressive groups in check.”

Superman frowned, recalling the ammunition and weaponry that had been left by the mercenaries. “Yeah, that wouldn’t have gone over well.”

Lois nodded. “Anyway, I had what I needed for the story and to get your attention. I believe in having observant discretion. I report the news and will always dig for the truth, but, in rare instances, some things are better left undisclosed to the public.”

“Respectful journalism, the way reporting should be,”

Superman agreed.

With a blush, Lois looked down at the indirect compliment, only to quickly discover they had eaten most of what she had ordered.

“Well, Ms. Lane, thank you for sharing your dinner. Perhaps, if rescues permit, I will bring us some take out next time,” he said, standing up.

“I look forward to it. Let me know when you would like me to write an article on your foundation,” she said as they made their way to the open window.

“When I have it ready, I’ll let you know,” Superman promised.

“Looking forward to it. Thanks for stopping by, Superman,” she said.

“Kal-El,” he corrected with a smile. “My Kryptonian name. After everything, I think you’ve earned the right to call me that.”

“Alright, Kal-El,” she said softly before he disappeared with an appreciative nod.

Clark was busy for the next few days, reading up on non-profit organizations and how to form foundations between rescues and investigating the Boss. Once again, he was grateful for his ability to speed read, but it still left him with the question of who exactly he should seek to run and oversee it all—because, despite being Superman, there were only so many hours in the day. He needed to delegate, especially since, as Kal-El, he had no physical address or any official identification or citizenship. Someone would have to act in his stead when it came to all the legal technicalities.

He looked into Murray Brown next and was pleasantly surprised by what he found, even after he looked into other agents. He decided he would contact Brown by the end of the week and see what he was willing to offer exactly.

But before he could do that, he wanted to have a few directors chosen, and though he had several contacts who he knew would

have some capable people in mind, he could only trust one contact with all the information.

The General.

“Good morning, Burton,” he said over the phone.

“Ah, Clark, glad you called, I was just about to ask Margaret to get you on the line. We are secure by the way.”

“Oh? Is it urgent?” Clark asked, shifting gears and knowing if the General had secured the line it had to be serious.

“Yes, actually. And although it’s not exactly an emergency, it is time sensitive. Please stop by at your earliest convenience. Something was found that I believe you will wish to see.”

“I can make my way over there now,” Clark assured.

“Very good,” Newcomb said.

Clark hung up and zipped over the few states separating himself and Newcomb. In a matter of minutes, he was standing in the General’s office with the window shut behind him.

Newcomb looked up from his desk, long accustomed to Clark’s prompt arrivals.

“This morning I was contacted by someone I know in the Geological Society concerning a meteorite found in Smallville. A Mr. Wayne Irig sent them a sample of ‘green rock’ that he had found on his land.”

Clark sat down in the chair on the other side of the desk, intrigued.

“Wayne’s a friend of my family,” Clark said.

“Which is why I’m hoping you can help with this. A few tests were run on the sample, and it was found to be radioactive. Now, it’s not dangerously radioactive – at least in the initial tests – but it’s unlike any sort of material we’ve encountered before and we don’t know what long-term effects it could have on people or wildlife. I suspect the Department of Environmental Health and the Environmental Protection Agency would advise collecting the meteorite for safety and further study. I’m hoping you will be available to act as a friendly face when we send personnel down to Smallville to collect it all.”

Clark nodded, agreeing that removing questionable material from the area was best. “Sure, no problem. Whenever you need.”

“Excellent. Now, before we go any further, you had called me. Can I do something for you?”

“Well, there’s two things, the first a bit more serious than the second.”

“The recent terrorist attacks in Metropolis?” the General guessed.

“Correct. It’s obvious they were testing me, so I wanted to check in with you in case you had heard anything,” Clark said, hopeful.

“Internationally and nationally, your public appearance has stirred a few things, I’ll admit, but nothing unexpected, and nothing that seems to be related to the bombings,” Newcomb answered. “And actually, we haven’t even needed to maintain serious efforts in reassuring the other governments,” Newcomb continued.

“How much strife had I caused initially?” Clark asked, suddenly realizing the political impact of his existence.

Burton shrugged. “There was some question and fear concerning whether or not you would be used by our government at all, particularly in warfare. Rest assured, your actions (past and present) have answered that question, at least to the satisfaction of most international leaders,” he said, neither of them needing to point out the irony in that statement – granted, he had never participated in actual combat.

“Hmm, I wonder if I should make a statement, make it unequivocally clear on what I will and will not do.”

“Wouldn’t hurt, but it’s up to you,” Newcomb said, unbothered. “If you do, I suggest doing it sooner rather than later. I can get the ball rolling with certain Congress officials if you wish.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, please do so. I think being politically proactive here is the right answer. Other than my statement of intent, what should I prepare and expect?”

“Assuming this goes to Congress and doesn’t get handled differently, such as through the UN or an Executive Order, be ready to be invited to a session of Congress where they will have some questions for you. You will need to convince them of your sincerity and your goodwill. You will also likely need to reveal more about your background, although you already know how much I stress caution in such things. Less is often more.”

“I understand,” Clark said, looking pensive but determined.

“So, what was the second thing?” Burton asked.

“Well, the second thing concerns certain financial aspects of my side activities. I want to make a foundation but will need someone to oversee it and possibly a few other people to help.”

“A director of sorts with assistants?” Newcomb asked, intrigued.

“Yes, to see to the day to day activities at the very least.”

“Paid?”

“Although the foundation will be non-profit, I imagine it would be too much work to expect someone to do it for free. Perhaps some part-time assistants can be volunteers, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable not paying full-time people. I also want people to be committed and good at what they do. Pay usually helps with that.”

Newcomb nodded and retrieved a sheet of paper.

“Two people come to mind. Both retired military. Good, honest people. And I know one has been going crazy trying to find something to do,” he said, jotting down their names and contact numbers. “Julie Heinz is very organized and can keep track of dozens of schedules in her head without a problem. Maverick Ervin is a PR expert and very good with numbers. Either could serve as a director or an assistant. If you got both on board, you would be set.”

“Thank you. I’ll definitely contact them tomorrow.”

Newcomb smirked. “I’ll give them each a call in the morning to forewarn them then. They’ll appreciate the heads up that Superman may want to talk to them.”

Clark rubbed his arm self-consciously. “Yeah, good idea. Thanks.”

Newcomb waved his thanks away. “Knowing you, this foundation will help the world ten times more than you already have. No, helping you with this is my pleasure. It’s no trouble.”

Clark smiled, relieved he had such a diligent ally and friend.

“Well, unless there is something else, would you like to see the meteorite? I must admit, looking at it, it’s easy to believe it’s from space,” Newborn said.

“Sure,” he said, shifting in the seat a bit. “Do you think it could be from Krypton?”

“I would be surprised if it wasn’t,” he said, retrieving a small metallic box from his drawer. “It emits an extremely low level radiation. It’s very different from anything our scientists have encountered before, but it seems to be a cross between very weak gamma and cosmic radiation.” He slid it across the desk’s surface and opened it.

Green light instantly poured out, gleaming with such intensity that it didn’t seem real.

Clark reared back, a sensation beyond anything he had ever felt saturating all awareness.

Newcomb looked up from the box in time to see Clark flinch back, with his arm clenched around his stomach as he let out a strangled gasp.

Instinctively, Newcomb slammed the little lid back down, blocking the glow of green light, before clamoring around his desk to Clark’s side.

“Clark!”

Clark looked up at him, squinting. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure, but it didn’t look good. How do you feel?”

“Dizzy, I think. The ground feels unstable. My chest hurts, and my head feels like it’s pounding inside,” Clark said between breaths before closing his eyes.

“I don’t know why, but you obviously reacted to that rock. I’d go as far as label it as an allergic reaction. You’re sweating, and you look sick.”

Clark opened his eyes and touched his forehead.

“I know it might be hard for you to explain, since you’ve never really been hurt before, but when I first took the lid off, what did you feel?”

“Burning. I’ve felt heat before, of course, but this was different. It was painful, with stabbing all over, even from the inside,” he answered, exhaling shakily.

“Is it gone now?”

“Yeah, I just feel weak and heavy now.”

“Alright. Well, you just sit and rest. I’m going to make a few calls,” he said, going back around his desk and picking up the phone.

He called the Geological Society and requested for their expert to be sent to Smallville in the morning, where they would meet with an excavation team who happened to be made up of only people he trusted. Then he looked up at Clark after making a few other arrangements.

“You feel up to talking to Mr. Irig? I think being told that the government will be excavating one’s land might be received better if it came from you.”

“Sure, I’m feeling much better now,” Clark said, taking the phone. “Anything specific I should tell him?”

“The material he found is hazardous and that the government wishes to remove it all from his land immediately. He should also expect a sizable payment from the US government by the end of the week that will reimburse any damages to his land as well as any inconvenience the excavation teams may cause him. In addition, inform him that the meteorite must be kept a secret, as the material could impact national security. The team coming will have a reason why they’re there, so he shouldn’t have to worry about coming up with a story. Other than that, anything you wish to add, you are welcome to.”

Clark nodded, before calling his family’s neighbor.

He was able to confidently fly from Newcomb’s office half an hour later, though he was still inwardly shaken. It was frightening to know it had only taken a few seconds to be so severely affected. The fact anything could hurt him was scary, but that quickly? What would happen if he was exposed for thirty seconds? Five minutes? Would he die?

The only thing that kept him from panicking was knowing all of the rock would soon be collected and stored in a secure location, and that the only person who knew it could affect Superman was a proven friend.

Wayne Irig had taken the news well, accepting Clark’s word of the danger and assurance that it would all be taken care of with minimal fuss. Wayne had even offered to keep an eye out for more strange rocks whenever he worked on other people’s land since he often did maintenance work in the area. If he ever came across more, he would contact the General’s personal number immediately.

Clark was once again grateful for his eventful past with the military. People didn’t ask questions they normally would have, such as why he was such good friends with a three star general, because they knew he had been part of a special Air Force unit.

The retrieval team that Newcomb put together completed their work within two days. Wayne Irig cooperated fully, which included keeping the knowledge of exactly what they were doing out of Smallville’s gossip mill.

Clark was relieved when Newcomb confirmed that all of the

meteorites had been collected and were now being stored deep in Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado Springs.

His parents weren't too sure how to feel about it all. On the one hand, they were glad all of the meteorites in the area had been gathered up and taken away, but they didn't really like that it was now essentially in the control of the government, even though the government itself didn't know of its deadly effects on Superman.

Clark, however, trusted Newcomb and knew it would be classified and remain behind the tightest safety measures. Newcomb had adamantly advised so to the powers that be. It was a meteorite of 'unknown' origin and gave off a unique and unstudied radiation. They could not be too careful with it.

So, ultimately, it was in the best place it could be. Clark shuddered to think what might have happened if Trask had still been around and caught wind of it. With how paranoid and quick to latch onto wild theories he had been, chances are he would have instantly connected the rock to Superman. That would have been ... very bad.

Thankfully, he would never have to contend with that reality.

"The team recovered about one pound of the green meteor rock and came across a few red pieces as well, although those were smaller and not as prevalent," Burton told him later that week.

They were at Burton's home in Virginia, and Burton's wife was at a friend's house for brunch, so they were alone.

"And just between you and me, I've named the rocks Kryptonite. It's off the books, but I just don't like thinking of them as 'Crystalline 297,'" Burton said before taking a sip of his drink.

"Has anything been learned yet?" Clark asked.

"No, nothing beyond what I've already told you," Burton said. "But the scientists are excited."

"I can imagine," Clark said, not really liking that aspect of the situation but at least he was safely in the loop.

"Anyway, expect to hear something from Congress in the coming week. From what I understand, my little suggestion has taken hold and grown a great amount of interest."

"Should I be concerned?" Clark asked, putting his glass down.

"No. Things are just going to get interesting," he said with a smirk.

Clark, now a little more at ease, raised an eyebrow. "And they weren't already?"

Burton chuckled just as they heard his wife, Lisa, pull up the driveway.

Leaving with a nod, Clark disappeared out the back before the front door closed behind Lisa.

It hadn't been easy entering the night club, especially with a recording device, even for him, but once in, people talked. However, not as much as Clark had hoped. As soon as he felt himself inching toward the truth, people in the know would clam up and refuse to speak further. In the end, only his gentle persistence led to one tattoo covered 'gentleman' answering his questions.

"Oh yeah, pretty lady. I saw her photo a while ago. I thought she had already been hit?" he said after Clark had showed an image of Miranda.

"She was. I'm just ... looking for work." Clark shrugged, his worn but heavy duty leather jacket making his shoulders appear even broader than they really were. In his current disguise, which included a genuine five o'clock shadow and makeup to create a very convincing scar across his nose, he didn't look very friendly. "I was hoping if someone knew who sent the hit, or even who made the hit, I could offer my services to help out with the next. I've worked in other cities."

The man chortled. "We don't offer our services here as much as just do as we're told. I can tell you're experienced, but this city

isn't like the other places you've worked. Here, the Big Boss is god."

"The Big Boss?" he asked incredulously.

The man nodded. "He ordered the hit. I believe the exact instructions were to take care of the lady quietly and completely. No evidence whatsoever."

Clark nodded slowly. "But her body was found..."

"Hm, was it? Well, then I feel for the poor saps who did a sloppy job. The Big Boss does not accept sub-par work."

"Oh?"

"That's the most important thing you need to know here. Always do exactly what the Boss says."

"Who is the Big Boss?"

"Don't know, I've thankfully never met him. But there's an English guy who is usually the point of contact, providing instructions for jobs and giving payment to those who have carried them out."

"English guy?"

"Yeah. Old, a bit creepy," he said. "Goatee, big nose. Voice like some sort of old theatre actor. Once you hear it, you'll know what I mean."

"So you've seen him? Do you know where I could meet him or who I can ask to talk with him?"

"You're a pretty gutsy fella," he stated, stepping back to appraise him. "Well, I've never interacted with him directly, so I don't know, but I was there for one of the payoffs. We had roughed up a businessman a while back, some kind of turf dispute I think, and he brought us our money. As for who to talk to ... I hear you don't find them, they find you."

Clark nodded, knowing this was all he would be able to get from this guy. "Well, thank you, very much. Here, your next few drinks are on me."

The man grinned, accepting the small wad of cash. "No problem, no problem."

Clark stayed around a bit longer, not wanting to immediately leave in case anyone was watching him. He wouldn't want to make them think to question 'gentleman' specifically. This also allowed him to gain insight into other elements of the criminal underworld in Metropolis, which wasn't very encouraging. And it all centered around the Big Boss.

"Finished moving into your new office, Mayson?" Henderson asked, joining her in the hall.

"Yes, thank you," she said, happy to see a familiar face among so many others she didn't yet know.

"Good. Well, I managed to snag Mr. Kent. I heard you've wanted to meet him since you learned about the solving of the case, so I hope you don't mind me arranging the three of us dinner," he said, referencing the one case he would never need to identify by name with her.

The once cold case of Gregory Tibs, her high school sweetheart.

"Oh! No, no, of course not. I have no plans, as you know. Thank you. I can't wait to talk to him and not just to thank him," she said, falling into step beside him.

"Been hearing things about him in the grapevine, I take it?" Henderson asked, amused and not surprised.

"Hard not to, especially after what he did when he helped you arrest that scumbag," she said, referring to the sex trafficker, Jeffrey Grant. "Is it true Kent refused to be seen by the paramedics? He took four hits to his vest from what I heard, so—"

"Yeah, he got hit four times. I saw it myself. But the thing that you have to understand about Kent is that he is a very private person. He was seen by his personal physician, though, don't worry," Henderson explained as they got into his car.

Mayson hummed thoughtfully, feeling that Kent was more than private. Sounded like he was paranoid or something. Granted,

being a private investigator likely meant he had seen some crazy things. Probably doesn't like being seen by medical professionals he doesn't know and trust.

"Well, as long as he was checked out," she said, deciding everyone was allowed some eccentricities, especially if they did as much good as Kent clearly did.

They arrived at the restaurant, which was a simple diner on a corner. It was a quiet night, so they got in quickly and found Kent already waiting for them at a table in an empty area of the restaurant.

Approaching the table, Henderson quickly took the initiative to introduce Mayson to his friend as Kent stood up.

"Kent, Ms. Mayson Drake, our new assistant DA. Drake, Mr. Clark Kent, Private Investigator," Henderson introduced.

Shaking his hand, Mayson was struck by how downright attractive he was. It should be a crime to look that handsome!

"It's nice to finally meet you, Mr. Kent," she said, ignoring the subtle smirk Henderson was throwing her just out of Kent's view.

"Likewise," he said, making her heart skip a beat when a flash of recognition passed across his face. "You wouldn't happen to be the daughter of Detective Hubert Drake, would you?" It was hardly a question.

"Yes. Thank you for solving Greg's disappearance. As much as I wish it had ended differently, there is peace in knowing the truth," she said.

Kent gave a sad, sympathetic smile. "You're welcome. I'm glad I was able to bring you and everyone else involved some closure."

Just then, the waitress walked up and they sat down, breaking the solemn atmosphere. After a moment, the waitress took their order: burgers and fries for Clark and Henderson, a garden salad for Mayson.

"Bill tells me you're new to Metropolis. So, where did you move here from?" Kent asked once the waitress had left to retrieve their drinks.

"Boston, Massachusetts. Worked as a private lawyer for three years before helping with a few criminal cases and going from there to work for the D.A.," she said. "What about you?"

"I've done a lot of traveling working as a PI. I was also in the Air Force for a time. When my commission was up, I decided to settle here in Metropolis to return to investigative work."

Her eyes widened. "How long did you travel? Where have you visited?"

"Since I was eighteen, and pretty much everywhere. You can see a lot in five plus years," he said as the waitress set their drinks down before leaving once again with a promise that their meals would be out soon.

"How old were you when you solved your first case?" she asked, impressed.

"Eighteen," he answered, a little sheepishly.

"What?! You never told me that!" Henderson exclaimed.

"It was off the books. I asked the police chief to keep my involvement out of it, and he was fine with that. It was in China, so I can only imagine the legal and political implications if it became known that an American helped bring down a few sex trafficking rings." Kent took a drink, trying to ignore their stunned expressions.

"Kent, you are something else," Henderson said.

"So, what about you? What sort of cases do you focus on, Ms. Drake?" Kent asked, trying to shift the attention away from himself.

"Mayson, please."

"Alright. Then you can call me Clark," he said, happy to be getting along so well.

"Well, I focus on cases involving criminal organizations and homicides," Mayson answered.

"Which is the main reason why I wanted you two to meet," Henderson cut in. "Kent might have stumbled upon – as he apparently often does – some interesting information."

"Oh?" Mayson asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The Boss' ordered the murder of Miranda Fairchild," Clark answered softly. "And I have a lead on his right hand man."

"Should we be discussing this here?" Mayson asked, glancing around and finding the closest occupied table was well over four tables away, and the occupants didn't seem to care about them at all.

"We're alright talking here. I checked before you two arrived," Clark said confidently.

Mayson felt far more reassured than she expected. His tone held no hesitation, and she had the distinct feeling he was extremely experienced in verifying such things.

"Alright. So what do you have?" Mayson asked.

"Nothing that'll stand up in court yet, but I have a strong lead. I'll let you both know when I learn more, but I will say that if my suspicions are correct, the Boss is extremely powerful. We can't trust anyone, even those within the precinct."

"Then why are you trusting me by bringing me into this?" Mayson asked, a little disbelievingly.

"Henderson wouldn't introduce you to me like this if you couldn't be trusted, and I did a brief check on you during the case. You're trustworthy, although I should warn you that you especially need to be careful."

"What do you mean? Why should I be careful?" she asked.

Clark took a deep breath, glancing at Henderson. "This is dangerous knowledge, but I think it would be foolish to not tell you both. Have you heard of Intergang?"

Mayson froze, not expecting that at all while Henderson stiffened.

"They're suspected of being a secret international criminal organization," Mayson said. "I don't know a whole lot beyond that, other than how good they are at pulling the strings from a distance."

Clark nodded. "I don't know how much they are involved, but I have no doubt that the Churches, Bill Church Sr. in particular and perhaps his son, are connected to Intergang."

"What!?" Mayson all but shouted before quickly glancing around apologetically, but fortunately her outburst didn't seem to have caused that much of a disruption.

"I'll share with you what I have if you wish. Unfortunately it's mainly circumstantial, little things I've encountered in my travels throughout the years, but my gut, which has never failed me, is telling me there is more to the Churches than just being owners of a budding store empire. So please, just be careful and don't let anyone know you suspect anything about the Boss or Intergang."

"So you think the Boss is head of Intergang?" Henderson asked.

"No, I think they're rivals. As far as I've been able to determine, Intergang is barred from any influence in Metropolis by the Boss. The Boss is extremely possessive. If Intergang learns we have a lead on bringing him down, they might try to work a deal with him by warning him. Or worse, they might begin a turf war knowing he's about to be distracted by us," Clark warned.

Mayson slowly nodded. "Alright, I'll assume you're right and keep this close to my chest, but I want to know everything you know."

"As do I," Henderson said, a little irked in not being told about Intergang sooner.

"Of course," Clark said. "And I'm sorry for not telling you sooner, Bill, but it's not the sort of thing that's easily brought up."

Henderson nodded his forgiveness, acknowledging that Kent did tell him before too long. They had been forewarned, and thus, were forearmed.

Their food came out not long after, and then they were free to discuss again.

“Have you determined anything with the bombings?” Mayson asked Henderson.

Henderson nodded grimly. “We’re certain whoever is responsible was testing Superman.”

Mayson frowned, and she couldn’t keep the sliver of annoyance from her face upon hearing Superman’s name.

“Oh, Kent, you should know, Mayson doesn’t like Superman,” Henderson pointed out somewhat unnecessarily.

Mayson sighed at the true accusation. “It’s not that I don’t like him, I just don’t think anyone should operate without proper authorizations. I mean, what if he accidentally hurt someone, who is going to cover that? And does he know how to not contaminate evidence? And what about the legal implications of his involvement in a case, however minimal? If handled inappropriately – hello, mistrial anyone?”

“Well, in his defense, he’s been extremely helpful during the bombing investigation and, from the attempted bombing of the Messenger, he left the bomb components completely intact. He seems to know a thing or two about handling evidence.”

“But who is he? Why is he helping us?”

“Kent, any thoughts?” Henderson asked, noting his silence.

“I think those are valid points and questions, but I also know that much of that should be addressed pretty soon – if one of my contacts is correct. I won’t say much more than that, but Mayson, you’re not the only one who has those concerns, and I’d like to think Superman knows and understands that people are unsure about him.”

Henderson nodded thoughtfully. “Would make sense considering the few times I’ve interacted with him.”

Both Mayson and Clark perked up at that, wanting to hear his opinion of the flying man.

“So?” Mayson prompted.

“He’s very polite, always asked before doing anything, and was cooperative. He seemed to sense when people were uncomfortable in his presence and did his best to keep his distance while giving his statements.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear he’s considerate at least, but I hope he understands the precarious position he places law enforcement and my department in.”

“Oh, you don’t need to tell me, I’ve done plenty of paperwork concerning it already, but he has prevented a number of rapes and a few murders beyond his major rescues, so I think the few legal hiccups his presence causes may be a fair trade,” Henderson defended.

“I’m not saying he doesn’t do good. I’m just concerned. What if his presence causes criminals to be allowed to get off and they end up committing more crimes and hurt more people?” Mayson asked, knowing she was sounding a bit like an alarmist, but it was a legitimate fear.

Clark leaned forward, and she couldn’t turn away from his dark brown eyes.

“What would you do in his place?” he asked, his tone curious as much as serious. “If you were an alien, lived here in secret for many years, perhaps in fear of being discovered – because, come on, you’d be stupid not to be – but had these abilities to help people? Would you sit back while knowing you could save people’s lives?”

Mayson heaved a big sigh. “No, but I would also learn enough about a planet to understand the importance of its laws. No one should be above it or be allowed to operate outside of it, and if nothing is done, he could set a dangerous precedent,” she argued. “There must always be a system in place to hold people accountable or all of society will eventually pay for it.”

“I agree,” Clark said, smiling.

“Just like that?” Mayson asked, confused, having expected a

bit more of an argument.

“There’s a but,” Clark added.

“Of course.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Bill, but Superman has only stopped people from getting hurt and prevented suspects from leaving the scene until officers have arrived, which any civilian is technically allowed to do in such circumstances.”

“That’s right, and he has yet to interfere with petty crime. All of his actions have only been to safeguard someone’s life and physical well-being,” Bill explained.

Mayson frowned, not in disapproval, but in deep consideration. “I see.”

Bill beamed, quite pleased with himself as he finished off his burger.

Clark and Mayson both noticed.

“Why are you so pleased?” Mayson asked, a little annoyed because she had a strange feeling she had been set up in some way.

“I knew Kent here would be able to convince you to at least consider giving Superman a chance,” Henderson said, completely unapologetic.

“Fine. I’ll wait until this mysterious event Kent’s source referred to comes about before I decide how to feel, fair?” she relented.

“Yes,” Henderson said before he pulled out the mini menu by the salt and pepper. “So, dessert? How about a *Super* Creme Brulee?” he asked, reading the dessert’s name.

Mayson groaned at the not so subtle jab, but she had to admit, dessert did sound good.

Chapter 5 – Committee

Lois shook out her hands. She had made the deadline with her most recent story, but it had resulted in a hand cramp.

“Lois, a call for you. Line 2,” Jimmy called.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” she said as she picked up the phone.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Hi, Lois. It’s me, Earl,” the janitor from police headquarters said.

She immediately straightened in her chair. Earl rarely called her. He usually just waited for her to visit him to share any information since she met with him at least once a week.

“Hi, Earl. What’s up?” she asked conversationally.

“Headquarters just had a very interesting visitor: a process server, and I managed to overhear a bit of a conversation. Henderson was asked to give a letter to Superman the next time he sees him.”

“Do you know what the letter contains? He’s not being sued or something is he?” Lois asked, a little worried.

“He’s being invited to Congress,” Earl answered, quite pleased.

Lois was baffled. “Congress? Do you know why?”

“No clue, but it’s certainly something, ain’t it?” Earl was clearly enjoying himself. “Anyway, just thought you would like to know sooner rather than later.”

“Yes, thank you, Earl. I’ll be sure to bring your favorite donuts the next time I stop by,” Lois assured.

“Gracias, gracias,” Earl said playfully before he promptly hung up.

Clark scanned the letter bearing the seal of the United States Congress for a second time, unable to believe what he was reading.

Once he translated the extravagant diction and flowery language, the message was clear. He was to present himself before the members of Congress and state his intentions as well as answer some questions to clear up any misconceptions and fully define what he will and will not do.

“Well, Burton was right. This does make things ... interesting.”

He looked over at his globe sitting at the top of his bookshelf before turning back to one of the paragraphs in the letter and smiled.

Time to prepare.

Julie Heinz and Maverick Ervin had both been understandably flabbergasted that Superman wished to have them help run a non-profit organization with a talent agent named Murray Brown. If it hadn't been for Burton Newcomb, they would have assumed the call from 'Superman' was a prank.

But they suspected what Newcomb did for the government. It actually made sense that he would somehow know Superman. So they happily agreed to meet with Superman later that week and discuss particulars. They weren't sure if they would actually accept his offer of helping to run a non-profit, but it was worth seriously considering. Neither of them were content to live out their retirement years the same way a number of their peers did—playing Pinochle or Bridge as wrinkles multiplied.

Washington, D.C. teemed with activity, as it often did, particularly at the United States Capitol. However, today was different. Dozens of news crews were gathered throughout the bustling area, anticipation heavy in the air.

The world knew Superman had been invited to a special session of Congress, an Oversight Hearing to be exact. The senators were very tight-lipped on what the hearing would cover precisely, but it was clear that they wanted Superman's intentions spelled out, which was just as well.

Senator Nathan Daniels was waiting anxiously in his dark brown business suit and wing tipped shoes, though no one would know by looking at him. Standing at the bottom of the steps to the US House of Representatives, Daniels smiled at those he saw, ever charismatic and regal, even to those he didn't particularly like.

He smiled, this time to himself. It was nice when he and his political opponents actually agreed on something, and it was even better when he was the instigator of that something.

When General Newcomb had called his office, he wasn't too enthused with actually answering. After the fiasco with Trask and his followers, he was still feeling the impact years later. He had ended up pulling in a lot of favors to ensure the truth wasn't distorted by those who wanted to exploit the resulting fallout – all while protecting classified information – which had not won him many friends or allies. He hoped the results of today would help restore a bit of his lost influence while making sure Superman remained a benefit to the world. Inwardly, he shook his head. He had to give it to the old general, he knew politics very well, but he clearly knew national security even more. Superman was a resource they had to hold on to while keeping a watchful eye on. This meeting, with any luck, would accomplish both.

As the clock struck 9 am, all foot and vehicle traffic came to a sudden halt when a red and blue form descended from the sky and landed several paces from the steps beside Senator Daniels.

News crews quickly began filming if they weren't already as everyone, security included, bolstered their nerves and tried to look calm or at least not utterly awestruck. Many failed. They all watched Superman begin making his way to the stone stairs, their eyes quickly taking notice of a bluish sphere he carried in his right hand.

“Superman, I am Senator Nathan Daniels,” Daniels said, holding out his hand as he politely intercepted him at the bottom of the steps.

Superman smiled and shook his hand firmly but not overly so as an excited crowd began forming a distance behind him.

“Nice to meet you, Senator. Are you here to escort me to the Oversight Hearing?” he asked.

“If you would be agreeable,” Daniels said amiably.

“Of course,” Superman said as they started making their way up the steps side by side.

Daniels wasn't sure if he was relieved or annoyed that everyone was keeping their distance, including the reporters. Of course, this was *Superman*, and standing next to him now ... his frame just seemed to ebb power.

The only thing that kept Daniels steady was his experience in dealing with powerful people on the daily basis and the fact that he himself was not exactly a small fish.

“The hearing will be in Room 216 of the Hart Senate Office Building, so we will be taking the scenic route through the tunnels,” Daniels explained as they made their way up to the grand entrance.

As they entered, people stopped and stared. Daniels glanced at Superman and was intrigued to find that he appeared a little uncomfortable. He wasn't sweating, but there was a stiffness to his posture and a tightness to his mouth that suggested nervousness or at the very least unease while passing so many awestruck people. Daniels couldn't help but feel reassured. As most sensible people, Daniels was a bit skeptical about someone so powerful being as selfless and helpful as Superman was making himself out to be, but this ... it indicated to Daniels that, Man of Steel or not, the flying man wasn't actually emotionless and his statements to Lois Lane from the Daily Planet had been genuine.

That was why so many senators, himself included, wanted to have Superman be escorted the 'long way' to the hearing instead of simply have him arrive outside the Hart Senate Office Building. They had wanted him to be exposed to the grandeur that was the Capitol and what was the United States government, not to mention the human factor—which was what they were just beginning to experience now.

“Sir, can you identify this object, please?” the guard asked at security, indicating the globe Superman was carrying.

“Yes. It's a family heirloom that will help answer some questions at the hearing,” Superman answered, holding it up as it transformed from a strange red and blue planetary body to the recognizable blue and green surface of the earth.

“Oh, thank you,” the guard said, thoroughly impressed as they waved them through.

They then made their way down several elaborate halls and finally to the stairs that was one of the entry points to the underground tunnel system.

“This way,” Daniels said, somewhat unnecessarily as they entered the crowded shuttle that would take them to the Hart Senate Building.

The dozen or so people in the shuttle with them stared at Superman with wide eyes for a long moment before one brave man straightened and held out his hand as the tunnel train began moving.

“Pleased to meet you, Superman. Thank you for doing what you do,” he said. He had a badge indicating he was a clerk.

Superman shook his hand, relaxing. “You're welcome.”

Soon after, everyone else seemed to have gotten over their uncertainty and excitedly thanked Superman and offered their hands. Superman, surprised but happy, managed to shake all of their hands before he and Daniels had to get off.

The halls all along the way to Room 216 quickly became packed as word spread that Superman had arrived. People lined against the walls to let him and Daniels pass, but practically everyone was eager to catch a glimpse and were hopeful that they would get to shake the Kryptonian's hand.

Daniels entered Room 216 and stepped aside for Superman before too long. People were already congregating and getting ready within but were quickly distracted by Superman's arrival. The cameras from above captured it all, which was a very interesting sight. Superman, with his bright uniform a stark

contrast from the mostly black and brown dress suits, slowly and courteously made his way to the front witness table Daniels indicated to him. Carefully, Superman placed the globe on the desk and took his seat.

The chamber quieted and everyone, including Daniels, had taken their places as it became apparent the hearing was ready to begin. The chairman cleared his throat, straightening in his seat, clearly feeling the weight of the moment. The lights glared off his bald head as he smiled. He had a white goatee and a tight blue tie around his light blue, collared shirt.

Clark forced himself not to fidget, as he knew it wouldn't appear very Superman-like.

He had gone over his plan with his parents and with Burton. They all had their reservations but did see the golden opportunity it provided him—assuming it worked.

"I'd like to call the hearing to order. And I'd like to welcome our sole witness today: Superman — thank you for being here with us this morning. Before I make my remarks, I would like to ask Superman to formally introduce himself for the record," Chairman Lee said, motioning Superman to do so.

Superman gave an understanding nod and leaned toward the microphone. "My name is Kal-El, formally Lord Kal-El, son of Lord Jor-El and Lady Lara of the House of El."

"Thank you," Chairman Lee said, not the only one intrigued by Superman's words. "For the duration of this hearing, how would you prefer to be addressed?"

"In light of the outcome that I'm hoping to achieve from this hearing, I prefer to be addressed by the name the people of Earth have given me — Superman."

"Very well," Lee said with a nod before he resumed. "Over the past few weeks, the world has been mystified and grateful for the rescues done by Superman, but some concerns and inquiries have risen and that is the purpose of this hearing—to ask and discuss these questions and determine if any action is warranted to address them. This is an important public discussion, but I want to make something very clear. There is no indication that Superman has done anything wrong. In all reports around the world, Superman has conducted himself with efficient care to save as many lives as possible. So let me be the first here to publicly thank you, Superman. Thank you," he said, before looking to the Vice Chairman. "I turn to the Vice Chairman Par for any additional comments."

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman," she said. "I'd like to second Mr. Chairman's comments and share some figures I was just given this morning by the Department of Defense. Seven million, three hundred and twenty-one thousand, four hundred and twenty-four. That is the number of American citizens we know who have been saved by Superman these past six months. World-wide, the number of lives saved climbs to eight million, four hundred and one thousand, two hundred and seven. And that is just what we know through gathering eye witness accounts, emergency reports and the like. I can only imagine what the true number is, knowing rescues have been occurring in secret for well over five years — according to Lois Lane of the Daily Planet and our own determinations." Vice Chairman Par smiled at Superman. "If the numbers are any indication, we are fortunate to have you here. I am hopeful that our future together will be bright. I return the floor to Mr. Chairman."

"Thank you," Lee said. "At this time, I'd like to swear in our witness. If I could ask you to stand and raise your right hand?"

Superman did so.

"Do you solemnly swear to give this committee the truth, the full truth and nothing but the truth so help you G-d?" Lee asked.

"I do," Superman said.

"Please be seated," Lee said before taking a brief pause.

"Superman, is there anything you would like to state before we

begin our questions?"

"Yes, thank you," Superman said as he took a moment to look at each of the panel members before him. "First, I'd like to thank you all for inviting me here. When I received the invitation to this hearing, there was no question of whether or not I should accept. I've lived on Earth for many years now and have impacted the lives of many people, in what I hope has only been in a positive way, so I will take whatever questions that you have for me and answer them as best I can. In light of how you have gracefully received me and how dozens of your people have helped me throughout the years, I can do no less. I am done hiding what I am, and I am ready to fully become part of this world — my adopted home. Thank you."

There were soft murmurs throughout the room, but they quickly quieted as Lee gave a thoughtful nod and looked to a man at the end of the committee table. "I'd like to recognize the senator of Nebraska first. The floor is yours," Lee said.

After saying the customary pleasantries, the senator addressed Superman directly.

"Superman, according to the interview you gave to Daily Planet reporter, Lois Lane, you stated you were a refugee from the planet Krypton. Superman, as difficult as I imagine this question is for you to answer, could you tell us what brought you to Earth and what happened to Krypton?"

"Yes," Superman answered, not needing to look around to know everyone was eager to hear his answer. "If I could be permitted, I think it would be easier to share a compilation of some of my father's messages to help answer."

"You have permission," Lee quickly allowed.

Lifting the globe from the table, Superman looked at the men and women directly before him.

"I left Krypton as a child, placed in a rocket of my father's design, and, as one of my parents' precautions, they made this for me to fully explain to me where I came from," he said, motioning to the orb with his free hand.

"Now don't be alarmed. It's merely a recording in the form of a hologram." He opened his hand, releasing his grip on the now glowing orb and allowing it to rise above his palm.

The whole chamber startled when a man materialized between the witness table and the chairman and began to speak.

"My name is Jor-El. And you are Kal-El, my son. The object you possess has been attuned to you," the translucent man said, before his image shimmered and shifted into a scene of him and a woman working diligently on some unknown technology.

"Time grows short and we continue to search. The immensity of space is both a blessing and a curse. In that near infinite variety, there must be some place suitable," Jor-El explained. "Lara works by my side. She is tireless and endlessly patient. Considering what is soon to come, this is my greatest consolation: that we are together."

A tremor suddenly rocked the lab as the console flared. Jor-El took Lara in his arms, and they waited until it subsided.

"There is no longer any doubt. The chain reaction has begun. As panic spreads, the population awakens, too late, to its fate. Our future is inevitable," he said heavily before the view changed again, this time to a screen showing what could only be Earth.

"At last the computers have located a suitable destination: a planet physically and biologically compatible with Krypton whose inhabitants resemble ours, and whose society is based on ethical standards which we, too, embrace in concept, if not always in deed.

"We give you to Earth. Remember us, but do not regret our passing. All is fate."

The light from the globe faded, and it levitated back down onto Superman's hand. The whole room was silent as dozens of cameras throughout continued to broadcast around the world.

"Krypton used to be 27.1 light-years from Earth, in the

southern constellation of Corvus, orbiting Rao—the red dwarf star your astronomers know as LHS 2520. Unfortunately, Krypton’s core had become unstable and ultimately resulted in its destruction. All that remains there now is a green cloud of planetary debris.” Superman swallowed and looked down at the red and green globe in his hand.

“And you have not heard from any other survivors?” the senator asked after a long moment.

“No.” He clenched his jaw, and even the hardest hearts in the room felt sympathy toward him.

“As inadequate as they may be, you have our condolences for the loss of your world and people.”

“Thank you. It is not something I allow myself to think about much. My parents saved my life and sent me here to live and to live well. I wouldn’t be able to do that if I allowed myself to dwell on what I cannot change. Earth is my home now,” he said, shedding the sense of melancholy from his frame as someone would a cloak. It was really quite remarkable.

Impressed by his emotional resilience, the senator decided to follow Superman’s approach.

“Although I wish circumstances were different, I for one am glad you consider Earth your home. I now yield back,” the senator from Nebraska said.

“Thank you. I would like to recognize the senator of Florida. You have the floor,” Lee said, nodding to a middle-aged man a few seats to his left.

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Superman, when did you arrive on Earth?” the senator from Florida asked.

“I will have to decline from giving the exact date, but I will say it was over fifteen years ago,” Superman answered, causing many to gasp at the unexpected and much longer time frame.

“What is your reason for not giving a direct answer?” the man asked, surprise clear in his voice.

“I will not directly answer questions that may risk the safety of those who have cared for me over the years,” Superman answered, his voice unwavering. “I am not naive enough to believe I have not made enemies in stopping the occasional bomb or protecting people from those who meant them harm – not to mention the likelihood of there being people out there who hate me simply for being what I am. Maybe one day I will feel able to answer, but until then, this is the best I can do. Please accept that.”

“Very well. Let us change topics then. To put things simply, what are all of your special abilities?” he asked, not too upset by the previous refusal, especially since he had more pressing questions to have answered.

“Well, I haven’t really named them, but to summarize: strength, endurance, speed, flight, heat vision, x-ray vision, near-invulnerability, cold breath, eidetic memory, and enhanced senses. Hm, I think that’s all of them,” he said before pausing and then nodding. “Yeah, that’s all of them.”

“X-ray vision?” the senator asked, a little perturbed.

“Helps a lot in finding people under fallen buildings and the like,” Superman answered simply. “Rest assured, I only use it when I really need to and when I have reason to look.”

“I see. Do you know how strong and fast you are?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never failed at lifting anything, and I can go faster than the speed of sound, but I’ve never really timed myself.”

“What do you mean by ‘near-invulnerability?’”

“The only thing that has ever penetrated my skin has been my heat vision, so although I can’t say I’m actually invulnerable, I pretty much am.”

The man nodded in amused understanding while adding, “As you’re not going to actively hurt yourself.” He shuffled through some papers. “Well, the heat vision certainly explains how you prevented cameras from capturing your image when you had saved the Messenger.”

“Yes. I do apologize. I try to avoid damaging property, but at the time I felt it best to remain hidden.”

The man waved away his concerns. “A few cameras in exchange for the continuation of an entire space program is more than fair. If EPRAD ever sends you a bill, forward it to me,” he assured.

No one knew if he was joking or serious.

“I return the floor to Mr. Chairman,” he said.

“Thank you. We will take a brief recess and reconvene at 11:05,” Lee said before standing.

Lois watched the hearing as avidly as everyone else was at the Daily Planet.

“So people have cared for Superman? As in, ‘looked after’ him? Did I understand that right?” Jimmy asked, coming up beside her as the chairman called for a brief recess.

“Well, he was sent here as a child, arrived here over fifteen years ago, and he can’t be over 30 – assuming he ages like we do – so it stands to reason he would have needed someone to help him when he was younger,” Cat put in. “Find food, get shelter, etcetera. We also have to remember that he could have landed anywhere and received help from anyone. Who knows, maybe he lived in the jungles of Brazil with the secluded tribes there before venturing out. After all, I can’t imagine him landing near modern civilization. Any modern government would have been all over him.”

Lois frowned. It was possible, she supposed, but from the few times he had spoken to her, he had seemed quite, well, civilized and relatable. Granted, fifteen years was a long time to become acquainted with customs of many different types of people, especially when one could fly wherever and whenever they wanted.

“I wonder how young he was when he got here,” Jimmy said. “But there’s also the issue of space travel. Krypton was over 20 light years away. Maybe he grew up on his spaceship?”

“Hm, if that’s the case, he seems really well adjusted to have been alone for so long, but he is an *alien*,” an intern said somewhere behind them.

Lois inwardly stiffened at the girl’s tone. Fortunately for the girl, the chairman returned and everyone else in the chamber was retaking their seats, including Superman.

“I’d like to call the hearing back to order. The Chair would recognize Senator Jones for questions,” Lee said, getting straight to business.

“Thank you,” Jones said, quickly turning his attention to Superman. He put his hands on the table before him, his eyes piercing. “Superman, I’m going to be brutally honest with you, because I know I’m not the only one who feels this way – you terrify me.”

The room went utterly still, and all eyes were instantly on Superman, whose expression had fallen to sad acceptance. Lois’ heart clenched and several around her stiffened as their eyes remained glued to the screen.

“By your own admittance – not to mention what we have all seen on international television – your speed and strength is unmatched, and you are effectively invincible. By all definitions, you are a god among men. What’s stopping you from taking over? Why are you choosing to help us? What’s the catch?” Jones asked, his tone bordering on harsh.

“What’s stopping me?” Superman asked before taking a deep breath. “Physically? Nothing.” Superman looked at the panel of people unflinchingly. Several of them swallowed. “Why do you think I remained hidden for so long? I knew I would frighten people. Not merely because of what I am or what I’ve done, but because of what I **could** do.”

He sighed and closed his eyes for a few seconds before continuing. “When I realized that I was the most powerful man on

this world, I had to make a decision: whether my powers stood for destruction or for life ... and I chose life.

“Why? Because when I save a life, in that instant, I know two things most people will never figure out: why I’m here and how I can make a difference,” he said, his eyes as hard as steel. “That is something I would never be able to experience if I took over and claimed some sort of egotistical godhood.

“As for a catch, there is none. I don’t expect you to believe me right away. I understand it will take time and that all I can do is show you I am telling the truth by my actions. I just want to live here in peace and use my abilities to contribute to the well-being of others.”

Jones stared at him in surprise, quite stunned by his words and tone before collecting himself.

“Thank you for your thorough answer. I hope you truly are as good as you sound,” Jones said. “I yield the floor.”

“Thank you. I would like to recognize Senator Prin. You have the floor,” Lee said.

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman,” she said, her big hair bouncing above her slender shoulders. “Superman, I must admit I hold the same reservations as Senator Jones, but like all members of this committee, I am hopeful for the future and your part in it. So, to help us better understand your perspective, what is it that you hope will come about from this hearing? Is there anything specific that you would want or would suggest moving forward?”

“Well, I hope the fears that people have about me will begin to diminish, first and foremost. Second, I think implementing two of the proposals I’ve overheard on the news and the like would be a good idea,” Superman said, to the obvious interest of several committee members. “The first concerns setting clear expectations between myself and emergency personnel so that we can work together more efficiently. This, I believe, should include myself becoming officially authorized to be a first responder. I understand there have been questions on my ability to render first aid and whether or not I know what to do if I were to come across someone who has a broken back or some other condition that would make moving them unwise. I want to put these fears to rest, and I am willing to complete any training or certification tests required.

“The second is a contract of sorts with law enforcement. My priority will always be saving those in danger, and as such I will undoubtedly occasionally intercept those breaking the law. I don’t have the authority – nor want the authority – to arrest people, but I also want to ensure no one escapes Justice. I would like to work with law enforcement while keeping my focus on helping with accidents and emergencies,” he said before relaxing back against the chair.

“Those suggestions certainly have merit, and in the coming days we will be sure to discuss them. I’m relieved to see you seek to work within our systems and understand the reasons for our concerns. I am also pleased by your proactive approach to help address potential issues and prevent foreseeable problems. Thank you.” She looked at the chairman. “I now yield the floor.”

“Thank you. I now would like to recognize one of the individuals responsible for this hearing to the floor, Senator Daniels.”

“Thank you,” Daniels said, inwardly pleased by the recognition. “Superman, I have been reassured by your answers today, as well as how you reacted to those around you on our way here this morning. I could tell you were not very comfortable with the attention, but you seemed to relax when you were welcomed. It is clear to me that you are telling the truth. You just want acceptance and to be allowed to contribute something to the world. So I would like to broach the subject of the technology you showed and mentioned to us. Without sounding too presumptuous, how much would you be willing to tell us about your people’s technology?” he asked delicately.

“In time, I could see myself sharing everything that I know and have with Earth concerning Krypton’s technology,” Superman answered to the astonishment and glee of many. “Admittedly, I’m not a scientist and did not receive a full Kryptonian education, so my working knowledge is limited, but I have no doubt that what I do know could be beneficial. I know how my spacecraft’s engine works, for example.”

“Alright, Superman!” Jimmy exclaimed before quickly being shushed by those around him.

“What do you think you would be able to help us with specifically?” Daniels asked, very pleased with the possibility of new and advanced technologies within their reach.

“Space exploration, energy generation, transference and storage, holograms, and matter teleportation, just to name a few. Please understand I don’t have the means to produce anything of note at this moment simply because I don’t have access to required materials and processes, and I’m not sure when Earth will be able to create what is needed. However, if the current trend of technological advances continue, I suspect some aspects of Kryptonian technology could be implemented within certain industries within the next twenty years.”

“You sound like you’ve already given this a lot of thought,” Daniels said, impressed and barely suppressing his excitement.

“Yes, especially for the last several weeks. I—” Superman tilted his head, his gaze panning off from the committee table and to the top left corner behind them. His eyes seemed to glaze over, as if seeing something far off, although they didn’t seem to focus on anything.

“Superman?” Chairman Lee asked, growing concerned after a few seconds of seeing his blank stare.

“I request a thirty minute recess. Flight 68 has sent out a mayday and is falling over Maryland,” Superman stated, standing up.

Gasps of astonishment echoed throughout as Lee quickly answered, “Granted.”

A rush of wind whirled around the still chamber as Superman’s form promptly vanished, startling everyone, before a sonic boom roared loudly over Washington D.C.. It was so loud that it was heard through television sets.

“Great shades of Elvis!” Perry White bellowed. “Greg, find Flight 68’s itinerary. Lois—”

“Already writing!” she shouted from her desk as someone changed the channel to LNN.

Flight 68 was, in fact, plummeting to the earth.

Clark flew faster than he ever had in his entire life. He was flying so fast he couldn’t even make out the radio calls anymore. And then he saw it.

The 747’s most starboard engine was in flames, trailing a dense plume of black smoke behind it. The plane began to tilt, rolling right and down.

He shot forward, curving around and under it as the city buildings below came into view. He inhaled a sharp breath and targeted the engulfed engine, snuffing out the fire and quieting the smoke that quickly turned gray and white under his frost.

He flew beneath, positioning his upper back and shoulders against the smooth metal of the plane’s belly as it continued to roll. His right hand bit into the metal as he quickly peered through it to ensure he gripped a structural beam as he forced the entire 747 level again. The metal groaned.

Ignoring the screaming coming from inside the fuselage, Clark focused on what was ahead. He pushed the aircraft up, not wanting it to descend any further due to the skyscrapers they were approaching.

“Flight 68, maintain any altitude above 3000. You are now coming above the city,” Clark overheard from the radio. “Speed is your discretion.”

“Understood,” the pilot replied, sounding out of breath.

“What is your status, Flight 68?”

“Number four engine failure. Part of the wing has been damaged as well. We have been having difficulty maintaining altitude and roll stability, but we seem to have re-established control for the moment.”

“Is your engine on fire?”

“It was, but it’s out now.”

“Thank you. Alter your heading to 280. Winds at 270. Report when airport is in sight. The skies have been cleared for your approach.”

“Roger.”

Clark adjusted his trajectory, helping the aircraft turn.

“Why are we able to maneuver this easily?” the co-pilot asked aloud.

“I don’t know, but I certainly believe in guardian angels now,” the pilot answered.

Clark supported the plane all the way to the airport, and along the way more and more people on the ground noticed.

“Look! It’s Superman and Flight 68!” a pedestrian called out from the street far below, no doubt spotting his red cape and the faint smoke trail still coming from the destroyed engine.

“He actually got to it in time!”

“Good Lord, how fast is he? He left D.C. a few minutes ago! It’s amazing!”

The airport came into view and before long he could hear and see air traffic control directing other flights away from them to allow them to land.

“Flight 68, you are cleared visual approach 2-1 Right,” Air Traffic Control directed.

The runway finally came into sight.

“Flight 68, we have learned Superman is beneath you and now have a visual of this,” Air Traffic stated.

“Didn’t quite get that, Control, could you repeat?” the pilot asked.

“We have a visual of Superman on your belly,” Air Traffic stated.

“Oh. Suggestions on how to proceed?”

“Keep with standard procedure. Lower landing gear and prepare for landing,” Air Traffic advised, despite being a bit bewildered themselves.

“Roger.”

The landing gear began to come down, but then suddenly the right one jammed and wouldn’t lock down.

“Air Traffic Control, the right landing gear won’t engage. Repeat, red light on the right landing gear,” the pilot stated.

Clark heard the co-pilot muffle a curse.

“Copy Flight 68. Has the left engaged?”

“Yes.”

“Flight 68, we have a visual. The right wheel does not appear down. What is your current fuel status?”

“One hour of fuel. Will abort landing to double back. Attempting to lift landing gear and re-lower.”

“Copy. Speed and Altitude at your discretion, but advise minimum 170 kno—”

Clark didn’t hear the rest as a jarring noise rang sharply in his ears. Clark turned in alarm as he heard a loud pop and the sound of ignition. Like the start of a grill with a bit too much lighter fluid.

He acted instinctively as he peered through the thin metal of the aircraft, seeing a now burning pool of jet fuel near the wingbox of the plane that had apparently leaked from one of the many fuel tanks due to engine number four’s explosive failure. The fire shot up, leading up into the wing where the leak originated.

He let go of the 747, knowing he had no moment to spare a second thought and no time to second guess what he was about to do.

He ripped off the wing and ruthlessly threw the entire thing,

complete with the two jet engines (one of them beyond repair), far above him as the fire engulfed the bleeding tank. He didn’t bother to see how high it went or wonder how far it would go as he turned back to the now rapidly plummeting crippled plane.

He blew out the remaining fire at the jagged metal protruding from the bottom of the fuselage where the wing had attached and took hold. He reared back sharply, gripping the metal tightly and leveling the plane before it could fully roll into a side dive. He could barely hear anything thanks to his thundering heart, but his fear didn’t drown out the furious roar that suddenly rocked overhead and behind them.

If he had looked, he would have seen the severed wing now in flaming pieces and falling back to Earth over the lawn and runways of the airport, but he had more important things to do.

He slowed the broken airplane as quickly as he dared and stabilized its decline. The absolute horror of the passengers was like a dull thrum of bizarre encouragement to him. If they were screaming, it meant they were still alive and could still be saved.

He didn’t bother to fully align the airplane with the runway as he made his approach. The airplane wasn’t really moving forward anyway, but it was more like a lopsided crab gliding sideways—or perhaps like a drunk goose with an amputated wing.

His feet touched down, and he took a few dozen steps before bringing the jet to a complete stop on the tarmac, forgoing the landing gear while easing it down on its belly and allowing it to tilt and rest slightly on its remaining wing. After a few moments, the emergency slides inflated and soon emergency vehicles were racing to meet them. Taking a few steps away from the now busy scene, he took a moment to simply look around. He could see masses of people pressing themselves against the large windows overlooking the airport’s many runways and celebrating as emergency crews swarmed the people pouring from the plane. He felt the eyes of thousands of people on his form as he glanced back at the organized chaos that had commenced. In less than a second, he checked all of the passengers and crew, finding a dozen had broken bones and that many more would be feeling tender for the foreseeable future. But they were all alive.

Tears of joy and cries of thanks soon echoed from around the formerly doomed craft, and Clark couldn’t help but release a huge sigh of relief at the fact it was over.

Lois was ready for the weekend even though it had been a wonderful week. There had certainly not been a shortage of stories to report on. So many things had happened that her hands were actually a little sore from typing.

Along with the typical news, there was the ongoing Oversight Hearing about Superman and his activities. Each session was full of awe inspiring quotes, answers begging for more questions to be asked, and discussions rich with purpose and feeling. And through it all, the growing love the American people and the world had for Superman was evident, particularly after the heart pounding rescue of Flight 68.

The video of him ripping off the wing mid-air moments before it exploded and saving the remains of the 747 was still being shown on news stations, along with clips of the Hearing thus far.

Lois’ heart still swelled when she thought about his responses to their questions, both verbal and not, as some of his facial expressions were words unto themselves.

She couldn’t wait for the Hearing to recommence and conclude the following week.

The final session of the Oversight Hearing had arrived and was coming to an end. After a rehashing of everything they had discussed, as well as long winded speeches of thanks and acknowledgments, the chairman took the floor to give the committee’s closing words.

Clark, as Superman, straightened behind the witness table in anticipation, long since deciding Superman was allowed to occasionally look less than stoic.

“Superman, I know I speak for everyone when I once again say, thank you for your time and being so forthright in your answers. I also thank you immensely for saving so many lives throughout the years you have been here in secret and since Prometheus,” Lee said. He smiled warmly before taking a moment to look at his fellows in a visible form of unanimous agreement. He then focused back on Superman. “So it is with great pride and confidence that I say the following: after much discussion and consideration, this committee advises that, moving forward, Congress should formally give Lord Kal-El, aka Superman, honorary United States citizenship. This committee also recommends a Ratification Hearing follow to negotiate a treaty between the United States and Lord Kal-El of Krypton to formalize official permission and authority to provide emergency assistance anywhere within US territory, along with other pertinent agreements concerning Kryptonian technology and, however unlikely, future interactions between our two peoples should any other survivors of Krypton come to Earth.”

Even if Clark had not decided to allow Superman to be somewhat expressive, he would have failed to contain his surprise and joy.

He had anticipated some form of plan moving forward for him to have official permission to continue his rescue activities, but this was beyond anything he had ever imagined.

“I am sure Congress will be in contact with you, Superman, thank you again. This hearing is now adjourned,” Lee said, clearly quite pleased.

Chapter 6a – New Routine

Congress moved astonishingly quick after the Oversight Hearing, and before the end of the week Superman had become an honorary citizen of the United States and a Treaty had been drafted.

Soon after news of his honorary U.S. citizenship came out, dozens of other nations followed suit, sending out their own formal declarations. By the end of the week, he was an honorary citizen of several dozen countries and the United Nations was now requesting talks with him and for the treaty between him and the US not be signed so that a worldwide treaty could be made with him instead. It was argued that Superman had stated Earth was his home, not just a single country, which was a valid argument.

However, this did open a Pandora’s box – after all, each country had their own set of laws and code of ethics. Things the United States would be happy to have Superman involve himself with would never be allowed in other countries, particularly nations that did not ensure standard human rights for their citizens. And the other issue was, should Superman involve himself with such nations? Not to mention the whole nightmare that was politics.

It was then that Clark decided he needed to set a flat code of conduct he would hold himself to no matter the country, and if a nation did not agree with this code, they could request he stay outside of their borders, which he would honor. It was the best thing he could think of while ensuring his image remained untarnished.

The world accepted his Code of Conduct, which could be described simply as his oath to only peacefully enter countries to save lives threatened by accidents or natural disasters. He would carry out no other actions unless with the explicit permission of that nation’s government.

He kept war, politics, and law out of it completely.

The glorious part of this code was that any country that might have outright refused him were now strongly discouraged from doing so because of how it would make them appear. Refusing his

code would mean they were alright with allowing their people to die in instances where they could have been saved.

As for anything beyond the code a nation wished to implement, the final outcome fell to the treaty that quickly became termed as ‘the Treaty of El’.

“Honey, this has ballooned well beyond your initial expectations. It has certainly blown apart mine,” Martha said, skimming the treaty he had just been given to review by the U.N..

“Yeah, Mom, but at least this way I have some control and input. And it protects us,” he said, a little exasperated.

Admittedly, they were a little overwhelmed by it all.

“It does,” Jonathan relented. “But son, do you know what you’re doing? Do you really want this much influence?”

“I don’t think I have much choice, Dad. Even if I didn’t make a code or sign a treaty, my decisions would still receive the same amount of attention and scrutiny,” Clark said.

“You’re right, Clark. This is just a lot to take in.” Martha went on to the next page of the treaty. “I’m just glad you’re staying out of politics and keeping your focus on rescue efforts. Anything more and I think some countries would become hostile,” Martha said before looking at another sheet on the table.

She began reading the list of countries where Lord Kal-El of the House of El, born of Krypton, now had honorary citizenship.

“One hundred and seventy nine,” Jonathan said in awe. “As overwhelming as all of this is, it really is amazing to see how much the world has accepted you.”

Clark smiled softly. “A relief you mean.”

“Well. ...”

“It’s okay, Dad. I agree with you,” he said before looking over his mom’s shoulder to review the next portion. “Well, at least there’s only ten pages.”

“Yes. They certainly took your request for a short treaty to heart,” Martha agreed.

“Are you going to announce the creation of your foundation before or after the signing of the treaty?” Jonathan asked, knowing that was the second thing occupying his son’s mind.

“After. I don’t want to distract from the treaty,” Clark answered with certainty. “It’ll also give Ms. Lane some time to get things set up with the editor of the Daily Planet.”

Martha smirked to herself before turning her attention back to Clark.

“Which reminds me – your suit for the signing. I’ve finished the design,” she said.

“Martha, is that really necessary? Why can’t he just wear what he’s been wearing as Superman so far? I doubt the world will mind,” Jonathan put in, taking pity on his son.

Martha refrained from rolling her eyes. “He is signing a treaty with well over one hundred and fifty sovereign nations; I think this warrants a bit more decorum than merely being present in his typical attire. Sure, he could probably get away with wearing his usual suit, but wearing a special one will signify that he appreciates the enormity of this event; besides, when you get down to it, he’s not just signing it as Kal-El, but as a representative of the Kryptonian people,” she said before taking a deep breath and placing her hand gently on Clark’s arm.

Clark nodded solemnly. “You’re right. Whether or not there are any other Kryptonians out there, I am representing my people. But this suit, it’s not too ... extravagant is it?” he asked, a little uneasy.

“No, dear. It’s still based on your original suit, I’ve just added some Kryptonian flare. Borders, really. Come on, I’ll show you,” she said, handing the treaty over to Jonathan.

Clark followed her uncertainly, but as Martha rolled out the sheet of paper she had sketched the altered design on, he was instantly reassured.

With his normal suit as the template, tight red and gold cuffs accented in sapphire blue were on the wrists, extending slightly

over the top of the hands in a gentle ‘V’ shape. On his boots, an inch from the top rim, had a thin line of gold all around, and the toe tips were blue with a matching strip of gold as a border between the blue and the red. The third and last change was to his cape, where the bottom edge now had a trim of blue sewn on with golden thread.

“Do you like it?” she asked, hopeful.

Clark nodded, impressed and a bit surprised that it actually worked. As loud as his suit already was, the additions somehow gave it a regal aspect without tipping it into the gaudy and brass.

“I think this will work,” he said with a smile. “Thanks, Mom.”

Mayson sighed as she put down the latest report and rubbed her eyes.

She was grateful that it was Friday, and the weekend would be spent at home with a few good movies. She needed to decompress.

She glanced at the TV in her office. It was muted, but she didn’t need any volume to know what, or rather who, they were talking about.

The signing of the Treaty of El was international news and was being televised as much as the initial appearance of Superman had been if not more. She wasn’t sure what to think about it all, but it was reassuring to have a clear outline of what to expect when it came to Superman. She had to give it to him, he had reassured a lot of people by his apparent openness and desire to go the official route. It had even made her initial reservations about him fade a bit, even though the cynical side of her remained leery. He was just too good to be true. Here was a god in a cape willing to go out of his way to help mankind as lawfully as possible (after being discovered) without expecting anything in return, other than being allowed to continue living on Earth—which he could do with or without permission.

‘Granted, that’s probably an oversimplification,’ Mayson grudgingly thought to herself as she focused back on the television screen.

A clip of the treaty signing came on, showing Elias Olafsson, the current Speaker of the United Nations, shake hands with the Man of Steel who had even altered his uniform slightly for the grand occasion.

It all was really quite impressive and inspiring if she were honest. Reservations aside, everything was conducted so elegantly and was the definition of class. For once, the vast majority of the entire world agreed on something good.

She watched, for what must have been the fifth time since it first aired, Superman receive a gift from the United Nations: a golden capelet covered in emblems of all of the world’s participating nations (which was the vast, *vast* majority). He accepted it reverently and allowed Olafsson to place it around his shoulders and secure it at the front.

Mayson really hoped this ‘Lord Kal-El’ was legit and wasn’t some kind foreign agent planning an elaborate ruse for something heinous like a world takeover.

She gave a mental snort, acknowledging she was being a bit ridiculous. If Superman had wanted to rule the world, he would have done so already. Perhaps she was working too hard or wasn’t getting enough sleep.

Okay, she definitely wasn’t getting enough sleep.

Since that meal with Henderson and Kent, or Clark rather, she had been distracted. Troubled.

She had no doubt Clark had been serious and likely correct about his claims, both about the Boss and Intergang. She knew enough about him to know he didn’t form outlandish theories and he was no doubt good at what he did. He had solved Greg’s disappearance, after all.

But that aside, when she put her personal feelings far behind

her, there was something off with the Churches. About Bill.

She had ignored it for a long time, convincing herself that she was imagining things or was merely distracted by other cases and misplacing her feelings of unease on harmless coincidences and the like. But now that she had reason to really focus and look...

She really needed to re-evaluate everything.

A knock on her door jam jolted her from her thoughts.

“Ms. Drake?” a voice asked.

“Yes?” she asked before she looked up and immediately stiffened.

“I apologize for startling you, Ms. Drake. I was told by Inspector Henderson to give my statement to you because he feels it might involve a case you’re working on, but I can come back later if you would prefer,” Superman said, standing calmly at the threshold.

If it wasn’t for his colorful suit, he would have appeared unassuming, perhaps even hesitant, but instead, he simply was.

She quickly stood up and beckoned him in, instantly falling into her ‘professional mode’ while hoping he didn’t notice her stiffness.

“No, now is fine, Superman,” she said, inwardly balking at how silly she felt using that name. “Feel free to sit. I’ll fill out the report as you give me your statement,” she said, retrieving the form and a pen.

“Before the Inspector instructed me to come to you, I had already filled out a police report,” he gently informed her, handing over the page before sitting in the chair across from her desk.

She took the report and forced herself to ignore how ridiculous he must feel sitting in an office chair in that suit and cape as she began to skim the report. Fortunately, the report took her mind off such trivial things, and she couldn’t help but blink at the extremely precise handwriting before her and jump down to the main body of text. It looked as if every letter had been drawn with a stencil. The language was also very formal and brief while being informative and factual.

“Thank you. Is this your first time writing a report?” she asked, marginally impressed.

“I read up on how to write them a little while ago,” he answered simply.

“Well, this is very helpful. It’s as if you’ve been doing this for years,” she appraised. “Anyway, I see you witnessed the suspect threaten and attempt to harm the store owner, Mr. Wójcik.” She reread the next bit and nodded to herself. This could be related to other incidents in that area of town, and possibly two murders she was investigating. Certainly had a similar MO. And he had smelt what he believed to be an explosive – C4 to be exact? She would need to make sure forensics checked for that.

“Yes. And if you need me to testify, I am willing to do so,” he said amiably.

She hesitated.

“If you feel it wouldn’t help the case, I understand,” he added upon her silence.

She looked back to the top of the page where his contact information should be, and, to her surprise, she found it had been filled out.

He had written his name, Kal-El, along with an address and a phone number.

“I can contact you directly?” she asked, unable to hide her disbelief.

“Well, the address is a building downtown I’ll be staying at sometimes, and the phone number is the landline there. This hasn’t been made official yet, so I’d appreciate you keeping it under your hat for a week until it is, but yes, the department will be able to contact me through there. I’m in the process of making a non-profit, and I’ll have someone there manage my mail, answer phone calls, and forward pertinent messages to me,” he said, growing a little self-conscious toward the end. He clasped his hands together

over his knees.

"I see," she stated.

This had to be one of the most bizarre conversations she had ever had.

"Wait, so you'll have a residence in the city? You'll actually sleep there?" she asked. She wasn't sure why she was suddenly so curious about this, but she wanted to kick herself for not having better self control. "I'm sorry, it's none of my business."

"It's a fair question," he said, unbothered, which sort of surprised her. "I will sometimes sleep there, but it'll also act as headquarters for the non-profit. I haven't quite worked out the logistics yet, but I've found some good people so I think it'll work out."

"I see," she said again, even though she didn't. Not really. "Well, if we need you to testify, we'll be in touch, but before you go, about the explosive you detected," she continued, deciding to just plow ahead. "Do you know how much there may have been and where it was located?"

"It was more than a trace amount, I can tell you that, but it was spread out, I suppose you could say, and it wasn't on the suspect."

"So it was coming from around the store itself?"

He nodded.

"Hmm, well, I'll be sure to have that checked out," she said, making a little note. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Ms. Drake," he said, standing up and leaving without another word.

As Superman disappeared out the door, Mayson suddenly realized something.

In the way he spoke and held himself, with his genuine straightforwardness and gentle tone, he was nervous, as if afraid he would offend or frighten her. She was very good at reading body language, and she was certain that if he hadn't been wearing that colorful outfit, she would have noticed more. She frowned as she mentally reviewed the last few minutes and stilled after she considered everything she knew about the Kryptonian.

Superman did want something, and whether or not he hoped to receive it in exchange for his assistance, he wanted it just the same.

Acceptance.

"This is great, Lois," Perry praised as he tapped the front page of that morning's edition two weeks after the signing of the Treaty of El.

An image of Superman standing behind three well-dressed people was beneath the headline:

'SUPERMAN FOUNDATION ESTABLISHED'

By Lois Lane

"Thanks, Chief," she said, beaming.

"And you're already working on the follow up piece, correct? I understand the donations are already pouring in."

"Yes, as well as 25% of the profits from all Superman merchandise. The companies were quick to agree with the arrangement and apologized for not asking for Superman's permission initially. I think some of them regret not taking the initiative because there's a chance they could have avoided the competition they now have," Lois added with a snicker.

"Has there been any hints as to where this money will be spent first?" Perry asked.

"It sounded like Metropolis Children's Hospital was near the top of the list, but I know the orphanage was also a priority. They both are likely to get something by the end of the month."

Perry gave a pleased nod.

"Now, there is another story I want to talk to you about," Lois said, shifting gears.

"And that's why you're the best," Perry noted.

"Yes, well, this story is linked to the bombings. I'm waiting

to hear back from Henderson, and Jimmy is going through old city records now, but from what I've been able to find so far.... This is big."

"I suspected as much," Perry said, all previous pleasure now replaced with grim seriousness.

Despite all the attention the treaty and the world's formal welcome of Superman had been receiving the last few weeks, Lois had not forgotten about the series of bombs that had cut across Metropolis. She was determined to get to the bottom of it, even if it took her as long as it had taken her to get to the bottom of the miracles occurring around the world.

"Not just in how it involved Superman. I'm in the process of gathering and reading the police reports of that day, and I don't think they're merely a random chain of tests placed for Superman as I had initially suspected," she said, anger now leaking into her voice. "I think whoever is responsible was using this as a cover for something else. Sure, they likely did this to learn more about Superman, but that's not their only or even main purpose."

"What evidence do you have so far?" he asked.

Lois pursed her lips. "Nothing concrete yet, just a feeling."

"You've gone off of that before, and you haven't let us down yet, but as always I want proof before anything goes to print. You have a week, or I'll have to assign you something else," he cautioned.

"What if I need more time, Perry? I have a feeling this is going to be big," she countered, not surprised by the condition, but not pleased.

"Find evidence, Lois, then you can argue," Perry said.

"All right." She hadn't expected anything less.

"Clark, hi!" Mayson said, (pleasantly) surprised to find him talking to Henderson.

"Good morning, Mayson," Clark returned, equally cheerful as he offered her a donut.

"I was just bringing Clark up to speed with the traces of C4 found in Wójcik's shop," Henderson explained, leaning back in his desk chair.

"Oh, good," she said, taking the donut with a smile. "Thank you."

Henderson continued. "Forensics found the chemical composition was an exact match to the residue found in the series of bombings likely set up to test Superman's abilities."

Clark nodded grimly, turning his eyes to the page in his other hand. "So Wójcik's in for questioning?"

"Yes. He's not admitting to anything and has lawyered up, but you can tell he's worried."

"Can I talk to him?" Clark asked.

"Sure, he's in a holding cell. The FBI are on their way."

"Then I should talk to him sooner rather than later," Clark said, putting aside his donut bag.

Henderson quickly got up. "He'll be in room three in ten minutes."

Mr. Wójcik was in the room in five minutes, and Mayson watched Clark enter a minute later with Henderson.

"Do cholery jasnej," Wójcik grit softly through his teeth before defiantly stating in a heavy accent, "I already said, I'm not going to talk without my lawyer."

He was a grandfatherly gentleman and wore a tweed vest. His hair and goatee were mostly white.

Henderson opened his mouth to talk, but Clark lifted a hand and approached the man, foregoing the chair on the other side and simply stopping by the table and lowering himself to the old man's level. Mayson was surprised that Henderson didn't seem to mind Clark's approach or that he had taken control so abruptly, but she was even more stunned by what Clark did next.

"Panie Wójcik, myślę, że jedyna rzecz, którą jesteś winny, to próba ochrony twojej rodziny. A teraz, czy nie pomożesz mi

pomóc?” Clark asked.

Mayson looked at Bill to see his reaction and was gratified to know she wasn't the only one flabbergasted by Kent's hidden talent as Wójcik replied in his native tongue, just as astonished.

Bill remained in the background as a dialogue commenced between Clark and the old man.

Ten minutes later, a much calmer Wójcik was returned to the holding cell, and Clark had some very interesting information.

“So his grandson got a job delivering packages?” Mayson asked.

“Yeah, but when he learned how much he was being paid, two thousand per delivery, he knew something was fishy, so he made his grandson quit. After he did, they were threatened,” Clark explained. “Understandably, Wójcik is afraid of what could happen to his family if whoever hired his grandson believes they know anything about the packages and tells the police, but he's also afraid of his grandson taking the fall for whatever activities the packages might have been used for, so he decided the best thing to do was to take the blame on himself, to appease both sides, so to speak.”

Bill and Mayson both shook their heads. Fear and love certainly made people do some mind boggling things.

“Did he know what was in the packages before we took him in for questioning?” Bill asked.

“No, he thought it was drugs, but as soon as he learned we suspected explosives, he recalled the bombings that had happened after his grandson first took the job and correctly suspected the worst.”

“Did he say anything else?” Mayson asked.

“Just that the few times his grandson picked up and delivered packages, he had to store them at the shop for days at a time, which explains why Superman smelt the C4 residue but couldn't pinpoint its location,” Clark answered.

Bill nodded grimly. “Wójcik and his family will need to go into protective custody.”

“I warned him of that,” Clark conceded.

“Good. I'll start making phone calls,” Henderson said, pushing off from the wall.

“So, Polish?” Mayson asked after a moment. “I didn't know you were bilingual.”

“I'm a polyglot, actually,” Clark said with a shrug. “For whatever reason, I pick up languages quickly.”

“How many do you know?” Mayson asked, thoroughly impressed.

“Depends on what you mean by 'know', but I can get by pretty much anywhere if I'm honest. I've traveled around the world for about a decade before arriving in Metropolis. Immersion really is the best way to pick up a language.”

Mayson blinked.

“Weren't you in some special division for the Air Force as well?” Bill asked, a little confused but curious about what he was hearing.

“Yeah, the Special Field Support Division. I was essentially the trial run. It's a permanent part of the Air Force now though,” Clark said matter-of-factly.

“So you learned to talk Polish from the military?” Mayson asked, now wondering if she had heard things wrong before.

“No. I went into the service roughly five years after learning the basics of many languages,” Clark explained, before seeing their bewildered expressions. “I, uh ... joined the military because I needed a slight change and got an offer I couldn't refuse.”

“A 'slight' change?” Mayson asked, wondering what he would consider a big change.

Suddenly, Clark stiffened. “What time is it?” he asked, before spotting the clock on the wall and swiftly heading out. “Oh, shoot. I'm sorry. I need to go. Meeting someone for a case. Sorry!”

“Okay, no problem! See you later, Clark!” Mayson called

after him.

Bill chuckled.

“What?” Mayson asked him.

“Kent. Lieutenant Polyglot PI extraordinaire, can't keep track of time,” he said, before clarifying. “He's always doing that, but he solves cases just the same.”

Mayson smiled, amused as well, before pausing. “Wait, he was a military officer?”

At her expression, Bill broke into laughter.

Superman shot across the city, the screams beckoning him to the four lane bridge at the edge of Metropolis. Before he even saw the bridge, he knew it was an accident, but on his approach he could see it involved a charter bus full of middle school students and a fourteen wheeler. The front driver's side of the semi was twisted into the bus and had forced it up into and onto the concrete median, where it had caved inward horribly.

“Superman!” people cried, grateful but not yet relieved.

He was the first on the scene, which was no surprise since the accident had occurred barely a minute before. He scanned the bus, noting with some relief that the people within were no longer outright screaming since they had learned of his arrival.

There were twenty two children and three adults, apparently on a cross-country band trip. Fortunately, most only had a few scrapes and bruises, except the bus driver and two students near the front row. . . .

He turned his attention to the concerned drivers who would not be going anywhere due to the crash blocking three of the four lanes. A handful had already gotten out of their cars and appeared to want to help.

“I've called 911,” one spoke up, looking at him.

Superman nodded his acknowledgment and scanned the semi before deciding on a path.

“Anyone who wishes to help, come up, and let me know if you have any first aid or medical training,” he said loudly. “Everyone else, please keep back and let the responders through when they arrive.”

He was instantly rewarded with five individuals moving forward: a young couple, a middle-aged woman, and two toned bikers. The first three quickly stated they had some basic first aid training.

“Thank you,” Superman said, moving to the front of the semi as they joined him.

Ripping off the passenger door, he put it aside before gently removing the limp, unconscious driver and placing him flat on the pavement. Much of the damaged to the semi was to the bottom front end and fortunately hadn't substantially reached the cabin.

“He's had a heart attack and needs CPR,” Superman said as the young couple knelt down beside the man and started chest compressions after quickly confirming he had no pulse. “His left collarbone is broken and his ankle has been twisted, but nothing else,” Superman added before leaving them to it and looking at the middle aged woman. With his voice low so it wouldn't carry, Superman said to her, “The bus driver is in a bad way. Go around and get in the bus. You must keep her calm and still. She has several broken ribs and has internal bleeding, but her spine is intact. I could take her to the hospital, but the two students behind her are in more immediate danger.”

“I understand,” the middle-aged woman said before hurrying around the semi and carefully climbing into the broken bus. “It's going to be alright now, honey. Superman's here, and the ambulance is coming,” she assured the driver.

Superman turned to the bikers. “Gentlemen, please go to the rear exit and begin carefully helping those able to vacate the bus,” Superman directed, before turning to the worst of the accident.

The bikers did as requested as sirens blared in the distance.

Ignoring the people watching from their cars, Superman put

his hand on the intertwined metal of the semi and bus that looked more like a steel meatball than the side of any vehicle. He could hear whimpering on the other side and, with his x-ray vision, saw a boy and girl caught in the horrible mess of aluminum branches and immovable iron vines.

He rose up above the street, eliciting some excited gasps behind him as he floated up and over to peer between the mangled, twisted metal. Meanwhile, the bikers and adults in the bus were ushering the uninjured children away from the wreck.

“Kids, this is Superman. I’m going to need you to stay as still as possible. I’m going to begin removing pieces of the bus so I can reach you.”

He didn’t wait for them to respond, knowing they were in varying stages of consciousness, and dropped down to hover over the median before focusing his vision. He cut through the metal faster than a blow torch and pulled back the first layer of entrapment. Dropping it behind him, he got to work on the next layer and then the next, working behind the bus driver until he couldn’t go any further safely.

Carefully bending a jagged rod of steel away from the boy’s face, he felt the paramedics approaching and could hear a stretcher being rolled out to the unconscious semi-truck driver still receiving CPR. Keeping his eyes directed ahead, he reached in and touched both of the kids’ hands.

It was a little bit of a reach, especially since he had to reach over the girl to reach the boy, but he knew it was important for victims to receive physical contact.

The boy trembled in pain as he opened his eyes, but upon seeing Superman he smiled with relief and hope. The girl was unconscious.

“Superman?” he whispered.

“Yes. What’s your name?”

“Luke,” he breathed, ignoring his black bangs falling in his eyes.

“What’s her name?” Superman asked, motioning to the girl beside him whose head was bleeding.

“Charlotte.”

“Good. Now, because of how the metal is bent, I’m going to have to get her out first, alright? So I need you to stay still but awake, okay?” Superman asked.

“Hmm-mm,” he managed through ebbing pain.

“If you need my attention, just tap on the metal with your nail or click your tongue. I’ll hear you. I know you’re hurting and very tired, but you must stay awake,” Superman said.

“Kay,” the boy said.

Superman gave him an encouraging smile before turning his attention to the girl as police began directing traffic away behind him, utilizing the single remaining lane.

The middle-aged woman and the bus driver couldn’t see them, but Superman knew they could hear him.

“Superman?” a seasoned paramedic asked, calling up about four feet below him.

“We’re going to need a stretcher and a tourniquet so I can get her out,” Superman said, forgoing pleasantries, though he did take note of his name tag that read ‘Williams’.

“Got it,” Williams said, before shouting directions out to his crew. “Condition?”

There was only one access point to the children. The other side was blocked by metal and the efforts already in progress to get the driver out.

Superman held out his hand and hoisted the paramedic up to his level, taking his weight so he didn’t disturb the wreckage.

“The girl, Charlotte, has a broken leg, concussion, lacerated side, and an injured arm that will require surgery,” Superman said before pointedly adding, “They will both need transfusions.” He pointed to a rod.

Williams followed the path with his eyes, finding the metal

skewer had all but severed the girl’s arm but that its continued presence had prevented excessive blood loss. Small mercies.

Unfortunately, it hadn’t just hit her arm. It had gone through Luke.

Grimly, the paramedic gave a short nod. He knew not to ask about the condition of the boy just then.

A moment later, a stretcher was ready for her.

“We’ll need the tourniquet before we move her, otherwise…” Superman trailed off.

“Here, unless you would prefer I—” Williams offered uncertainly as he did his best to ignore that he was standing on Superman’s left boot and being further supported by the Kryptonian’s left arm. He never thought he would be in such a position.

“I got it,” Superman said, gently lowering Williams before taking the rubber wrap. With superspeed, he wrapped the girl’s arm tightly just below the shoulder, stopping all circulation into her arm before looking back at the awestruck paramedic team below.

Superman glanced at the direction of the bus driver being maneuvered out.

“I’ll make this quick, but I’m not sure how this will all shift and I want to make sure Luke is safe, so when I get her out, it would be best if you all move back with her soon after,” Superman said as the responders on the other side of the bus hurried to an ambulance on that side of the road with the bus driver.

All of the other students and adults were also clear of the bus, thanks to the bikers.

“We understand. On three, then?” Williams suggested.

Superman gave a nod before looking at Luke. “Luke, I’m going to get Charlotte out now, but I must warn you, things are going to shift a bit. After it stills, I’ll get you out next, alright?”

Luke gave an understanding grunt.

“You’re doing really well. Just hold on a little longer.”

Superman turned his gaze back to the head paramedic, who gave a ready nod. “One, two, three.”

In a blur and a flash of red melting steel, there was a groan and high pitched whine of metal as the girl disappeared, only to reappear on the gurney. Williams and his team moved away with her quickly as Superman immediately rose up and prevented the remains of the bus and semi from shifting further into the boy. Shards of glass fell and shattered on the pavement as the boy released a pain and fear laced scream before everything stopped.

Superman braced his arm against the remains of the bus as he hovered beside the boy, his free hand taking the boy’s own. Slowly, the boy opened his eyes again and found Superman’s face a few inches from his nose.

“Another gurney is on its way!” a paramedic shouted from below.

“Alright! Can we get an IV up here?” Superman asked with a glance back.

“Ladder is coming!” another shouted.

Luke heaved in a breath, fatigue and agony heavy in his gasp. His eyes were afraid and worried, and Superman was resigned to the fact he could see the all too familiar expression of coming death clear on the boy’s face. He could practically feel the veil separating life and death brushing near.

“Superman?” Luke asked.

“Yes?” he asked, neverminding Williams who appeared beside him, climbing up the ladder his team had just placed over the median.

“I’m not going to make it, am I?” Luke asked.

Williams looked at Superman, not able to completely conceal the concern and sad acceptance in his eyes.

Even if the boy had not lost so much blood, his condition would still be dire. The metal rod was clear through his torso. There was no way it had not damaged at least one major organ,

not to mention arteries. The only reason he was still alive was because the rod was still in place, slowing the blood loss. Slowing his death.

Superman's jaw clenched, knowing a lie in this instance would not be considered a sin to most people, but also knowing from experience that stating the sad truth was not as demoralizing as most would imagine. The truth, even terrible, often did set one free.

However, an idea came to mind.

"There is something I could try, but I've never done it before and there is no guarantee that you would survive. A one in five chance, possibly, and I won't lie to you, it won't be comfortable."

"Please try. I don't want to die trapped in here," Luke said.

"What will you try?" Williams asked Superman.

"I'll try to induce hypothermia to slow his heart rate, bleeding and tissue degradation. If he gets to the hospital in time, they might be able to save him in surgery," Superman explained as an IV bag was handed up to them.

Williams quickly started the IV as he nodded. "It's worth a shot. There's no chance otherwise," he said, deciding there was no point sugar-coating anything. The boy already knew. Better to go all for this effort than be wishy-washy.

"Please," Luke whispered again.

"Alright. Close your eyes," Superman directed.

Luke did so, trusting completely in the Kryptonian.

And Superman breathed, exhaling a white mist that settled on the boy and lowered his body temperature faster than one would believe possible.

A moment later, Superman shot focused heat vision at the metal rod, freeing Luke from the would-be tomb – all the while listening to the boy's slowing heart. With Williams' help, a backboard was placed beneath him, and they lowered him onto the gurney below while carefully maneuvering the steel fragment still piercing him.

A path to the ambulance was instantly cleared, Williams shouting out orders for them to radio the hospital of Luke's condition and the need of an immediate surgery.

"Everyone get in. I'll fly you all at once," Superman said as he got beside the ambulance in preparation to lift it.

No one argued, taking it all in stride thanks in part to Williams' calm demeanor toward the hero. They were all on the same team, working toward one goal: preserving life.

CHAPTER 6b: Suspicions

Lois sipped at her coffee, absorbed in the thirty fourth police report she had opened so far. Normally they were dull, but she had already discovered something rather ominous and she had a feeling she had just grazed the edge of it.

She froze, her eyes zeroing in on a name. She put the page down and quickly leafed through a document on a pile beside her.

"This is insane," she whispered, swiping a highlighter and circling a name among the Board of Zoning Appeals before jotting down a note on a list she was compiling.

It was the ninth thus far. She went back to the top of the list, shaking her head.

"Mr. Yomi Talicur," she muttered, stating the ninth name that had sent up a red flag.

At first she wasn't sure if it would be a waste of time, but as the hours wore on, she was grateful she had just asked Henderson for ALL of the police reports involving incidents – accidents and crimes – dated that day.

The car accident Superman had arrived at right before the first bomb went off had of course been one of several dozen accidents that occurred that day, but Lois quickly realized—as the police report indicated—it was not an accident.

It was also not the first orchestrated 'car accident' that day—at least that was her theory.

There were four other car accidents within a two mile radius of one another before the bombings, and all of them contained individuals with direct and indirect connections to various city boards, commissions, and banking firms. What sent up red flags was not only the individuals in the cars but the timing. These accidents each occurred within 70 to 85 minutes apart, one after another. That was not normal for that area of town, and there was nothing going on in that area that would explain a surplus of accidents – especially as the next accident in that area after the bombings, a simple fender bender, was five hours later with seemingly no links to the previous ones.

Which led her to making a leap in logic that provided the only sensible conclusion she could see.

They had baited Superman. But it didn't end there.

The bombing locations were conveniently placed near individuals and businesses financially linked to a number of boards and firms. And a frightening percentage of victims listed from the bomb sites could also not be considered coincidental if one identified their circles of influence.

Lois shook her head, doubting anyone was digging into this like she was because who would consider it worth looking into when the motive appeared to be clear? To test Superman.

But what she was uncovering ... it was as if someone was trying to get certain people out of the way or threaten them. It was ten times worse than a demonstration of power from the mafia decades before.

She glanced at the second list she was making. She would be sure to deliver it to Henderson in person as soon as she had finished going through the rest of the reports. It included all of the 'car accidents' she felt should be reviewed—specifically the cars involved. She would be astonished if those cars did not have a similar device Superman had found on the initial car. A device that disrupted the vehicle's controls and thus caused it to suddenly crash.

She rubbed her eyes before looking back at the main list she was working on.

"What do you all have in common besides being important and powerful people?" she asked aloud. "Whoever you ticked off is extremely powerful and no doubt corrupt." She frowned, a chilling revelation piercing her core. "If I'm right, this could get me killed ... or a Pulitzer," she breathed. "But it makes so much sense ... it's the Boss."

She tapped her lips with a tight white fist, unsure if she should be extremely pleased with herself or horrified.

She needed to speak with Henderson.

Henderson put down the test results that were finally completed and leaned back in his desk chair, both excited and worried, because whoever was responsible for it all was far more powerful than he had initially feared.

The bombs used in the 'testing' of Superman were remarkably similar to the bomb used in the attempted sabotage of the Messenger, in that the components came from the same source and were very likely assembled by the same party due to the similar composition and design. He knew Kent would find this information very interesting and likely as alarming as he found it, especially after learning what they had from Wójcik.

His desk phone suddenly rang.

"Henderson," he stated.

"Lois Lane is here to see you, she says it's urgent," Ella, the woman at the front desk, stated, her voice bored.

"Very well, send her back," he said, wondering if he should be suspicious of her timing.

Occasionally, he wondered if she had an inside contact at the precinct. Her ability to just show up when something was going on or about to happen was uncanny. Granted, there was that janitor he had seen her talking to one time....

A moment later, Lois knocked on his open door.

“Come in, Ms. Lane,” he said, waving her in.

She stepped in without a word before closing the door surely behind her. He raised an eyebrow.

“We secure here?” she asked, her tone unusually serious.

He frowned. “Yes, why?” he asked.

“If you have any doubt, we should go elsewhere. This information cannot be overheard,” she said.

He stared at her, noting how firmly she was gripping her camel-colored briefcase in her arms.

“I take it this involves all of the police and accident reports you requested.”

She didn’t answer.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked. One could never be too careful, especially in technically public buildings. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, not even his office was completely secure.

“Come with me,” she said.

He followed her out but decided to grab the bomb evidence report. Might as well share his disturbing news after she shared whatever had spooked her.

They took his car, since she had taken a cab, and only after he started the car and began pulling out did she direct him to go to her apartment. He glanced at her as he drove, noting her grim expression and the flat line of her lips. She was rarely this quiet.

They entered her apartment complex and went down a hallway.

“Good evening, Lois,” her neighbor greeted.

“Good evening, Mrs. Lonham. Do you need any help with anything?” Lois asked.

“Oh, no, dear, not tonight. Thanks for asking though,” she assured with a tender smile.

Lois smiled back as Lonham went about her business, her portable oxygen tank on wheels beside her.

She liked Mrs. Lonham. She was a sweet elderly woman who Lois helped with groceries and the like occasionally. She was getting up in years and now required near full time oxygen. Though she refused to confirm, Lois believed the kind woman was unfortunately in the severe stage of COPD, with 30 to 50 percent lung function.

Mentally shaking her head at the injustice of such a gentle soul suffering such a fate, she continued to her door. Henderson remained silent.

“Thanks for humoring me,” she said quietly as she began the ritual of unlocking her seven locks.

“No problem, Ms. Lane,” he said, following her in before closing the door.

She relocked everything before going to the side bookshelf and turning on her radio, putting the volume just above the level of normal conversation. She motioned to the couch.

“I hope you’re just being overly cautious,” he stated.

“I think when you learn what I have discovered you’ll agree I can’t be too cautious with this,” she said, sitting down next to him and handing him her folder.

He took it and began scanning it. His eyes widened as he got a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Oh my Lord,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“No, it’s worse. Look at this,” he said, handing her the evidence report.

She muttered a curse. “This is huge. Huge! This is....” She looked up from the papers, instantly connecting even more dots. “Oh, gawd. LexCorp!”

He nodded gravely.

“Lex Luthor?” she asked in a horrified whisper.

“I don’t know. It could be, or it could be someone on his board or someone else high up,” he admitted.

“I don’t see how all of this could be happening and him not know,” she stated.

“I agree, but whoever is responsible is ingenious and has stayed hidden for a very long time. Maybe he has Luthor fooled too.”

“Or maybe he’s working with him, assuming he’s not Luthor himself,” Lois muttered darkly.

Henderson nodded, agreeing with her but not wanting them to make any assumptions.

“We should bring Kent in on this. He’s been looking into The Boss as well and seems to be making some progress. Maybe together we can find some hard evidence because, as frightening as this is, it can all be excused as circumstantial. Nothing is clearly identifying the Boss, only that he has a very likely connection to LexCorp,” he said, motioning to their folders.

“Kent? The PI?” she asked.

“I see you’ve heard of him,” he said, unsurprised. “Yes, Clark Kent. He’s been helping us out on a few cases and has solved a number of cold ones for us the last few months.”

“And he can be trusted?” she asked. Of course her research indicated he was legit and a good detective, but this was not just any case. It didn’t involve two or three families, it involved the whole city—and possibly a lot further considering how far reaching LexCorp was.

“Yes. He’s one of the few people I would trust with my family’s lives,” he said firmly.

Lois blinked. She wasn’t even sure if Henderson trusted her that much.

“All right. Just let me know when and where,” she said.

He nodded. “Have you made copies of all this?”

“Yeah. Ran to the copy shop not long after I figured it out early this morning. I have the originals in a lockbox at the bank.”

“And I’m sure you already attached a condition clause to it if anything were to happen to you,” he said, not sure if he should be worried about how far ahead she planned.

“Darn right I did. Here, you can have this copy,” she said, stacking the papers up for him.

“Thank you, Lois. We’ll get to the bottom of this. Let me know if you suspect if anyone is on to you though. I have a few uniforms I know are safe. I can have them check up on you occasionally if you wish.”

“Nah, I don’t want to tip anyone off. I feel I’m still under the radar, but if that changes, I’ll let you know,” she assured.

“I’ll go ahead and head out and contact you about Kent, probably tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” she said, feeling much lighter than she did an hour ago, though a heavy sense of foreboding draped over both of them. Things were going to get harder before they got easier.

“Well, someone’s happy,” Mayson said, taking note of Clark’s cheerful grin as he entered the research room.

“I got some good news,” he explained, keeping his smile as he perused the files of missing persons, skimming for anything that might catch his attention while memorizing the faces within.

It was something he sometimes did between professional cases. Thanks to his memory and his travels, he could sometimes solve a missing persons case simply by recognizing someone who was in fact a missing person. More than once, he had come across a runaway or spotted a kidnap victim, just by going about his business while paying minimal attention to those around him.

“Can you tell me the good news?” she asked curiously.

“An acquaintance who had been in a bad accident is going to make it,” he said honestly.

He would never tell anyone the exact circumstances, but there was no harm in letting people know he was happy because someone he knew, however distantly, hadn’t died.

Of course, the person he was referring to was Luke, a

trombone player from Metropolis Middle School.

The surgeons got to work as soon as Luke was given over to them, taking his cooled body and lowering its temperature a little further to the tried and true 64.4°F that would allow them to essentially suspend his life long enough for them to go in and repair the internal damage from the accident. Admittedly, it had been touch and go for a while, and the doctors expect a long road of recovery for the young man, but Luke and his family could not be happier. He was alive and would heal.

The paramedics and doctors made it very clear that the only reason he had lived was because of Superman's unconventional intervention.

"That's certainly good news. I'm glad they're doing better," Mayson said, happy to see her friend was pleased by the news while sensing he was not going to reveal anything else. She suspected it was an individual involved in one of his cases. "Well, did you hear what happened earlier this week, with Superman?"

Clark blinked. "Uh, maybe? There's news about him all the time."

"He froze a kid so he'd make it to the hospital! It's absolutely astonishing," Mayson said, waving her right hand about.

"Oh. Yeah, I did hear something about that," Clark admitted.

Mayson shook her head, still trying to wrap her mind around the news story. Freezing a boy to save him from death! Was there anything Superman couldn't do?

"Are you warming up to the idea that Superman might be as good as the world hopes?" Clark asked cautiously.

"I am still a little, well, nervous, but ... maybe. What I saw in the photos of him helping with the accident is pretty hard to ignore."

Clark started in surprise and for two different reasons.

"Photos? And what is hard to ignore?" Clark asked, privately concerned.

"Someone had a camera at the accident," Mayson said with a shrug. "The pictures they took were on the news. As for what I'm talking about, when I saw Superman, I saw —" She frowned, not sure how to describe it. "I saw, well, a first responder. He had professional concern plastered on his face, but there was this one shot of him, when they loaded that poor kid into the ambulance, where that professional mask dropped."

Clark stilled, not sure what to say.

"I don't know. I guess it just struck me. Since actually meeting him the other day, I guess I'm beginning to look at him differently."

"Oh?" Clark asked, intrigued on more than one level.

"I'm still hesitant to jump on the bandwagon of adoring the ... man, but I'll admit that I'm cautiously optimistic. I'm not as worried as I was before about how much trust we're giving him," she said, breaking eye contact as she subtly admitted her first assumption might have been wrong.

Clark slowly nodded. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, I have it on good authority that he really does just want to help the best he can."

Mayson laughed softly. "You know, it does make me feel a little better," she said, amused as much as serious. "Thanks, Clark."

"You're welcome, Mayson."

Mayson sighed and smiled up at him. "Have you eaten lunch?" she asked.

"No, not yet."

"Care to join me?"

"Sure," Clark said, returning her smile as she retrieved her purse.

Nigel St. John, Lex Luthor's personal assistant, was a former espionage agent of Her Majesty's Secret Service.

It had taken some time, but Clark had been able to reach

some of his more obscure and secretive contacts. After days of digging in old documents, he had determined Nigel St. John was not his real name and that he had served in the British military before moving to America and changing his name—after his supposed death as Thomas Rebin.

Clark held out an image of Thomas Rebin taken from a distance. The image showed Rebin armed and in the process of covertly moving around a building.

"I took that photo. It was what proved he had no business being in the service of Her Majesty," his contact, Agent Tig, said, frowning as he recalled that night.

"What happened?" Clark asked, unconsciously scanning the parking garage to ensure they remained alone. He had already taken care of the cameras before Tig arrived.

"Thomas set fire to some munitions. The photo proved he was there when he had stated he had been elsewhere during questioning. Unfortunately, before his trial, the transport he had been on to take him to another holding facility crashed. Several burned bodies were recovered, including one believed to be his," Tig explained.

"So all this time even MI6 thought he was dead?" Clark asked. Before he hadn't been sure if the secret service had orchestrated his supposed death or not, but from this it was clear Luthor's assistant was a bit more slippery than he had previously thought.

"Correct. It was before DNA testing could be done, so we only had dental and the standard physical remains comparison to verify identity. You've done a great service in coming to me with this and I will be going to my superiors as soon as I leave here. They will need to act. Which reminds me, how did you know to reach out to me?"

"I was doing a blind search, to try to find out his past. I examined a lot of old photos, guessing he could have been prior military due to how he carried himself, and from his accent I figured Britain would be a good place to start. I found a photo of him with his division in the Royal Navy, and from there it eventually led to you. I'm just glad my gamble bore some fruit," he said with a shrug.

"I would hate to play any game of luck against you," Tig said with a bewildered but pleased look.

Clark smiled before growing serious once more. "Sir, the reason I started looking into Rebin wasn't to investigate him specifically, but his employer: Lex Luthor. I have reason to believe he has been organizing a great deal of questionable things in Metropolis as well as the States and possibly beyond, so I would appreciate...." Clark trailed off, trusting the old agent would understand.

"I will be careful with this information. Because Thomas has chosen to work with Lex Luthor, I expect certain channels will need to be handled delicately. Not to mention other channels, as staging his death would have required the assistance of some well-placed insiders.... That man was very elusive twenty years ago, I can only assume he has improved since. Hmm, yes. We will be extremely selective in who we report this to and how we move forward," he promised.

"Thank you."

Tig gave him a parting nod before turning and leaving without another word.

Chapter 7 – Nightfall

Maverick Ervin (or simply Mav) looked up from the front desk, deciding he needed to select an assistant from the list Julie gave him sooner rather than later. Being the face of the Superman Foundation was a full-time job, but he was happy to be active and was proud to be part of something far reaching and positive. The amount of money pouring in was mind boggling, and the help they were able to accomplish with it was even more so.

Superman stopped by at least once a week to make sure everything was still running smoothly, to pick up any mail, to sleep, and to see if there were any changes to the schedule – particularly in events that needed his presence such as fundraisers or other functions.

At first, Mav wasn't certain about working for the superhero, simply because he wasn't sure how the foundation would work. But then he met with his future team, Murray Brown and Julie Heinz, and then Superman himself. None of them were like he had expected, especially Superman – or Kal-El, as he preferred them to call him. He was surprisingly personable and genuinely kind. Mav wasn't sure why this surprised him so much, but it did. After working with so many powerful people, Mav had gotten very good at spotting fake people, and it was quite refreshing to discover his new pseudo boss was nothing like the last few people he had had to work under. As for the other two, Brown was eccentric, but not as annoying as he initially thought he would be. He was efficient and actually knew what he was doing, even though his eyebrows and ties might suggest otherwise. Julie Heinz was amazingly organized and had an unrivaled memory; she was also tenderhearted and softly spoken.

"Mr. Ervin?" a white-haired man in an expensive suit and black wing-tip shoes asked, approaching the desk. He had a companion dressed similarly, and their posture screamed government. Fortunately, the evening was winding down, and there were no other visitors in the building; in fact, he would be locking up in less than half an hour.

"Yes?" Mav asked, grateful Superman's legal status had been unequivocally decided before the creation of the foundation. At least he could be sure it didn't concern anything like that.

"I am Senator John Cosgrove, and I need to get a message to Superman immediately," he said.

"Yes, Senator, I recognize you," Mav said simply, unbothered, even though he had voted for the other guy. "What is the message?"

"May we speak privately?" Cosgrove asked, which was sort of an odd question since they were already alone.

"Certainly," he said. "Just let me lock up, and we can discuss this in my office."

They allowed him to finish his duties before following him to the side room.

"How quickly can you get him here?" Cosgrove asked, somewhat impatiently.

Mav suspected he was anxious and in a hurry. It certainly made Mav a little uneasy, but Cosgrove was at least a halfway decent politician. He didn't tend to stir up drama, although he could be coarse at times.

"He has a pager. He could be here within minutes, assuming he's not busy, such as at an emergency, or on the other side of the world, you understand," he answered, finding no hint of deception or the like from Cosgrove or his companion so deciding to be honest.

"Please page him now," Cosgrove stated.

"Certainly," he said, picking up the phone and sending the 911 page. "I trust you will explain?"

"This is top secret and cannot go beyond the confines of this room," Cosgrove said brusquely.

"I understand," Mav said, agreeing to secrecy.

"It is imperative Superman hears what we have to say. It goes beyond national secu—"

Before he could finish, there was a whoosh, and the window to the office was suddenly open and Superman was standing in the room. His cape settled behind him as he took in those before him.

"Superman!" Cosgrove said, startled.

Mav suppressed a smirk.

"I understand this is urgent?" Superman asked, glancing at Mav.

"Yes, very much so. I'm Senator John Cosgrove, and this is Mr. Smith," he said, briefly motioning to his shadow. "Superman, I was asked to ensure you know that your presence is needed at EPRAD Command and Control tonight at 8 pm. It concerns the safety of the planet," he said, collecting himself remarkably fast after being so surprised. He stepped toward Superman, his eyes revealing grave seriousness. "Superman, I am not exaggerating when I say the lives of billions are on the line."

"What's happened?" Superman asked. "War?"

"No. Something worse. I'm not at liberty to say more here, but you will be told everything at EPRAD."

"Very well. I will be there at 8. Is there anyone I should seek out specifically?" Superman asked.

"Thank you, and Dr. Stephen Daitch is who you need to meet with, though there will be others. He will have the most pertinent information, however," Cosgrove answered.

"I'll be there," Superman assured.

"Thank you, Superman, I know the President will be happy to hear that. I'll take my leave now. I have a few other things to do before tonight," he said.

They each gave a nod, deciding there wasn't much else to say. Cosgrove and his escort left, leaving Superman and Mav alone.

"Well, I think this involves something from space," Mav stated. "Daitch is the chief scientist of EPRAD."

Superman nodded. "Put a hold on any unnecessary spending. I have a feeling our help will be needed in a different way shortly. And accept any volunteers you feel capable."

"Sure thing. Anything else, Kal-El?"

"Please let Julie know our schedule will likely be changing. I have a feeling whatever is going on will take priority for the foreseeable future," he said.

"All right."

"I'll contact you after I learn what the situation is."

"Thanks. And don't worry if it's 3 am when you can tell me. I'll want to know, no matter the time."

"Of course," Superman agreed before going out the window.

Eight o'clock came quickly.

He landed in the viewing room that was open to the facility's balcony, spotting Professor Daitch, along with two others. The scientist was looking through a huge telescope, while the other individuals were talking among themselves, including a general.

"You requested me?" he asked, announcing himself.

"Superman!" Daitch said, pulling back from what he was doing.

"Yes, thank you for coming, Superman," the General said. "I am General Robert Zeitlin, this is Professor Daitch, and I understand you have already met Senator John Cosgrove."

Superman nodded, before shaking hands with them all.

"So what is this about?" Superman asked.

"Take a look," Daitch offered, motioning to the telescope. "Though do you need it with your enhanced visual abilities?"

"I do. I have my limits like everyone," Superman answered, looking through the eyepiece. He pulled back, now having an idea of why he had been called. "How big is it?"

"'Nightfall' is close to 17 miles across. It's traveling near 30 thousand miles an hour," he said, going to the computer.

A stylized digital countdown with the EPRAD space logo came up.

EPRAD COMMAND AND CONTROL

121:54:23

Estimated Time to Impact

"If my calculations are correct, in a little over 5 days, it's going to hit the Earth," Daitch said, taking a deep breath. "The sky, literally, is falling."

"What kind of damage could this cause?" Superman asked.

"Superman, this could knock the Earth off its axis. Even

throw us out of our current solar orbit. It's far larger than the meteor that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. The crater alone will throw enough dust into the air to start a new ice age," he answered, unable to keep his voice level.

Superman looked to the general and senator. "When is this going public?"

"The President will tell the public soon, but he wants to avoid panic too. He simply wants to make sure you're on board before making an announcement," Zeitlin said.

"I'm on board. Is there a plan?" Superman asked, concealing his apprehension remarkably well.

"Yes. We are in the process of modifying an old cold war rocket packed with explosives. We have decided against using a nuclear bomb since we don't want to introduce possible fallout and feel we can be successful without introducing that risk. The energy that'll be released with a non-nuclear rocket—from the explosives and through the kinetic force of the rocket's impact—will be enough to break up the asteroid and redirect the remaining pieces away from Earth," Zeitlin answered. "We also won't be hitting it head on, but from the side."

"So you need me to act as a delivery service," Superman concluded.

"Correct," Cosgrove said, both relieved and pleased Superman was on the same page as them.

"You'll have to fly out with the rocket approximately 1.2 million miles from the earth. We'll place equipment on the rocket that will let you know when to release it so you can make it clear before impact. There will be scanners at the nose of the rocket, and it will measure how quickly the rocket is moving and how far it is from the asteroid. There will also be a course indicator that will let you know if you begin going off course. We don't want to rely on our radios in case there's interference – although we will aim to be in continuous contact – and we must remember there will be a time delay in our communications back and forth the further away you get. The delay will get up to 10 seconds," Daitch said. "But anyway, we're also in the process of making you a space suit."

"I won't need a full suit, but I will need air, so perhaps just a vest and a helmet? I can only hold my breath for about 20 minutes," Superman answered.

"We'll get you fitted for all necessary equipment as soon as we're finished here," Zeitlin promised.

"So you're immune to the vacuum of space?" Daitch asked curiously.

"I've gone to the moon a few times and haven't had any trouble," he said simply. "So it's just about air supply."

"Amazing," Daitch said. "How fast can you go?"

"I've never really timed myself to be honest, but I made it to the moon in about 8 minutes without pushing myself too hard. My cape began to come apart though."

"And your uniform?" Cosgrove inquired.

"As long as it's close to my skin, it's fine."

"So you must give off an aura!" Daitch said excitedly as he punched in some numbers into a calculator he had whipped out from somewhere. "And you can go at least 800 kilometers a second! In space at any rate."

"Professor, I'm sure you'll have the opportunity to discuss this further later. For now, let us move on," the general gently interrupted.

"Of course," he said, much to his chagrin.

"Well, now that we know you are on board, we will notify the President and he will make an announcement tomorrow in front of EPRAD Command Center at 2 pm. If at all possible, we ask that you make an appearance then," Zeitlin said.

"I'll be there," Superman promised.

"Thank you. Seeing you and the President with a plan and standing confidently together will help the public remain calm. We must do everything we can to ensure a panic doesn't occur,"

Cosgrove said.

"Agreed. What may help further is allowing the press to have direct access to some of what EPRAD is doing, after two o'clock tomorrow of course. The unknown is what scares people the most, so also describing a plan B may not be a bad idea. Having a second rocket in case the first doesn't take care of the asteroid fully will assure the world that we're not putting everything on one chance. And to be honest, it would bring me some peace of mind as well. We have time." Superman paused, looking pensive. "And now that I say that, if there's anything I can do to help prep any rockets to speed things along, let me know. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"Others have made similar suggestions, and there is a backup rocket in the works. It should be ready to go three days after the first, should it be needed, but your help would certainly be welcome," Zeitlin said.

"As soon as we get you fitted with your vest and helmet, I'll get you in contact with the rocket prep teams," Daitch said, looking much more at ease than ten minutes before.

Superman nodded in thanks.

"You are a wonder, Superman. You continue to go beyond what any of us could expect from you. I know you have answered before, but I must ask, why do you help us?" Zeitlin asked.

"Earth is my home now. Has been for years, as everyone knows. Earth isn't perfect, but it is good, and I love her people. Earth has cared for me, and I refuse to allow it to meet a fate similar to my home world," Superman replied.

Zeitlin straightened, his respect for Superman clearly rising.

"Thanks again, Superman. We'll leave you with the professor and will keep you updated on anything relevant," Cosgrove said after a moment.

"In case I am away, here is my pager number. Just send '37723' for EPRAD, and I'll come here right away," Superman said, a slip of paper seemingly appearing in his hand.

"Thank you," Cosgrove said, taking the note before taking his leave with General Zeitlin.

"Well, Superman, let's meet the team," Daitch said, eager to begin.

Superman met and worked with several teams before morning arrived after briefly updating Mav on what was happening. A deeply shaken Mav promised to keep the news to himself as he worked with Julie on preparing the Foundation for what was coming.

With Daitch's team, they focused on the equipment that would be needed on the rocket and on Superman. The helmet was quickly made, taking an existing space helmet and altering it so it would seal against his skin around the base of his neck through adhesive and the pressure applied by the vest harness that extended down to wrap around his thighs. The 'space vest' had compartments for the electronics and air tanks, along with snaps and velcro straps that would secure the helmet, hoses, and wires. His 'S' emblem was still visible and his cape would be removed when he was fully suited up.

As the engineers and scientists made the finishing touches on his vest and helmet, he helped with the two rockets. With his assistance, he easily saved the teams over twelve hours of work on each rocket.

"The President is on his way," Daitch's assistant said, interrupting their work. "He'll make the announcement soon. General Zeitlin has asked for you and Superman."

"Thank you, George," Daitch said, before he and Superman left to meet with Zeitlin.

Within the meeting hall of the EPRAD Command and Control Center, news cameras lined the back and faced an elevated platform with a podium loaded with microphones. Behind the

microphone was Dr. Stephen Daitch, EPRAD Chief Scientist. Right behind and beside him was General Zeitlin and Senator Cosgrove. Not far from them were other official looking individuals, but all eyes were on Daitch.

Standing with dozens of other reporters, Lois was astonished by what she was hearing.

An asteroid was coming and, unless stopped, would hit Earth in a little more than four days. What was more was that there were smaller bits of meteoroids accompanying the cosmic planet killer.

“A plan has been made, and thousands of individuals have already been brought together to implement it. If you look behind me, you will see our plan. Please forgive its rough appearance.” He motioned behind him and a projector displayed a simplified representation of a few stages involving Earth, a rocket, and the asteroid. “To summarize, we are modifying a missile that will be delivered to the asteroid by Superman tomorrow morning. We have named the rocket ‘The Asgard’. Its payload will be non-nuclear and will detonate on impact. Superman will have equipment that will ensure he is on target, coming at it from the correct angle instead of head on, and it will notify him when to release The Asgard so he can get out of range of the resulting blast. It will then strike the asteroid, disrupting its trajectory to Earth as well as destroying the smaller asteroids near. We are confident in this plan and have run several computer simulations. They all support our initial calculations.

“We do have a secondary rocket being prepared in case it is needed, but at this point it is merely a precaution. I will step aside now, but I will answer any questions later,” Daitch said after an official leaned forward a bit and whispered something to him.

Daitch glanced over at someone near the back and stepped away from the podium as a side back door to the stage opened.

Due to the secret service, the press were not surprised by the entrance of the President of the United States – though they were pleased; however, they were a bit more excited by the colorful figure stepping in behind him.

“Good afternoon. You may be seated,” President Garner said, his voice strong and certain, unbothered by the press’ split attention. “I was briefed on the situation and plan yesterday and gave the order to proceed soon after. Superman has been working closely with our teams for the past twelve or so hours, helping us prepare for the mission ahead,” he said, turning to the Kryptonian just behind and beside him. “On behalf of the world, thank you, Superman. You have not only saved us insurmountable time but have become the keystone to saving us all.”

Superman gave a nod in acknowledgment before the President faced the cameras.

“I have no doubt, with our combined efforts, that we will succeed. This asteroid, this Nightfall, will not befall doom upon us. We will defeat it and demonstrate mankind’s ingenuity and determination. In the coming days, I ask everyone listening to me now to remain calm and steadfast. I know in times like this fear can leech into us, make us shadows of our true selves, but I tell you, we are better than that, more capable and resourceful,” he said, motioning for Superman to step beside him, shoulder to shoulder.

“Less than twenty-four hours ago, we detected an object in space that in the past would have guaranteed the end of our world. Within a little more than 18 hours, we have retrofitted a cold war missile into a defender of life, The Asgard. And in that same span of time we have equipped Superman with the means to transport The Asgard over a million miles into space with time to spare for a second rocket to be launched if need be. We have already accomplished so much in so little time. Let us continue to strive together in all our coming days, for we have already demonstrated that there is nothing we cannot accomplish together.”

Lois had to give it to the President, he knew how to give an inspiring speech.

“I have time to take a few questions,” he offered.

Several raised their hands of course, and he answered some of their inquiries which covered a few general things involving the international community.

“All nations have been informed of the situation, and their governments are responding in the way they see fit. A number of our allies and even others have come forward offering a range of resources to help us defeat Nightfall, and we are grateful,” he said.

“Are there contingencies if both rockets fail or if they do not completely stop Nightfall?” came another question.

“Within the hour, a formal declaration to all local governments will be sent out, directing them to organize and implement any safety measures they deem necessary to protect citizens in case Nightfall or pieces of it get past our efforts. They are to request any needed resources to aid in those measures to the Federal Government immediately,” he said, clearly having foreseen such a question.

“What will those measures likely comprise of, sir?”

“Organizing shelters by identifying safe locations for local residents to go to, such as Cold War era fallout shelters or even places as simple as subway tunnels. Getting such locations ready for mass habitation and helping people who need it to get there would be my priorities, as well as ensuring that any volunteers know what they need to know so they can better help with the efforts.”

“A question to Superman, if he’s willing to answer,” a gutsy, but polite reporter asked after the customary self-introduction.

The President glanced at Superman in question, offering him the mic. Superman stepped up after a millisecond of hesitation.

“Yes?” Superman asked, now behind the podium, though the President remained respectfully close.

“How do you feel about the plan?” the reporter asked. Lois felt he managed to keep his awe for Superman decently under control, but like nearly all of them, it was still plainly there.

“It’s rare that a species is capable of influencing their planet’s fate in the cosmos—to stop what should otherwise be beyond their control,” he said, an odd tone of loneliness and melancholy somehow leaking into his voice. He shifted slightly. “To my knowledge, I’m the last of my people. Nothing could be done to save my former world, and there was not enough time for a mass exodus, so I am exceedingly grateful that the people of this world are willing and able to act. So in answer to your question, there is no risk to Earth in trying this plan, and the chance of complete success is very high, and I daresay at least stopping the worst of Nightfall is certain, so I fully support this plan and am happy to have a part in it.”

“Do you have any concerns, anything you want to say to the world?” he asked, deciding now was not the time to inquire on Superman’s lost world.

“Yes, though it doesn’t involve the plan itself. As President Garner said, fear can affect people, make them become less than who they really are,” Superman said. He glanced down, clearly choosing his words carefully. He looked up, and Lois was struck by how earnest he had become. “I want to be able to go to the asteroid tomorrow knowing that I will return to find the same world I have grown to love. I don’t want to see panic take any serious hold anywhere. If you’re afraid, which you have every right to be, find something productive to do. Help your neighbor, gather supplies, volunteer with whatever local efforts crop up in response to Nightfall, just don’t give in to fear and allow mob rule to rise. I have long since learned that humans are not helpless. You do have a measure of control in every situation, no matter how dire. So please, don’t lose it in fear.” He straightened, having nothing else to say.

The clapping came quickly, followed by everyone rising from their chairs. And then a shout from the back cascaded into a seamless chant.

“No – to – fear! No – to – fear!” the room chanted, echoing out into all the homes of all the viewers watching live around the world.

President Garner boldly placed his hand on Superman’s shoulder, beaming.

Clark entered through the backdoor long after the sun had set. He could smell his mother’s cooking and hear his dad juggling with the pots in the sink.

“Mom, Dad?” he asked, knowing they were there but wanting to make his presence known. He knew his dad didn’t enjoy feeling as if he’d been snuck up on.

“In the kitchen, Clark,” his dad answered, promptly abandoning the dish washing.

As soon as he entered, his parents quickly engulfed him in their hugs.

“We’ve been following the news all day,” Martha said.

“Was the confidence shown by officials genuine?” Johnathan asked.

“Yes, fortunately. I think this will work,” Clark assured.

“There are risks, of course, but safeguards have been placed to help, such as the second rocket that could be sent with or without me.”

“Do you think the second rocket will be necessary?” Martha asked, concerned.

“As long as the rocket strikes where it should, no, the second won’t be needed. The amount of energy that’s going to be released is more than enough to knock it from its current path.”

“Are you ready? We saw they made you a suit?” his dad asked.

“I’m as ready as I can be. And yes, they’ve included everything possible in my vest and helmet. They even hooked up a way to measure my vitals during the mission,” Clark answered.

“How long will it take you to reach the asteroid?” Martha asked, placing her hand on his arm.

“Around 6 hours is the estimate, so 12 hours round trip. I’ll have 36 hours of air. Since they don’t know if I’ll require more under strain, they said that they preferred to provide me extra just in case.”

“They seem to be considering everything,” Jonathan said in an approving nod.

“I would hope so. They are arguably the smartest collection of people on the planet,” Martha pointed out.

“Well, I should head back and do some last minute checks, I just wanted to ...” Clark trailed off.

“We understand, and we’re glad you stopped by. Even with your abilities, we still want to wish you luck,” his mother assured tenderly. “We’re so proud of you and love you so much.”

“I love you too,” he said, giving them both a tight, lingering hug before finally pulling away and departing.

He waited until he was far enough away before leaving a sonic boom in his wake.

Clark knocked on the ajar door, refraining from sticking his head in. Ironically, he had learned that appearing to not be nosy went a long way in aiding in cases since it made one look courteous instead. Granted, with his abilities, this wasn’t really a difficult practice.

“Come in,” Henderson called.

Clark entered, quickly spotting Mayson in the chair against the wall.

“Hey, Clark,” Henderson greeted.

“Hi, Bill, Mayson. Glad I was able to catch you two,” Clark said, closing the door behind him.

“Oh?” Mayson asked curiously.

“I wanted to let you both know that I’m going to be out of town for awhile. I’m going to help out my folks in Smallville until

Nightfall passes, and then I’ll probably take care of a few other things before returning here,” he explained, his tone apologetic and gentle.

“Oh,” Mayson said, taken aback for a brief moment. “Well, do what you need to do,” she said, standing up.

“When do you head out?” Bill asked.

“Very soon. I actually need to fly out before dinner,” Clark admitted.

Mayson nodded her understanding. “I imagine flights are crazy right now, with everyone trying to get to wherever their family is. I’m glad you were able to get a plane ticket.”

Clark nodded in agreement while hiding his concern for her. Unfortunately, he knew it wouldn’t be appropriate to inquire about her family situation right then, especially if it was less than ideal.

Did she have family to actually visit? Surely she did. He hoped. Picturing her alone as the countdown to Nightfall...

He knew Henderson lived with his wife and two children but didn’t know anything about the man’s extended family. Privately, he swore to himself to get to know his two friends much better after Nightfall.

“I do have a brief update on our case on the Boss, however,” Clark said, changing the subject and pulling out a thin folder. “Here are my notes and a list of possible new leads. I’m not sure how long I’ll be away, so I want to make sure you have everything I do.”

He placed the folder on Henderson’s desk.

“Thanks,” Henderson said as he got up from his desk and went around it. “Lois Lane from the Daily Planet came across some very pertinent information as well, but it can wait until you return.”

“If you can act with certainty, don’t wait up for me,” Clark said. “I’ll let you go through my folder later, but to sum up, I suspect the Boss is directly connected to Lexcorp. Her Majesty’s Secret Service will also likely be contacting you soon in regard to Nigel St. John, formerly Thomas Rebin.”

Henderson’s eyes widened and glanced back at the folder. “Well then, I look forward to going over this,” he said before turning back. “Good luck, Kent, and thanks.” He shook Clark’s hand and pulled him into a brief but firm hug.

“See you whenever you get back, Clark,” Mayson said, following the trend of not actually saying ‘goodbye’.

“See you, Mayson,” Clark said before embracing her as well.

“Call us when you’re heading back,” Henderson said.

“I will,” Clark promised.

Mayson and Bill both turned to the folder on the desk as Clark closed the door behind him.

Lois hung up the phone from behind her desk, staring at the news channel across the bullpen. The world was handling the news of Nightfall exceedingly well, even when one considered the government’s positive spin of it all and Superman’s heartfelt statement. Granted, being shown teams actually working on primary and secondary plans did wonders to help reassure people, including her. She wasn’t sure how much of that was due to understanding more of what was being done or seeing Superman participate. She and Jimmy, along with dozens of other reporters, both television and newspaper, were allowed to view EPRAD’s efforts firsthand.

They watched crews prepare *The Asgard* with Superman zipping to and fro, helping lift equipment into the nose of the rocket so the crews could install it into *The Asgard* before taking down tools they no longer needed. It was amazing to watch how seamlessly they worked together and how easily Superman maneuvered heavy and intricate pieces of technology that would help save the world.

Such encouraging images were placed into that evening’s edition of the Daily Planet, and it wasn’t long before even more

donations began pouring into the Superman Foundation as thanks. Superman would head to Nightfall with *The Asgard* the following morning at 7 am Eastern Standard Time. By 1:00 pm, the world would know whether or not the secondary rocket, *The Phoenix*, would be necessary.

Lois sighed and took a deep breath.

Although the governments of the world hyped up the strong likelihood of success, a number of realistic (and pessimistic) analysts (and by extension a few journalists and radio hosts) pointed out the real risks Superman was taking upon himself.

Everyone knew he needed air to breathe, so they focused on that aspect, but then, with the limited knowledge of his abilities, they drew up scenarios on how he could get stranded in space after being blasted off course from the impact's shockwave or after some electronic or mechanical malfunction. He was going to be flying so far out that even he admitted he couldn't really see Earth from such a distance. Thus, it became known that he would need guidance to have any degree of certainty on making it back. It was a sobering thought, but so much was happening anyway that it became just another fragment in the whirlwind of chaos.

She had met with Henderson an hour before. Kent, apparently, wasn't available to meet, even if they had time to, but there was some good news on the situation. Kent gave Henderson information involving Luthor's assistant Nigel St. John and told him that Her Majesty's Secret Service would no doubt be getting involved in the future (assuming the asteroid was taken care of).

Henderson also told her about an assistant DA, by the name of Mayson Drake, who he had brought in to help with the case. Lois had not been enthused about bringing in another person, but since it looked like they were getting close to needing a warrant, she couldn't say it was a bad idea.

But limited progress aside, in the end, they decided to postpone their investigation, which was just as well.

She looked down at her watch and got up. She needed to head home and get some sleep. She would need to be at EPRAD Command Center early the following morning.

She made it to her apartment before too long, practically on autopilot as she began the arduous process of unlocking her door and entering. She re-locked the door before glancing around her apartment and recalling when it had been particularly dark and off putting. It wasn't like that now, which disappointed her somewhat.

She went over to the window and opened it, wanting a slight breeze. Fresh air was what she needed. She turned around, intending to grab a quick snack before heading to bed, but was startled by a knock.

"I need to get better about not startling you."

She smiled as she turned back to the window where she found Superman – or rather Kal-El – floating just on the other side of the partially open window.

"No, I just need to not assume every noise is something out to get me," she replied, blushing slightly as she motioned him in.

"Just most noises are?" he questioned good-naturedly as he glided inside her apartment and silently landed a few feet from her.

Lois failed to hide a snort. "Unfortunately."

Superman smiled as Lois met his dark brown eyes and grew serious.

"Are you ready to go out there?" she asked.

"Yes. Everything that can be done to make tomorrow successful has been done. It's really quite remarkable. All of the preparations have been coming together very well despite the limited amount of time. How are you with it all?"

"Scared, to be honest. Scared enough for the both of us," she admitted, making her way to the couch and sitting down.

Superman joined her, placing a bag she hadn't noticed he had on the table.

"What's that?" she asked.

"I wasn't sure if you had eaten, and since the last time I was here I mentioned that I would try to bring take out...." He shrugged and opened the bag, revealing a pair of fresh sandwiches and coleslaw.

One had mixed pickled vegetables and sliced turkey onto crusty ciabatta bread. The other was on honey wheat bread with thick slices of ham, provolone cheese, tomato and leaves of lettuce.

"I stopped by a deli real quick on my way here."

She blinked. "At this time of night?"

"It's not as late in California," he said simply, handing her the turkey club.

"Ah. Well, thank you. I haven't eaten since eleven. Would you like a drink? I think I have a 2 liter bottle of cream soda in the fridge," Lois said, deciding to just go with it.

There were other things she wanted to discuss with him besides how exactly he got their food – though she would have loved to have seen how the people at the restaurant reacted to his presence. Granted, perhaps he didn't go as Superman?

"Sure, thank you," he said.

She returned a moment later with two full glasses of cream soda. She picked up her sandwich.

"I'm glad you stopped by. I know tomorrow is going to be pretty hectic; organized chaos, I imagine. We probably won't get the chance to talk at all."

He nodded. "Yes, which is why I came by now," he agreed, making her heart skip a beat. "I wanted to thank you. Things would have been very different if you hadn't written that article all those months ago."

"What do you mean?"

"The world knows about me now because of that article. If my existence had not been more or less exposed then, helping now would have been much harder."

She nodded slowly, not having considered that consequence of her actions before. "I suppose a stranger coming to EPRAD, offering miraculous help, would not have been received well."

"Caution and fear probably would have prevented me from helping directly, or at least hindered it a great deal. But I probably would have tried to go a different route anyway, instead of trying to make contact with the EPRAD scientists to stop the asteroid. But it doesn't matter. We are in much better circumstances," he said, waving it away gratefully.

"So you're confident this will work?" she asked, happy to see him so at ease.

"Nothing is a guarantee, but to answer your question, yes, I'm pretty confident."

"That's a relief to hear," she said, before taking a few bites. "Wow, this definitely hits the spot."

"It's one of my favorite sandwich places. I first came across it last year."

"You know, I know you've lived on Earth for years, but imagining you just walking into a store or whatever like the rest of us is really hard to picture for some reason."

"It's probably because of the suit," he said with a grin as he pointed to his S-shield with his sandwich.

"You're probably right. But anyway, is there anything you need? I mean, do you have anything that needs to be taken care of while you're gone? A pet fed? A plant watered? I know it'll just be half a day, but some pets and plants are needy."

Superman laughed. "No, my house and affairs are all set. Though ..." He stilled. "You should probably know, I left some envelopes to be delivered by the Foundation if ... certain conditions are met. One is addressed to you."

"Oh." She lowered her sandwich.

"It's just a precaution. I tend to be optimistic, but I've learned to be realistic with certain aspects of life so I place contingencies," he quickly explained upon seeing her expression.

“I understand,” she managed, trying not to get too emotional. “I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything,” he apologized.

She swallowed and forced herself to keep her voice steady. She partially succeeded.

“No, I’m glad you’re thinking ahead. If you’re being this thorough, it means you’ve been just as thorough in preparing for taking care of the asteroid.” She took a deep breath. “I’ve just been refusing to think about anything other than success. I suppose that’s not the smartest thing to do, especially since I’m a reporter.”

“It’s the natural thing to do, which is why I’m going to deflect this conversation to something a little less stressful. What do you plan on doing after all of this is over and things are back to normal? Or as normal as things are for you at least,” he said, before taking the last few bites of his sandwich.

“Return to an investigation that I’m on, which—! One second.” She quickly put her glass down and dashed to her room before returning a moment later. “I’ve been working with Inspector Henderson, and we’ve found some rather ... alarming things. Heh, sorry; so much for a less stressful topic.”

Superman frowned and took the offered pages, quickly going through her notes including heavily highlighted sections. His eyebrows rose high, and his eyes went wide the further he flipped through the pages, the paper and his hands blurring as he breezed through the information before he set it all back down in a neat stack. He looked back up at her.

“Despite the seriousness of those pages, I must say I’m a little jealous of your speed-reading ability. It would help a lot in research,” she said, quite impressed.

“It does have its uses,” he admitted before frowning in thought.

“I’m sorry, Kal-El, I should have waited. You already have enough on your mind.”

“It’s fine, and I’d rather know than not. I’ve suspected him for some time but haven’t been able to gather enough evidence against him, but with this...” His voice trailed off.

“What?” she asked, growing concerned by his silence.

“As soon as I’m back, we’ll move on Luthor. He has a great deal to answer for and we shouldn’t wait.”

Lois smiled, relieved he was thinking along the same lines as herself.

“Well, I should go and let you sleep,” he said, putting his trash in the bag for easy clean up before standing.

“Do you need to sleep?” she blurted. Apparently she was more tired than she realized, though, if she was honest with herself, her curiosity often got the better of her no matter her state of mind. Thankfully, Superman didn’t seem to mind her sudden and somewhat odd inquiry.

“Yes, but I typically only need two to three hours to feel rested. I’ve gone about a week without any sleep and just got a little tired but didn’t feel the need to test myself further.”

Lois smiled and shook her head.

“What?” he asked, slightly confused.

“I must admit I would have stayed up as long as I could, most likely binge-watching rentals at night, just to see how long I could stay up,” Lois said.

“I can definitely believe that,” he said, amused as she walked him to the window.

He turned back to her. “Well, good night, Lois,” he said as they came to a hesitant stop.

She smiled softly before growing bold, realizing she would forever kick herself if she didn’t seize this moment—if not for her sake, for his. She stepped toward him and took his hand, giving it a firm, reassuring squeeze. He didn’t pull away or look too taken aback, so she brought her hand up and placed it on his chest, near the edge of his family crest, and looked up at him.

“I’ll be all right,” he said, possibly just to fill the silence as he

put his free hand on the side of her face.

She nodded, not sure if she could really trust her voice so she swallowed and closed the distance, wrapping her arms around him. He returned the hug, and she was amazed by how warm, how *human*, he felt.

After a long moment, she forced herself to pull back. “See you tomorrow, Kal-El,” she said, before growing brave once more and placing a light kiss on his cheek.

Surprised, but clearly not offended, he smiled and gave her hand one final squeeze.

“See you tomorrow, Lois,” he said, before letting go and stepping back to disappear the next instant. A sonic boom followed soon after.

Chapter 8 – Impact

There were dozens of news crews and the flashes from cameras were enough to give most anyone a migraine. Hundreds of people were gathered behind the press line and a row of military and government officials from around the world were on the other side, giving quotes and the like as scientists and engineers continued to work on the launch site far behind them. Along with people, the launchpad had the rocket loaded with explosives and electronic equipment, though it did not have any fuel to actually launch. All propulsion would be provided by Superman, who was all set just yards away from the press.

A navy blue vest was secured over his uniform, braced with leather and reinforced kevlar straps that went around his thighs – the final design of his space harness. A tank of oxygen was on his capeless back and a space helmet was tucked under his arm, waiting to be placed over his head. Most everyone already knew the components of Superman’s special equipment, it all having been covered by the media the day before, including the wires that ran from a wristband to the vest with a few wires even disappearing under his tight-fitting standard uniform. His vitals were going to be recorded and watched during the whole mission, which both reassured and intrigued the public.

All of the reporters at the press line, Lois included, were waiting and hoping to receive some quotes to help make their article one that would be specifically cited in the history books to retell this exceptional day.

Superman looked across the people around him, standing with an assuredness reminiscent of a soldier softened by a relaxed posture and the occasional smile he gave to people waving at him behind the security line. However, if one looked carefully, there was a touch of nervousness in his expressive brown eyes.

“Superman,” a man began, getting everyone’s attention as the launchpad was vacated by engineers and other personnel. It was time. Superman approached, taking the man’s extended hand. He was Elias Olafsson, the current Speaker of the United Nations. “Speaking on behalf of Humanity, thank you,” he said.

Superman gave a nod as the people beside the Speaker gave their thanks as well. The media captured it all, witnessing several international leaders give their regards to the Man of Steel, until, finally, it was time for him to carry out the mission. Dr. Daitch stopped beside him.

Superman stilled and looked to all the people gathered. Silence rose, and no one moved.

“I’ll do my best,” Superman said before donning his helmet.

He turned to Daitch, who quickly helped him complete the last minute equipment testing, before flying to the launchpad. It was a peculiar sight to see such a relatively small, levitating form take hold of the massive rocket and lift it from the platform. It was then even stranger to see said individual simply shift himself and cause the missile to take off with no fire or noise a moment later.

Faster and faster the rocket rose until it cut through the clouds and vanished from sight.

The world continued to pause in whatever they were doing at least once every fifteen minutes to get an update on what was happening thousands upon thousands of miles away. All news stations were reporting EPRAD's readouts and updates, covering everything from the rocket's most recent calculated momentum to Superman's last known location. There was even a devoted corner on nearly every screen showing Superman's last recorded vital signs. A few stations even displayed an electrocardiogram (EKG).

"I believe I see it. Over," Superman's voice cut in.

Everyone who wasn't already watching quickly clamored to the nearest television. That was the most Superman had said in the last three hours.

Suddenly a view box appeared on the feed with the label 'Camera S1' at the bottom. The camera displayed the surface of the rocket with one of Superman's hands visible. Above that was the blackness of space, save for an infinitesimal spec in the distance. There was also S2 and 3, which were cameras located on Superman's shoulder and sleeve, and R1 through 6, which were cameras on the rocket itself.

On another television screen that read 'Satellite Delta' at the top, there was an image that showed a zoomed in view from a distance. All of the satellites capable on that side of the Earth were aimed at the asteroid in hopes of capturing the collision to better verify if the threat was over or not. Currently in view was a silver rod with a blue smudge on the side that appeared to be heading to a brownish black smudge in the distance.

"We copy, Superman. You are still roughly two hours out from the point of release. You have 345,722 miles left to go. Your vitals appear stable with zero respirations for the last fifteen minutes. Are you tiring at all? Over," EPRAD Command returned.

Everyone's eyes snapped to the little monitor at the bottom of the screen beside the 'time to release' readout.

100.5°F, 50 bpm, 0 RR, 92 SpO2

Six or so seconds later, Superman replied.

"No, I feel the same, but I admit my sense of time seems to be slipping. It feels like a lot more time should have passed than just four hours. Over."

"It is likely due to disorientation in empty space. You have no frame of reference. Over."

"Makes sense. Unless something changes, I'll check in an hour from now. Over."

"Understood. Over."

100.5°F, 49 bpm, 1 RR, 100 SpO2

"I never thought I would ever witness anything like this," Perry said as they continued working in the midst of the continuous TV reports.

It was nearing the six hour mark. On a few screens, a simple moving diagram appeared. It had been shown a few times before to give the public a better understanding of the distance being traveled and the size of the asteroid they were facing. A blue circle, signifying Superman and the rocket, was approaching a dotted line marking the zone in which Superman would release the rocket. On another screen, showing another live feed, the former spec had become a massive rock and there was now a silver object approaching from the right, though it was still a fair distance away from the asteroid.

"It is pretty surreal," Jimmy agreed some time later as EPRAD communications sparked to life for the fifth time that hour.

'In a few moments, we will carry out the final release procedures with Superman,' the EPRAD scientist said confidently in the midst of dozens of other scientists and operators among a sea of screens.

One news camera panned Mission Control, while others covered other items of interest. It was a good thing there were a dozen televisions in the bullpen of the Daily Planet.

Suddenly, Jimmy noticed something odd just as a newscaster

pointed it out. Superman's vitals had changed.

100.6°F, 59 bpm, 2 RR, 100 SpO2

"Well, he knows the time to release is coming. I imagine it's just nerves, Carl," the other newscaster assured. "I mean, I'd be a bit nervous and excited in his position right about now, wouldn't you?"

That seemed to appease Carl and most other people, until they heard EPRAD.

"Do you read, Superman? Over?"

Nothing.

"Superman, this is EPRAD Control, do you read? Over?"

Before five seconds had passed, camera S1 blinked into static and one of the news cameras showing the view-screens of cameras S2, S3, R1 through R6 followed in the same instant. Static.

However, the satellite images were still broadcasting.

'Technical difficulties?' Carl asked.

The co-host blinked, his previous expression of reassurance caving to one of stunned panic.

100.7°F, 115 bpm, 3 RR, 100 SpO2

"Our communications have been disrupted by something," a scientist out of frame said.

Lois knew something was wrong the moment she saw his heart rate go up. She couldn't explain why, but she knew he would keep himself calm in almost any situation, especially if he knew the world was watching, which he did. If he was physically responding to whatever was happening, it must be bad.

She made her way down to where a number of the important officials were, including Daitch and General Zeitlin. Thanks to who she was (being the first to make known contact with Superman), she was given greater reign than the other reporters at Mission Control.

"What's happening to his vitals?" someone asked as a lead technician notified the press that they would soon begin the 'release procedure'.

Lois wanted to roll her eyes at that. How hard was letting go? Did they have to over complicate everything, especially when they had gone over everything with him on Earth **and** within the last hour?

"I'm not sure," Daitch said as they waited for Superman to reply to their most recent hail.

And waited.

They repeated the hail, and they all grew uneasy, but true panic didn't come until the cameras on Superman and the rocket went dead.

"What the heck is going on?" someone exclaimed.

"Wait, look at the heart monitor!" another shouted.

Lois gasped as she looked at the EKG readout that was tracking Superman's heartbeat. No one needed to be a doctor to know that that was not a normal heart beat ... even for a Kryptonian.

It had no sensible rhythm and the peaks and valleys looked nothing like those his heart had produced for the past several hours.

"My Lord, that's Morse Code," General Zeitlin breathed.

"He's passed the moment of release!" Daitch shouted.

"Let go! It's on course! Just let it go!" several people cried even though they knew Superman could not hear them.

"He must have removed all but one of the EKG leads and is now using a second lead to tap this out," a scientist beside Lois said, amazed. "He knows this line is separate from our standard com."

"What's he saying?!" Lois asked, ignoring the time to impact now flashing on several screens, as well as Superman's vitals.

101.1°F, 145 bpm, 25 RR, 100 SpO2

"Ten seconds!" someone shouted in the background as Zeitlin grabbed a pen and started writing each letter as it came after

quickly jotting down the two that had already scrolled past.

“Oh, Lord Almighty.”

Lois didn’t know who uttered that as she watched Zeitlin write.

S A B O T A G E L

The timer went to zero, the rocket’s locator beacon and Superman’s met the asteroid blip on the screen, disappearing. The EKG readout went dead.

The satellite images revealed an instant flash giving way to an immense, black and gray, impenetrable cloud expanding out. They couldn’t see Superman.

“We have impact.”

The announcer’s voice was not triumphant or joyful, but flat and weak, and yet it echoed around the world like a crack of thunder would in a wide verdant valley.

EPRAD Command was silent for all of two seconds before people began moving about in well-ordered chaos as commands from lead engineers and managers filled the air.

“Go through the images frame by frame, see if he managed to let go and get away!”

“Confirm breakup of asteroid!”

“Sweep through all our systems, find out where, when and how our coms and cameras failed and why!”

“Is his tracking beacon still working?” General Zeitlin shouted over the noise.

“No, it’s gone, just like the rocket’s,” the nearest technician answered, bringing up a more detailed display of their equipment’s outputs.

Everything connected to Superman and the rocket provided no readings, but the satellites were beginning to gather spectrometry data and broad spectral analysis as the dust and debris cloud continued to expand.

And then nearly all the incoming satellite feeds on that side of the earth abruptly died and over a quarter of all television broadcasts around the world fell into static.

Everyone in EPRAD looked around at one another in disbelief.

“That was an electromagnetic pulse. A big one,” Daitch said in the horrified silence.

The following hours were filled with pandemonium, but, thankfully, due to the precautions taken by local and federal governments, basic communications were restored in most places within the first hour. At the very least help could be requested and news could be shared instantly.

The public was numb. Almost everyone had witnessed the moment of impact on live television and saw Superman’s locator vanish.

The EMP had destroyed all the satellites in or above geosynchronous orbit on the side of the Earth nearest to the blast, and a fair chunk of those in low earth orbit, but fortunately the atmosphere had disrupted the worst of the pulse before it could reach ground level.

Everyone who knew how catastrophic an EMP would be for a city, let alone entire nations, breathed a sigh of relief when they learned the EMP had not been as bad as they had initially feared. They had enough to deal with already.

The only silver lining was the confirmation that Nightfall had been completely and utterly shattered. They were able to pierce through the dust particles with infrared telescopes and view the remains of the asteroid.

All of the remaining pieces were no longer in line to impact Earth, but even if they were, the largest remaining shards would not even pose a moderate threat. The asteroid shards were now considered meteoroids, and most of them would burn up in the atmosphere due to their size if they came that close.

Unfortunately, they were not able to find Superman, but they admitted he could be behind some of the larger debris. Despite their attempts, that statement was not very reassuring.

Lois remained at EPRAD after phoning in most of what had transpired and gathering everything she could get to the bottom of what had happened and who was responsible. The message Superman had sent in Morse Code was not publicized, as EPRAD wanted to investigate further before allowing that to get out.

But public or not, it was clear to Lois that someone had sabotaged the rocket and had forced Superman to . . .

Lois furiously blinked her tears away.

“Ms. Lane?” a voice asked.

She turned to find Mark Leon, one of Dr. Daitch’s assistants, standing near her. As ordered by Daitch, he was compiling Superman’s last moments so they could perhaps determine his fate. They did not wish to give up all hope unless there was proof that such hope was futile.

“Yes?” she asked, quickly joined by a handful of other scientists and engineers.

“I think you’ll want to see this,” he said, motioning to the screen.

She walked over, quickly recognizing Superman’s vitals, only this time they were listed minute by minute. Mark selected the last one, expanding it to reveal a breakdown of each vital, second by second.

Her eyes widened. That was a lot of data.

“Do you see it?” he asked.

“His respirations. Is this the length of time he inhaled and exhaled?” she asked, seeing two columns of numbers beside clock times.

“Yes,” he said. “The scientists wanted to know for knowledge’s sake, so they made it to measure that instead of merely counting breaths.”

Lois nodded slowly, realizing scientists would take every opportunity to study Superman, even if in a roundabout way. It was a good thing they had in this instance.

“He exhaled a lot more during all of these times, but then at the end . . .” Lois trailed off.

Mark nodded, pleased. “He inhaled as much as he could. And if you look at the tank readings, you can see how it sharply plummets right before impact,” he said, pointing. “Astonishing lung capacity.”

“So he breathed in as much oxygen as he could, knowing the tank would not survive the impact.” She concluded before breaking out into a grin that matched Mark’s and those around them. “Does he have enough air to make it back?”

“Yes, assuming he was able to keep the air in his lungs and survived the impact itself, which I believe he’s capable of, so there is a chance,” Daitch said, approaching from the side after quickly taking in the data on the screen.

Suddenly, he grew solemn. “Now we just need to hope he figures out which direction to go.”

He woke with a start, and his chest felt almost painfully full, and yet, something told him not to exhale. Something instinctive, primal even. His mouth felt gritty, as if he had taken a bite of charcoal, and his skin didn’t feel much better.

Looking around, he found himself in a black fog filled with floating debris he could somehow see, if only barely. He didn’t know where he was or how he had gotten there, but he knew he needed to leave. He did his best to peer through the cloud and was astonished when the cloud seemed to fade and allow him to gaze beyond.

A scattering of sparkling diamonds spanned a black drapery of nothingness.

And then a cold realization ripped through him. He was lost. He whirled around, trying to find anything to tell him what to

do.

He suddenly spotted a blinding orb of light to his right, but then a small shimmer of blue caught his eye further to the right. Home.

He willed himself forward, despite the fatigue he suddenly noticed creeping upon him and the heavy soreness saturating his muscles that was accompanied with sharp, random discomfort.

What had happened?

He shook himself and refocused, reassured as he felt the black dust of the cloud rushing past him as he somehow propelled himself forward. He broke through the heavy mist, grazing past a large rock as the light from the sun now gleamed to his left.

Strange, he could not feel its heat.

‘Perhaps due to distance?’ he wondered.

Time passed; the blue dot of home now slightly bigger. He pat his chest, feeling thick, rough residue coating practically every inch of him as he puffed out and deflated his cheeks without releasing any air from his lungs a few times in attempt to shake up the only air he had available to him. He wished he could release a bit of it, particularly the carbon dioxide he was producing to improve the oxygen ratio at least, but he couldn’t.

Somehow he knew he couldn’t. Not if he wanted to live.

After an unknown amount of time, his chest began to really ache in a type of pain that almost brought tears to his eyes. The only other sensation that was more substantial was the cold. The cold was indescribable.

More time passed, though he couldn’t tell how much; he only knew he needed to get to wherever he was going soon.

His vision was blurring, his hands were numb, and his lungs were painfully throbbing for fresh air as the beautiful blue orb revealed itself to be a globe of life.

He cut through the atmosphere, glorious heat encircling him as he left the void of space. Unfortunately, the welcoming heat did not last, and frigid air quenched the fire on his form far too quickly, but at least he had made it. He expelled the stale, compressed air from his lungs and heaving in what should have been a breath of fresh night air, but it might as well have been nothing.

He coughed before trying to inhale again as he barely managed to stabilize his descent. His lungs were burning while the rest of him was freezing cold. He seemed to get a little air from all of his efforts, but it was certainly not sustainable. He was going to be in serious trouble if he didn’t get help very soon.

His eyes caught something familiar and something in the back of his mind insisted he go there, certain it was the closest guarantee of help.

The city came into a blurry focus, but he still managed to differentiate between skyscrapers, roads, and buildings. However, what made it difficult was trying to ignore everything he was hearing. His ears seemed to be going haywire and it was extremely disorienting, made even more so by his failing vision. He turned to a collection of shorter buildings and surmised they were apartments. He wasn’t sure why he was going there, but his gut had taken him this far; he wasn’t going to question it now.

He began to shiver, despite the warm night, and continued to fail to get a full breath of air even though he was sure he was breathing in as deeply as he could. He made it to a window, barely setting his feet down on the ledge as his chest began to feel as if it was collapsing.

He plowed into the window, the ting of the window lock breaking ringing loudly in his ears as he fell into the apartment and landed with a thud.

Chapter 9 – Tar

Lois’ living room was a mess. She had gathered everything she could from EPRAD and had a great deal of papers and folders strewn on various surfaces, including the floor.

Thanks to that evening’s paper, the world suspected someone had orchestrated the malfunction in the equipment that had prevented EPRAD from communicating with Superman *and* had somehow convinced Superman that he needed to stay with the rocket.

It was the only thing that made sense.

Looking back at the com readouts, they had determined the coms had been disrupted roughly three minutes before impact. What if the coms hadn’t simply malfunctioned or been severed but had been redirected? Could someone have been speaking with Superman? That would explain the elevated heart rate before the technical difficulties had been discovered, unless Superman had tried to communicate and hadn’t been able to get through before EPRAD had tried? But if that were the case, why hold on to the rocket unless he was certain the sabotage extended to the rocket systems, and how would he know that unless someone told him?

Lois hoped he would return soon so he could tell them what had happened.

She clenched her teeth, beating down the horrid thought of ‘if he comes back, that is.’

Turning her attention to the list she was creating, Lois laid out a timeline of sorts as well as everything being done to get answers.

They had determined the EMP had come from the asteroid. Somehow the material makeup of the asteroid had discharged a large amount of electromagnetic energy when it had been destroyed. Scientists believed it was due to the core of the asteroid, since the surface of the asteroid only contained rock, clay, and nickel. Which was another reason why EPRAD was working furiously to identify what exactly made up the asteroid, especially since the explosion had been larger than they had expected. But it would take time, perhaps a great deal of time due to the ruined satellites. At the moment, they only had the data that had been gathered in those few seconds between the explosion and the pulse. That and what they could see from earthbound telescopes which were unfortunately under cloud cover that would last through the night.

Mrs. Lonham, Lois’ neighbor, entered the room carrying two steaming cups of coffee on a wooden tray despite the late hour.

She had no family nearby and, with recent events, Lois invited her over so neither would be alone. Lonham was up in years and not in the best of health, but she was still able to make a great cup of Joe and was very nice to talk to. It was part of the reason why Lois was quick to help her out with groceries and the like. Finding people who could keep up with her conversationally was rare, after all.

“Any progress?” Lonham asked, setting Lois’ coffee down beside a stack of papers she was reading.

“I think so,” she said, before glaring at one of the stacks. “When I figure out who is responsible for all of this....” She didn’t bother to finish the threat.

“I’m looking forward to it, dear,” Lonham said, sitting down on the far end of the couch that was free of paper and closest to her main oxygen tank.

She had COPD and, as such, her portable tanks had to be refilled every six to ten hours (depending on how much oxygen she needed). After putting her cup down, she disconnected the lines to her now full tank before reclaiming her cup and reclining back against the couch.

“Thank you again, Lois. Being alone at home had not been appealing,” she said, taking a sip of her coffee.

“No problem, Eleanor,” she said, scanning a sheet she had obtained from Jimmy that afternoon.

After inviting her to stay, the older woman had insisted on being called Eleanor. They were no longer simply neighbors and being called Mrs. Lonham was unnecessarily formal now.

“What are you going to do next?” she asked as Lois took a moment to rub her eyes.

“Compile a list of everyone who had access and the ability to alter the electronics on the rocket and begin investigating them,” Lois answered simply. “I can’t completely trust anyone at EPRAD right now, so I need to do as much as I can on my own – not that that’s new really. Anyway, they no doubt have a rat on the inside who helped with this for some reason.”

“So you are going to find out who and why?”

She nodded. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone was an unwilling accomplice, but then we could be dealing with someone who was happy to do what they did.”

She moved to pick up another sheet of paper—

CRASH!

THUD

“What on Earth?!” Eleanor shouted, spilling some of her coffee as Lois rushed out to see what had happened in the other room.

A pitch black and grey figure was on his hands and knees in front of the window, wheezing horribly.

The light of the room was on, which was a good thing because she might not have been able to see him otherwise.

“Kal-El?!” she shouted, torn at hoping it was him while at the same time praying it wasn’t. But it was. No one else could get up to her apartment and enter (forcefully or not) through that window.

He had departed without his cape, so not seeing it didn’t surprise her, but the rest of what she saw did. His uniform was in tatters and covered in a black and grey residue that looked like dry tar mixed with ash. His boots were gone and his sleeves and pants were shredded with his right shoulder completely exposed, save for the black and grey all over it.

She quickly knelt down beside him, placing her hands on his back before immediately pulling them away. The black grit was rough and felt more like fine glass than one would think by its appearance.

And he was absolutely freezing!

“Kal-El,” she said again, for a moment at a loss of what to do as he continued to wheeze.

He looked up at her, showing that not even his lips or the inside of his mouth was free of the black material.

“Let’s get this stuff off of you, come on!” she urged, latching onto the first thing she thought of that had the chance of helping him. She looked back to the living room, hearing Eleanor approaching. “Eleanor, water and washcloths! Bring them to my room! It’s Superman!”

“Oh! I will as fast as I can!” she said, rushing back to the kitchen.

“Come on,” she said again, helping Kal-El up.

She was alarmed by how badly he was shivering, and his hands didn’t seem to be working at all. It was a struggle to get him to her bathroom that was less than a dozen feet away and into the tub she had. He could barely even step into it and all but collapsed. She helped ease his back against the tub’s back wall, trying to hide how afraid she was becoming at seeing him this way.

She started the water, leaving the drain open as it washed over his blackened feet. She waited a moment for the water to warm up, placing a reassuring hand on his chest as she grabbed one of her spare washcloths on the side of the tub. She wet it and began wiping his mouth as Eleanor came in.

Lois couldn’t help but gasp. His lips were blue and the skin she could see was as pale as a corpse. He was now taking short, weak gasps and his eyes were glassing over. His head was dropping forward and he wasn’t shivering anymore. Lois knew that couldn’t be good.

“Here, give him this!” Eleanor suddenly exclaimed, giving Lois her portable oxygen tank.

Lois took it without question, placing the nasal cannula on him after doing her best to wipe out the black crud from his nose. Eleanor set the tank’s flow on high.

“Help sit him up,” Eleanor directed, taking a seat on a stool on the other side of the tub since she couldn’t help much physically. “He likely has whatever is on him in his lungs.”

“Oh gawd,” Lois breathed, instantly realizing the implications.

“Cup your hand, like this, and as you lean him forward, pound his back slightly under the shoulder blades and just off the spine,” Eleanor said, suddenly grateful for having a son who fought pneumonia a number of times during his childhood. “Do it as many times as you can. I’ll tell you if you need to hit harder.”

It was a little awkward, balancing him with one arm while her other hit his back. She could tell he was doing everything he could to stay conscious. She seriously doubted she would have been able to keep him upright if he wasn’t.

As Lois began doing that, Eleanor took the cup she had brought and dumped it – Superman couldn’t drink anything at the moment anyway – and began taking the now warm water from the faucet and pouring it over his back and shoulders to try to warm him up, as well as rinse off whatever was caked on him.

On the twentieth or fiftieth heavy pat, (Lois had lost count when her arm began wanting to fall off) he began coughing.

And coughing.

Disgusting, black mucus mixed with the same substance that coated Kal-El’s body came up, striking the bottom of the tub between his calves with a sickening slap, but with each one, each following gasp sounded a little less strained.

“Good, good job. Just let it out,” Eleanor encouraged, deciding it was better to act as if this was no big deal.

“Better?” Lois asked as he took a deep, slow breath, his expression clearly relieved.

“Much,” he rasped, closing his eyes. “Thanks.”

Lois smiled, just as relieved, though she was still aware he was way too cold. “All right, let’s get you cleaned and warmed up.”

She eased him back, taking one of the clean cloths Eleanor had brought as Eleanor used the cup to scoop up the black viscous slough from the bottom of the tub.

“We might need to learn what was in his lungs. If we do, we’ll have this,” she explained at Lois’ questioning look.

Lois nodded in understanding as she gave the bottom a quick rinse and then stopped up the drain. They were quiet for a while, simply lost in the moment as the warmer-than-hot water began to rise. Lois looked at Kal-El, now reclined back against the tub and very close to sleep. It was definitely an odd sight to know this man had done so much and was now so vulnerable.

She brought the washcloth up to his face and began to gently clean away the space tar – which was the best term she could think of for it. Going to his temple, he suddenly winced. Frowning, she carefully continued.

She found a bruise, starting an inch from his hairline and no doubt going beyond it, under his hair.

“You have a bruise,” Lois said in disbelief.

He gave a noncommittal hum, dozing.

She found another a moment later by his neck and then another that fully encompassed his bare shoulder. That one was clearly a deep impact bruise, it’s center vengefully vibrant. She suddenly wanted to cry. She looked up at Eleanor who didn’t look much better.

“Kal-El, I’m going to remove the top half of your uniform, all right?” Lois said after swallowing thickly.

“Kay,” he mumbled.

Lois got up and grabbed some scissors from one of her bathroom drawers before returning. Eleanor turned off the water. It was now up to his armpits.

“Lois, where do you keep your thermometer? We should probably check his temperature,” Eleanor said.

“In the cabinet over there,” she said, pointing. “Are you doing

okay?" she asked her, glancing at the oxygen Superman was still using.

"Yes. If I need it, there's another tank in the next room I can use," she assured as she began searching for the thermometer.

Lois nodded before focusing on her own task. Pulling at the material, she began cutting it away. Removing the strips, she laid them across the back ledge of the tub. Most of the residue came off with the cloth, but there was still a fine layer stuck to his skin, apparently having slipped between the fibers. She took a moment to wipe across his chest as Eleanor came back with the thermometer.

They both stilled.

"Should we be concerned about serious internal injuries?"

Eleanor asked after a moment.

"I ... I don't know. They look similar to what I got from paintball the one time I played, just ... bigger."

Angry purple and blue marks littered his torso, from marble to baseball sized, although more were concentrated on his right side.

"Hmm?" he asked, squinting up at them.

"We need to check your temperature," Eleanor said, prompting him to turn his head so she could reach his ear. He did so.

"What is it?" Lois asked as Eleanor looked at the reading with a frown.

"89 degrees. His normal is 100.5, right?" she asked.

Lois nodded, now working on cleaning his arm.

"And he hasn't started shivering again," Eleanor said, concerned.

"Hypothermia?" Lois asked.

"Without question," Eleanor said authoritatively.

"All right, let's get this stuff off of him, then we can get him dry and under my electric blanket," Lois said.

They drained and refilled the tub two more times, using warmer water each time before they managed to get the majority of the dark space plaque off. She also cut away as much of his uniform as she could, removing everything from the mid thigh down and waist up, leaving him in a pair of strange, discolored shorts. Most of the time, she was pretty sure he was asleep or unconscious, and though his skin seemed to be warming slightly, he hadn't started shivering again yet. He should have if he was adequately regaining his temperature, but they knew he wasn't. His temperature was still 89 the last two times they took it.

"W-where am I?" Kal-El suddenly asked, his eyes halfway open as they began drying him with several towels.

"You're in my apartment," Lois answered.

"Cold. So cold," he mumbled.

"We know, we're drying you off now, and then we'll get you into bed."

"Into bed. Home, I need to go home," he said, feebly reaching out.

"Okay, but let's get you warm first, all right?" Lois said, taking his hand.

"Need to get home," he insisted.

"Okay, where do you live?" Lois asked, deciding not to fight him.

"Need to get home," he repeated. "Can't stop." He repeated it a few more times, no longer really hearing or seeing what was around him.

"I think he's becoming delirious," Eleanor said. "Maybe we should take him to the hospital."

"No!" he shouted, jolting up before flopping back, apparently more aware than they had thought. "No hospitals! Please, no hospitals."

"What? Why?" Lois asked, alarmed by his reaction.

"Not safe, not safe," he said earnestly despite his growing weakness.

"All right, no hospitals," Lois promised, patting his arm. He calmed quickly, sagging and falling back to unconsciousness.

Lois and Eleanor looked at each other.

"I might know someone we can call," Lois said hesitantly, biting her lip. "And there's someone else I should probably call anyway to let them know what's happened. I just don't know if we should give him more time to recover. I doubt this will stay secret for long if I tell anyone outside of here."

"I think we'll need to call someone sooner rather than later, unless you think you can get him out by yourself?" she asked, indicating the tub.

"I'll try first and then go from there," she said, not eager to call either person she had in mind.

Patting his cheek, she tried to rouse him. "Kal-El, I need you to wake up a bit. I need your help to get you to bed."

He didn't respond. She tried it again, and he moaned.

"Come on, as soon as you're in bed you can sleep as long as you need," Lois encouraged.

He sluggishly sat up and accepted Lois' help with Eleanor making sure the oxygen line had plenty of slack as she carried the small portable tank toward the bedside table. Carefully, Lois managed to help him stand, and he stepped from the tub.

"Thanks," he said as they made their way to the bed.

"It's the least we can do after you saved the world," Eleanor said, setting the tank on the side table before pulling the covers back from the bed.

He suddenly stumbled and grabbed hold of the wall as Lois did her best to stabilize him.

"Are you all right?" Lois asked.

He nodded, although he seemed a bit stiff and confused.

"You're still very cold, likely hypothermic. I have an electric blanket, so I'm hoping that will help you," Lois explained while she helped him with the last step.

He climbed into the bed, though Lois had to help with his legs before she could place her electric blanket on him, followed by the comforter. She adjusted the temperature dial, about to tell him he could adjust it if he wished, but she found he was already asleep.

"Should we take his temperature again?" Eleanor asked.

"Yeah. I want to know when it begins going up," she said, already getting the thermometer. "I feel like it should have by now."

She took the reading, and Lois wanted to curse.

"It's worse. 85," Lois said.

"How the heck did we lose four degrees? Let's check again in fifteen minutes. It's bound to be better once he's under the heated blanket for a bit," Eleanor said.

Lois nodded but retrieved her phone.

"I'll stay with him," Eleanor assured quietly.

Lois smiled gratefully before heading out of the room so she wouldn't disturb Kal-El, assuming anything could actually wake him up at the moment.

Taking a deep breath, she called the number she hadn't really wanted to call again so soon, but this was important. It was for Superman.

"Hi, Daddy," she said, trying to sound calm as she was suddenly hit with how close the world had come to losing Superman.

She knew there was still a chance they could lose him if she missed something or failed to help him. If he hadn't expressed such fear of going to the hospital she'd be calling 911 instead. Good Lord, what would have happened if Eleanor hadn't been there to offer her oxygen?

"Sweetie? Everything okay? You sound a little tense or something. You didn't sound tense at all during your last call, and the world had a chance of ending then," he said, latching onto her tone much better than she had wanted or expected. "Are you all

right?"

She swallowed. "Daddy, I can't go into specifics, but I need your medical knowledge here. It's serious, so don't ask why I'm asking what I'm about to ask, just go with me here, all right?"

"All right," he said slowly, now really concerned.

"How do you treat hypothermia?" she asked.

"Uh, it depends on how severe it is and the symptoms the patient is displaying and how long they've been hypothermic," he said, confused and taken aback by the medical subject. At first he was afraid she would ask about how to treat a bullet wound or something. He supposed this was a ... better subject.

"All right. About 15 degrees below normal, no shivering, sorta delirious, confused, very tired, um... ." She trailed off, not sure what else to add or include.

"That's moderately hypothermic, definitely a condition that should be treated in the hospital," he said, asking without technically asking why this person wasn't already in a hospital.

"Okay, but how is it treated?"

"Well, wrapping the patient with heated blankets or placing warm compresses at the neck, groin, and along the chest wall would be the first step. If they can drink, I'd offer warm liquids like warm cocoa or tea. Not hot, mind you.

"If that doesn't work, I'd start warm intravenous fluids and warm air to breathe, and then I'd consider blood rewarming," he said.

"Luke-warm to warm baths have been used but after moving him into a bed, his body temperature dropped four degrees," Lois put in.

"Hm, that's ... well, concerning. I assume this is inside, away from any cold elements? No open windows? Granted, it's not exactly cold or windy outside right now. This is in Metropolis, right?"

"Yeah, and we're inside. It's 73 in here right now."

"How long in the tub? Did you replace the warm water when it started to cool?"

"Three times. Each time the water was slightly warmer than the last. He seemed to be doing better, so the bed made sense."

"His temperature rose in the tub?" he asked.

"He seemed to be a little more awake, barely, but ... no, the temperature remained the same."

"That doesn't make any sense. His temperature should have risen substantially from being submerged in water. It's just how thermodynamics works. Is there anything else going on with him? Maybe that'll explain this and can tell us what should be done."

Lois closed her eyes, not sure what to do.

"Lois?" Eleanor called.

She hurried back to the room with her dad still on the line. Eleanor was standing by the bed, her hand on Kal-El's head.

"Temperature is up by a degree," Eleanor said, grinning.

Lois all but sagged in relief. "Thank goodness."

"Sweetie?" her dad asked, a little unnerved by the silence.

"He's re-gained a degree," she said, ecstatic.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed, relieved and overjoyed at hearing her much happier tone of voice. "Oh, and if you haven't already, make sure his head is covered. The head is where most body heat is lost," he said.

"Okay, I will. And thanks, Daddy. I better go."

"No problem, sweetie, just let me know how this mysterious fella is doing later. And please, if his temperature doesn't continue to improve, I don't care what the circumstances are, take him to the hospital or at least call me back."

"All right, I will," she said.

After exchanging their customary farewells, she hung up and returned to the room.

"I'm going to go home for a moment if that's all right. He looks about my Dave's size. He left some clothes when he stayed with me last. They might fit him, or at least well enough to be

worn until he can find something better. I doubt he wants to remain in what he's wearing now," Eleanor said, now sitting on the edge of the bed beside Kal-El. She was noticeably exhausted and Lois felt a great deal of gratitude toward her.

"All right. Thank you so much for your help. I'm not sure what I would have done if you hadn't been here," Lois said.

Eleanor waved it off. "I'm sure you would have figured it out, but I'm glad I was able to help. It's nice to be helpful, especially to someone like him. I doubt many people ever help him, much less save his life." With a tender smile, she brushed some hair from his still chilly forehead. "By helping him, how many lives can I say I will touch?"

"Wow," she said. "That's ... wow."

Eleanor slowly got up, looking a little pale and winded.

"Here, let me get your other tank," Lois said, leading the way to the living room.

"Thank you, dear," she said.

Lois helped her with the larger tank that was fortunately on wheels.

"Do you need help to your apartment?" Lois asked.

"No, I'll be all right. Keep watch over him. I've lowered the oxygen concentration to the lowest setting since he doesn't sound as wheezy, but since he still doesn't sound right I think he should keep it until he lets himself be seen by a doctor," she said.

Lois looked back at Kal-El, paying careful attention to his breathing. Eleanor was right, there was still some strain to it, as if he had to fight to breathe in the last second of air before relaxing to exhale.

Eleanor left a moment later with a promise to be back in an hour or so.

Time crawled even after Eleanor returned with a spare set of clothes that belonged to her out-of-state son. Lois teetered between dozing, watching over Kal-El and sleeping. There was a half hour of some relief and concern when Superman started shivering and then trembling so bad she had been very close to calling 911. The worst of it finally passed when he reached 92 degrees. By the time morning arrived, Kal-El had reached 94 degrees and was what Eleanor called 'gently shivering'. Lois was now trying to decide if she should make that second call to her father or call someone else. She was considering Henderson.

She had thought about Dr. Daitch but immediately nixed that idea. Everyone with a tie to EPRAD was suspect. The risk was too great. At some point she knew she should try to notify the Foundation that Superman was all right but she didn't want to start the media circus while he was so hurt.

And there was also Perry. She knew he would be torn for commending her loyalty to Superman while being irate over not getting the story immediately.

She was about to get up and make the dreaded call when she heard him.

"Wha—?"

"Kal-El?" she asked, slowly approaching her bed. She didn't want to startle him since the room was still predominantly shaded in darkness. It was still fairly early, and her curtains did a good job of blocking outside light on top of that.

"Who's there?"

He was still covered in blankets and wearing her purple wool hat.

"It's me, Lois," she answered, stopping by the bed and carefully sitting on the edge beside him.

"Lois? How long have I been here?" he asked, sounding bewildered while trying to calm his shivering.

"Since about 10 pm. It's about 7 am now," she answered as he squinted up at her. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Please, and anything warm. I feel like an ice cube, even though I'm pretty sure I look like an Eskimo."

She smiled, reassured by his ability to joke. "All right. I'll be

back in a moment. I'll also grab some clothes you might be able to wear."

She returned to find him sitting up but still hunkered in the blankets. It was strange to see him slouching and she was certain she had seen him flinch just as she walked in. He seemed to be holding his side.

"Shall I turn the light on?" she asked, not wanting to blind him. She knew some people preferred to wake up more before turning on any lights.

"Sure," he said softly.

She flipped the switch, snapping the darkness away. He looked exhausted but infinitely better than the night before. He didn't look like he was about to die, but simply getting over a particularly brutal cold. The only thing of slight concern were the bruises and the knowledge there were more beneath the blankets. The one on the side of his head made her want to wince in sympathy.

She returned to the side of the bed and placed a small stack of folded clothes beside the oxygen machine before facing him with a mug.

"Here you are. It's simple hot cocoa. I don't really have anything else unless you want me to try making tea. I would ask Eleanor to make some, but she's asleep right now," she said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

"This is fine, thank you," he said, slowly looking up at her as she offered him the mug.

He removed his hand from the confines of the blankets and took the cup. There was an angry bruise on his forearm that had darkened over the night. He carefully sipped, mindful of the oxygen line he still had going to his nose.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, glad he seemed well enough to hold the cup on his own and was actually able to hold a conversation.

"Sore. I feel like I got hit by something hard, a lot of somethings actually. What happened to me?" he asked.

She froze. "You mean ... you don't remember?" she asked, failing not to gape at him.

"Uh, no. All I can remember is..." He frowned, staring into his cup. He almost looked as if he was going to be sick. "I couldn't breathe. It was cold and very dark. And then ... I guess I made my way here, though I'm not sure how." He frowned again before he took another sip and glanced at the broken lock still on the floor across the room. "Sorry for breaking your window."

"Don't worry about the window," she assured, taking his hand while trying to think rationally. "The important thing is that you made it back."

He looked back up at her and she was struck by how uncertain he looked. Nervous even. He looked at the portable oxygen tank and slowly removed the offending plastic nasal ports. She went ahead and stopped the oxygen flow since she was closest to it and took the line from him to drape over the tank.

"I don't remember much of last night but know I'm only still here because of you and ... Eleanor was it?"

She nodded and he took a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry, I feel like I know you, and I must since I somehow knew to come here, but ... do I know you?" he asked hesitantly.

A loud, rushing noise roared in her ears and it took her a moment to realize she wasn't actually hearing anything, it was just her brain seizing up in horrified realization.

She was very still and utterly dumbfounded for several long seconds. He suddenly wished he could take back his words, but he knew he couldn't figure out what had happened and why he couldn't remember anything unless he asked questions.

"Yes," she said finally, trying to keep a semblance of calm. "You know me."

"Okay. And I assume my name is Kal-El? That is what you called me, right?" he asked, watching her closely.

She nodded, for the moment too stunned to speak.

"Do I know you well?" he asked as she seemed to regain her sense of control.

"Well, I think I can say we're good friends, even though we've only spoken a handful of times. Granted, we have had two meals together, and you've saved my life three times," she said, giving him an embarrassed smile and shrug before laughing a little.

"I would say that makes us friends then," he said, more than a little relieved. He didn't know why, but he knew he could trust her. He paused, the last bit of what she said settling in his mind. "Three times? How is that possible? Am I a cop or something?"

Lois rocked back slightly and took a deep breath. Apparently his lack of knowledge was particularly off putting for some reason.

"Not exactly, but you do help people. A lot of people. It's why we first met actually."

He shifted forward, doing his best to ignore the throb in his side and his overall fatigue. He wanted answers.

"Is that why Eleanor said something about me saving the world?" he asked with a slight grimace.

She frowned and looked at him in concern. "Are you all right? You look like you're in pain."

"My chest hurts a bit," he admitted, putting his arm back under the covers to brace his side.

"Is it getting worse?" Lois asked.

"I don't know, maybe." He didn't really know. He had been in pain since he woke up, but was it getting worse? Possibly, but it might just be because he was sitting up now.

"Do you, I mean, should we take a look?" she asked hesitantly.

Was she blushing?

"I guess we should," he said. "I should probably get changed anyway."

Still fighting shivers, he slowly slipped his arms free from the blankets and let them fall from his shoulders. He looked down. A concentrated cluster of bright discoloration wrapped his right side like a hand, drawing their eyes away from the other smaller bruises scattered across his chest and arms.

"Well, that explains why it hurts so much," he said dumbly.

"Yeah," she agreed.

He brought his arm up close to his side and suddenly moved his feet to the floor.

"What are you doing?! You need to rest!"

"I want to see how bad it is everywhere else," he said, now clearly shivering.

She followed him toward the restroom, but before he could step in front of the mirror, a sensation he could never fully describe slammed into him.

He sank to his knees in absolute relief, oblivious to Lois' shout of alarm as she rushed beside him.

"What's wrong?!" she cried.

Sunlight gleamed through the bathroom window, bathing his skin in renewing light. The pain that had ebbed from every contused inch of him was now coursing with soothing power. The hideous marks on his chest bled away and the cold evaporated from his center, refilling him with a heat as sure as the dawn. He closed his eyes and just basked in the sun.

"Lois?" a concerned voice called.

"It's—it's all right, Eleanor," Lois managed, now kneeling beside him while being careful not to block any light.

He touched his skin, just as astonished at his recovery as Lois.

"How is this possible?" he asked. "This isn't normal, is it?"

"Well, I guess it's normal for you, and it does explain a few

things. If you get your energy from the sun, that stuff covering you last night is probably why you were so weak and cold when you came in.”

“Really?” he asked incredulously. “You’re serious?”

“Well, yes....” She paused, contemplative and suddenly worried. “I’m not sure how best to help. I want to answer your questions, but I also don’t want to ... overwhelm you.”

“Just tell me. This confusion and not knowing can’t be any worse than the truth.”

“Okay. So like a band-aid, rip it off and get it over with, but maybe you should get changed and then we can talk about all of this while we eat. That would be better. Are you hungry?”

“I think I could eat, and getting out of this would make me feel better,” he admitted as he looked down at himself and grimaced at the rather disgusting looking garment he was currently wearing. “What *is* this anyway?”

“The remains of your uniform. I’ll explain when we eat,” she assured, quickly retrieving the clothes she had brought him earlier as he stood up. “They probably won’t fit very well, but while you shower, I’ll call Jimmy and hopefully he can bring you something you can go out in later,” she said, taking charge. “I need to make a few other calls anyway, and grab us something to eat. As soon as you’re dressed and I’m back, I’ll tell you everything I can. The towels are clean and you can use any you need. The soap is up there and the faucet can be a little temperamental so just nudge it a little.”

Bemused, Kal-El just nodded.

“Until I get back, if you need anything, Eleanor’ll be in the living room. I’ll leave the bedroom door open so she can hear you. And here,” she continued, handing him a pair of scissors. “In case you need it.”

“Uh, thanks.”

She left like a tornado.

Chapter 10 – News

The first person she called was Jimmy. Though Eleanor letting Kal-El borrow (or have?) her son’s clothing was a nice gesture, there was no way on all that was holy that she was going to let him leave the apartment in sweat pants and a stained old T-shirt. There was also the issue of shoes.

“Hello?” Jimmy answered.

“Hi, Jimmy, it’s Lois. I need you to do something very important for me, and I’ll pay you back with interest, and when you learn why you’ll completely understand and be happy for helping me but until then I need you to ask no questions, go to a clothing store, and get the following. Uh, you have a pen and paper ready?” she asked, forgoing pleasantries.

“Uh, yeah, yeah,” he said, the sound of scrambling loud in the background. “Okay, ready.”

“One large shirt, one pair of slacks or jeans – uhh,” she hesitated but quickly went with her best guess. “Waist 34 inches, length 36, maybe 38. Shoes and socks size 12 or 13. Oh! And boxers,” she listed off.

“Uhh, all right, Lois. Any particular style?”

“Casual, I suppose. Yeah, it should be comfortable but presentable.”

“Oookaaaay,” Jimmy said, still not exactly sure what this was about, but he had learned to just go with whatever Lois said.

“When you have everything on that list, come to my apartment and don’t bring attention to what you’re doing, but if Perry tries to redirect you on to something else, tell him I told you it is imperative that you do this and that I’ll take whatever heat when I get back, which I doubt I’ll get when he learns what’s going on. Anyway, do you think you can get all of this by lunch?”

“Yeah, I should be able to,” Jimmy said, one of the few people on the face of the planet that was used to her babble.

“Thank you, Jimmy. And remember to bring your camera,

you might need it later.”

“Okay, will do, Lois,” Jimmy said, perking up upon hearing that. “See you at lunch.”

“Bye, Jimmy.”

She picked up the phone again and called her dad. She had promised him an update.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Princess!” he said happily.

“I just wanted to give you a quick update on your long distance patient. He’s doing much better and is no longer cold. Thanks again for the medical advice. Anyway, I’ve got to go. Love you, Dad.”

“Er, glad to hear the mystery fella is doing better. And love you too, pumpkin,” he said, a little taken aback by the sudden and brief call, but he supposed he should be happy with any call at all. A moment later, Lois hung up.

She had considered asking him about amnesia but felt that might lead him to certain conclusions that would be way too close to the truth, if not the truth. Besides, Kal-El seemed to be functioning well enough; he just needed someone to help jog his memory. If he still didn’t have his memory after a few days, then she would look more closely at her options and of course include Kal-El on those decisions. He had made it clear he didn’t want to go to the hospital, even in his bewildered state. No, it was better if she tried to help him herself first.

“All right, now Perry,” she said, taking a breath to prepare herself.

The front desk quickly redirected her call to Perry’s office.

“Where in Sam Hill are you, Lois?! Jimmy said you have him on an urgent errand?!” he bellowed.

“Perry, I swear to you I’m on something big and Jimmy is—”

“Shopping, I know, but I want to know why. The world is scrambling due to what’s happened; we have news to report. Stuff is happening as we speak! We don’t have time for side activities like this.”

“Perry, for this we must take time, please, trust me.”

He grew silent on the other end, and Lois was gearing up for a fight. Finally, he spoke.

“You found him, didn’t you?” He said it so softly that only her years of working with him allowed her to piece together the words from the snippets of syllables she had managed to hear.

She didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

“Call in the story as soon as you can, and Lois?”

“Yeah, Chief?” she asked more than a little meekly.

“Tell him we’re grateful and to take as long as he needs.”

“I will, Chief.”

He hung up.

“Everything all right, Lois?” Eleanor asked as she entered the living room.

Eleanor was watching the news but had turned the volume low. Lois couldn’t see the screen from where she was but heard something about EPRAD. She didn’t want to get distracted so ignored it.

“Yeah, I think so,” Lois said, deciding not to think too much about her conversation with the Chief, except to be happy he was her boss. “I’m going to get us some things to eat, since there’s nothing really substantial here and I think Kal should eat something more than snack food. I don’t know how many things will be open right now, especially with everything going on, but I don’t want to risk the grocery store. I’ll try the fast food place around the corner. Is there anything you want in particular?”

“Nothing with beef. Anything else is fine,” she said.

Lois nodded and grabbed her purse before giving a worried look to the bedroom door.

“He’ll be fine,” Eleanor assured.

Lois frowned. “Eleanor, did you happen to overhear any of my conversation with him a little bit ago?”

“No, I tend to avoid eavesdropping, and my hearing isn’t what it used to be anyway, dear,” she said, curious.

“He doesn’t remember anything. He has amnesia. Bad. He doesn’t even know who he is,” she said nervously.

Eleanor gasped. “That’s horrible!”

“So when I get back I’m going to try to help him remember.”

“Well, he’s in good hands then. I shudder to think what might have happened if he hadn’t been able to make it here.”

“Yeah, which is why I’m not thinking about it,” Lois stated.

“There’s vigils everywhere for him,” Eleanor said suddenly.

“The biggest is around his Foundation. Understandably, there are also massive celebrations occurring around the world because of what he did. It’s really quite amazing,” she said, motioning to the television. “Reminds me of when people everywhere were praying for the astronauts of Apollo 13.”

“So the asteroid . . . ?” she asked, not wanting to assume anything despite initial reports.

“It’s been completely shattered and the remains are no longer in line to hit Earth. They unequivocally confirmed it about half an hour ago.”

Lois heaved a sigh of relief. “All right. I’ll be back in a little bit. Lock the door behind me.”

Eleanor followed her to the door and did just that.

Kal-El closed the bathroom door and looked in the mirror, scissors in hand. Lois and Eleanor had done a decent job cleaning him up the previous night, but there were still remnants of whatever that stuff was in his hair and on his skin. He couldn’t wait to learn what had happened to him, but Lois was right. They could talk while they ate, after he got dressed.

He cut off the remains of his ‘uniform’ and jumped in the shower, hoping he would just be in for five or so minutes. Unfortunately, it took him longer than he had expected to get the last of the black, stubborn residue off his skin and out of his hair.

He stepped from the shower and grabbed a towel half an hour later. Glancing in the mirror, he combed his fingers through his hair, letting it stay slicked back the way it had been before the shower – if only to keep his hair from his forehead so he could have more skin exposed to the sunlight still pouring in from the window.

He put the clean boxers and sweats on, deciding not to think about whether or not the boxers had ever been worn by someone else as he went back to the bedroom and pulled back the curtains to allow direct sunlight to enter. He left the shirt off, not wanting to immediately cover skin that had only recently been painfully raw and tender. Not when it felt so wonderful to be in the light.

“Kal-El?” a soft voice asked from beyond the room.

It wasn’t Lois, but he recognized it. It was elderly and feminine.

He moved from the window and regretfully put the shirt on.

“Yes?” he answered, stepping from the room in his bare feet to find the old woman who had helped Lois save his life.

She looked at him, no doubt comparing his appearance to how she had last seen him. Seeing the vast improvement, she broke into a relieved grin.

“I am so happy you’re doing better. It’s going to be a huge relief to so many people once they learn you’re all right,” she said.

“Thanks, and thank you for helping me last night, uh, Eleanor,” he said, suddenly realizing how little he knew about the two who had saved him. “Um, I’m not sure if Lois told you, but —”

“She did,” Eleanor said, saving him from awkwardly continuing. She stepped toward him and pat his arm. “Don’t worry, if anyone can help you get your memory back, it’s Lois. That girl is remarkable, and I don’t just say that about anyone.”

Kal-El nodded before following her into the kitchen.

“I have some tea brewing. Would you like some?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“Sugar? You look like a two or more sugars kind of man,” she said.

Kal-El chuckled, albeit a little embarrassed. “I think you’re right,” he said, before they heard a knock at the door.

Eleanor quickly went and checked the peephole. Upon finding it was Lois, she let her in.

Keeping with her routine, Lois secured the door behind her, even placing the deadbolts, before turning to Eleanor and Kal-El.

“Everyone up for breakfast burritos?” she asked, putting them on the table and taking a seat as Eleanor continued to prepare the tea.

“Thanks,” Kal-El said, taking the offered wrap though looking expectantly at her for something else.

“All right. Answers,” Lois said with a deep breath. She glanced at Eleanor.

“I don’t mind if she hears whatever you have to tell me,” Kal-El assured, quickly noticing her hesitancy and assuming the reason—however incorrect. “I mean, you both helped save my life.”

Lois smiled as they began to eat. “All right. Well, a lot of this will be hard to believe, but it’s true. Just let me know if you want me to slow down, okay?”

Kal-El raised an eyebrow, a little unnerved. “Okay.”

“Yesterday, you went out into space with a rocket and guided it into an asteroid that was headed to Earth. The asteroid was bigger than the one that destroyed the dinosaurs and if it had hit Earth, it would have meant the end of . . . well, it was doubtful that anything would have survived, let alone humanity,” she said.

“But it’s been stopped? I stopped it?” Kal-El asked, still confused about how he could have done so but more concerned about Earth—assuming this wasn’t some bizarre dream.

“Yes. There’s a lot more to tell you about yesterday, but I’ll get into that in a moment. I think you want to know more about who you are, right?”

He nodded as Eleanor placed his tea before him and quietly sat in the empty chair at the table.

“You’re a Kryptonian, a refugee who came to Earth many years ago. I don’t know exactly when, but it was at least fifteen years ago. Anyway, you only revealed – or rather confirmed – your existence to the public a few months ago. Before that, you worked in secret, saving people and stopping disasters and stuff without being seen,” Lois said before taking a tentative bite of her burrito.

Kal-El frowned. “Kryptonian? Came to Earth?”

“I know, hard to believe, but you saw what sunlight did to you. And you can do things no one else can. As human as you look, you’re—”

“An alien?” he finished for her, his voice edging toward being either appalled or incredulous – she couldn’t tell.

Lois blinked, a little surprised. “Does that bother you?”

He exhaled roughly and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I don’t know. I suppose what you’re saying makes sense. I mean, I do sort of remember getting to your window. I thought, hoped, it had been some kind of weird dream, but . . . What else can I do?” he asked, looking back at her.

She got up. “One moment, I think it might be better to show you.”

She returned less than a minute later with a stack of newspapers and files. She placed the newspapers on the table. The top one had the article, ‘Super but Not Supernatural’.

He quickly read it before putting it down and skimming through the others. Afterward, he shifted his chair back and took a few deep breaths while leaving the papers spread out among burrito wrappers.

“You wrote these?” he asked after a moment, glancing at the small portrait beside her name beneath the article’s title and the sketched image of . . . himself.

“A few of them,” she admitted softly. “I’m an investigative reporter for the Daily Planet.”

Kal-El coughed, startling both Lois and Eleanor, before breaking down in laughter. It bordered on hysterical before he managed to calm himself.

“I now see what you meant, about not wanting to overwhelm me.”

“Are you all right?” Lois asked worriedly.

He nodded, whipping his eyes. “Looking at all this, at least I’m not viewed as a ... a freak or something to fear – or worse.”

Lois caught Eleanor send her a side glance, and she knew they were both wondering if this involved his fear of hospitals.

“‘Superman’ is a bit to live up to, though,” he continued. “I don’t *feel* super, still feel a little sore if I’m honest, and I definitely don’t feel like I could do any of the things described here, let alone wear this uniform.”

“Don’t think of it as something you need to live up to, because I daresay you’ve already lived up to it. You stopped the asteroid, and your Foundation has already helped a lot of people,” Eleanor added, trying to help settle things back down.

Kal-El frowned. “But I wasn’t supposed to hit the asteroid, was I?” he asked, pointing to the last article that outlined EPRAD’s plan. It even included the diagram they had used in the press conference.

“No, and that’s the other thing I need to talk to you about,” Lois said nervously. “The rocket was sabotaged and communications were disrupted. I’m still trying to work it all out, but for some reason you determined you had to stay with the rocket until impact. I’m pretty sure someone didn’t just cut communications but *redirected* them because the coms were manipulated roughly three minutes before impact. In that time, I bet the people responsible communicated with you. It would explain your elevated heart rate that occurred before EPRAD even knew anything was wrong and why you sent a message that said ‘sabotage’ and ‘L’. I think you were trying to tell us who was responsible for the sabotage.” She took a deep breath. “I believe they knew you would stay with the rocket if there was a good enough reason: protecting Earth.”

“So someone tried to kill me?” he asked, far calmer than what Lois or Eleanor felt was healthy.

“I think so,” Lois said before pursing her lips together. “You seem really calm about that.”

“It is a little ... troubling, but I don’t feel it’s—” He closed his eyes and shook his head, flashes of things appearing in his mind’s eye: snippets of different moments in time.

Voices threatened him, most along the lines of ‘You’ll die for this!’ and ‘Your days are numbered’. Dozens of eyes glared at him, belonging to individuals who he knew could no longer harm anyone.

“I guess I’m used to it?” he asked, confused.

“Did you just remember something?” Lois asked, excited and hopeful.

“Flashes. I’ve ... upset a lot of people apparently. Very bad people. I don’t know how I know that though.”

“That’s excellent!” Lois said thrilled, before realizing how bizarre that sounded. “I mean that you remembered something. I bet if we trigger enough memories it’ll all come back to you.”

“That may be a bit of wishful thinking, Lois,” Eleanor gently cautioned. “We can definitely be hopeful, but I think we should avoid setting any expectations right now.”

She sighed, knowing the older woman was correct. “I suppose you’re right.”

“But maybe we should consider asking a doctor?” Eleanor asked hesitantly. “Maybe there’s things we can do that can trigger memories more quickly?”

“Would that be okay with you?” Lois asked, looking at Kal-El. “I could call my dad. He’s a doctor and I did call him last night

to get advice on how to help when you had hypothermia, though I didn’t tell him who you were.”

“I guess that would be all right,” he slowly allowed.

“Although I’m not sure anything a doctor might say about amnesia would help me. Does my brain work the same way as a human’s?”

“Well, your body temperature runs a little higher, and your heart rate is a little slower than ours, but you once told me those were the only differences you could find, other than your abilities.”

“Did I tell you how my abilities worked?”

“No, unfortunately,” she admitted. “But what we did to help you last night was in line with what you would do with anyone, even clearing your lungs.”

Kal-El rubbed the front of his chest in memory. “That’s true.”

“All right, I’ll call my dad later, unless you’d prefer a different doctor?” she asked uncertainly.

“Your father’s fine. At least one of us knows him,” he said with a small smile, trying to reassure her.

“Well, do you have any specific questions about yourself you want me to try to answer now, or do you want me to go more into what happened yesterday?” Lois asked.

“My abilities. Did I read that right, that I can fly?” he asked.

“Yeah, you read it right. And yes, before you ask, you really did smother a bomb in the subway.”

“But this morning I was covered in bruises. So I can get hurt if I’m, what, in the dark?” he asked.

“I think it’s dependent on how much energy you have at the time,” Lois guessed. “And if you have access to sunlight or not.”

Kal-El looked thoughtful. “That makes sense, especially after this morning.” He paused. “It did feel like I was being, well, filled up. I hadn’t realized how empty I was until the light touched me.” He chuckled at himself. “Listen to me, I’m practically calling myself a battery.”

“Well, every living thing needs energy in some form, so in that sense we’re all batteries,” Eleanor said.

“Thanks,” he said, touched by her tender efforts to assure him that he wasn’t so different.

He sighed. “I just wish I could remember. I believe what you’ve told and shown me, but it’s still hard to imagine. ‘Super strength, speed, flight, super hearing, invulnerability ...’” he said while counting off the powers the articles had described on his fingers. “To fly, do I jump into the air and just go up? How does that work? Please don’t tell me that I flap my arms.”

“No, you sort of just, levitate, I guess. I can have Jimmy bring us some tapes at some point. Maybe that’ll help.”

Kal-El nodded in agreement, relieved he would actually have some form of visual instruction, despite how weird it’ll be to see himself actually fly – FLY! – and not remember doing it.

He suddenly frowned before looking back up at them.

“And there’s no one else here like me?” he asked, his voice far quieter than it was a moment ago.

Solemn, Lois put her hand over his.

“You said you were the only one who made it here. You even said that you’ve looked,” she said softly.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Lois and Eleanor remained quiet.

“You know, it’s strange. I do feel alone, and yet ... it’s as if I know something. It doesn’t make it all right, but it ...” he said, struggling to find the words. “It makes it a little better.” He heaved a sigh. “I just wish I could remember.”

“Well, I think the fact you can sense that there is something is a good sign. It must mean some part of you remembers; it’s just buried right now,” Lois encouraged.

He nodded but didn’t add anything.

“How about we check the news,” Eleanor suggested, seeing that they were done eating.

“Good idea,” Lois said. “I also need to check with Dr. Daitch

at some point.”

“Daitch?” Kal-El asked.

“He’s the head scientist at EPRAD,” Lois answered. “You worked with him to destroy the asteroid.”

After quickly clearing the table, they went to the living room and sat down. Lois and Kal-El took the couch while Eleanor took the loveseat beside her oxygen.

Handling the remote, Lois turned on the TV. She didn’t need to flip through any channels as it was already on LNN.

The scene instantly had them all spellbound.

A reporter stood overlooking a building with thousands of people surrounding it, filling all of the streets that linked to it directly. The colors red and blue made up most of the peaceful crowd, swaying back and forth, as if in silent song.

“Here at the Headquarters of the Superman Foundation is just one of the vigils that have cropped up around the world for Superman. Sending prayers and good thoughts, I believe I speak for everyone gathered below when I say we hope for his safe and speedy return,” the reporter said before he covered his earpiece with his hand as he heard a question from the news station.

“EPRAD hasn’t confirmed whether or not sabotage was involved yet, correct Doug?” a female voice asked.

“Not at this time. As you know, a representative from EPRAD spoke briefly to the crowd below thirty minutes ago but stated it was too early in the investigation to say definitively either way, although it is suspected, Linda.”

Lois fumed at that. “Too early?! You spelled it out to us in your message to us! Argh!” she exclaimed at a somewhat bewildered Kal. She turned back to the screen. “I need to call Daitch,” Lois stated before shaking her head and changing the channel to another news station.

“Two more satellites are said to be out of their standard orbits and will fall back to Earth in the coming weeks,” a news anchor said, shuffling a stack of papers. “The EMP knocked out nearly all satellites that had been over the Atlantic Ocean and the Americas at the time of impact. EPRAD has also stated that communication with Prometheus has been touch and go.”

The co-news anchor took over. “According to an astronomer in Australia, an object entered the atmosphere last night after the amount of time it may have taken Superman to return. This news has sparked the formation of dozens of teams with one thing in mind: to find Superman. George is out in Metropolis now with one of these groups. George?—”

The news station switched cameras, showing a view of a reporter with a microphone in front of a makeshift group with serious expressions beside a street.

“Good morning, Al. I’m here with one of the groups that have recently formed to help find Superman. Late last night, an astronomer in Australia stated he spotted something entering the atmosphere and that it may have landed somewhere in Northern America. Although he admitted it could have been one of the damaged satellites, many are hoping it was not.”

He turned to one of the group members.

“Sir, can you tell us anything about what you and your team have been doing?” George asked.

“Er, yeah! We’re looking for signs of Superman and asking people in the area if they saw anything last night. So far we have learned a number of people saw what they believed was a meteor heading northwest,” the man said excitedly.

“Do you think it may have been Superman?”

“That’s what we’re hoping, of course. The time and trajectory lines up so with any luck we’ll find him once we zero in on the location. We’re coordinating our efforts with a few other teams around the US, since he could have landed in the next state over due to the area we’re looking at, you know?” the man explained.

“I see. And, assuming you find him, what then?” George asked.

“Help him if he needs it,” he said simply.

Kal-El shook his head, attracting Lois’ attention.

“I can’t believe people are looking for me. I need to let people know I’m all right,” Kal-El said. “Is there someone we can, I don’t know, call?”

Lois smiled. “Yeah, we can call your Foundation. I’ll get my phone.”

Returning with the phone, she muted the television and began to hand her phone and the Foundation’s number to Superman before pausing.

She suddenly looked at Kal-El. “Um, do you know what you’re going to tell them exactly? I mean, do you want them to know where you are or anything on what happened?”

He blinked, uncertain. “Well, I don’t want to cause you any trouble, so I was just planning on letting them know I made it back. Maybe that I’m some place recovering,” he answered.

She nodded. “Good idea. Wait, what about your memory? If you talk to someone from the Foundation who knows you, do you think they’ll … notice?”

“Oh. Good point.” He frowned, thinking.

“Lois, you could just tell them he made it back but needs some time to rest and will return once he’s recovered,” Eleanor suggested.

Lois nodded, liking that idea. “Yeah. And when I don’t tell them anything more they’ll just assume it’s because I don’t know. If they’re talking to you, you won’t have as much leeway I don’t think.”

He slowly nodded.

“You don’t like that idea?” Lois asked, confused by his hesitancy. Personally, she didn’t think it was a good idea to let people know more than absolutely necessary.

“I’m just thinking about … well, from the articles it sounded like I might have people out there who—” He looked at her apologetically. “Who really know me. Family maybe. Not blood related, obviously, but people who, I don’t know, adopted me?”

Dawning realization came to her.

“And you don’t want them to worry about why you’re staying away? Why you haven’t come home if we don’t share more?” she asked.

“Yeah, and then there’s my memories. If they know I don’t remember, maybe they could help? Although … maybe it’s better for them to stay away. If they came to help me, the whole world would discover who they are.”

She frowned, suddenly recalling the reason he gave during the hearing for not answering certain questions.

He sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t want to lie either. If I don’t get my memories back, how will that look when we finally come out and admit that I’ve got amnesia? Wouldn’t it be better to admit it outright?”

“Make it public?” Lois asked, more than a little alarmed.

“Perhaps just leave things vague at first? Give yourself some time,” Eleanor suggested. “That way if you recover your memories, we avoid the chance of a panic?”

“Would there really be a panic?” he asked, confused.

“It’s a possibility,” Lois stated. Upon seeing his disbelieving expression, she pressed on. “Look, at the very least it would bring a lot of things into question. What will happen to your Foundation? Will you still be able to be Superman? Are you still you? What about the treaty you signed? Will you still honor it even though you don’t remember signing it? The list goes on.”

“Okay, I see what you’re saying. We’ll stick with your plan, but if I still can’t remember after a while, we’ll go from there. Also, if questions are asked, we won’t lie.”

“All right,” Lois said before dialing the number.

Unfortunately, she got a recording saying all lines were currently busy and to either wait or leave a message.

With a brief moment of hesitation, she clicked the number to

leave a message.

“We are sorry, but the voicemail is full and cannot accept any messages at this time. Goodbye.”

“Well, the Foundation is being inundated by callers. I’m going to try your agent,” Lois said with a sigh.

“Agent?” Kal-El asked, stunned.

“Yeah, he’s helped you out on making deals with companies wanting to sell your emblem and stuff,” Lois explained distractedly as she looked for Murray Brown’s number near the kitchen. “But he should be able to get us in contact with the Foundation since I imagine he has the personal numbers of the people who run your foundation: Maverick Ervin and Julie Heinz. I think sticking with the Foundation is the way to go on letting everyone know you made it back. Murray ... he’s a bit eccentric. I don’t think you want him delivering this news. I would say we could just send the word out through an article from the Daily Planet, but I have a feeling we should go through a more ... direct channel, at least for the initial announcement.”

“All right. You know better than I do at the moment,” Kal-El said, a little amused by her gung-ho attitude.

She dialed Murray and waited. It immediately went to his voicemail, and, once again, she was told it was no longer accepting messages.

Defeated, she hung up.

“They all must be being swamped by well-wishers and reporters asking if they’ve heard from you,” Lois said with a sigh. She shook her head, thinking how their calls were essentially postponing them from learning Superman had returned. “How ironic.”

“Well, maybe we could try again after lunch?” Kal-El offered.

“Should I try Dr. Daitch? I need to call him anyway,” Lois said, not wanting to give up.

“If he can help, sure, but considering the sabotage you told me about...” He trailed off.

“Hmm. You’re right. We can’t risk it,” Lois relented. “I’ll just get an update from him then and ask him why the heck they’re sitting on their hands where the sabotage is concerned. The longer they wait, the more crazy theories are going to crop up, and I don’t want anyone to begin trying to accuse you of anything, as nuts as that sounds.”

“Maybe they don’t want to tip their hand toward whoever is responsible?” Kal-El asked.

“May-be. But I think it has more to do with them being cowards,” Lois stewed.

“All-right.” Kal-El playfully raised his hands in mock-surrender, earning a laugh from Lois.

“Okay, so we’ll try again after lunch, but what do you want to do if they’re still busy?” she asked, growing somewhat serious again.

“I guess the only thing to really do then is ... maybe go to the Foundation ourselves?” he asked, not all that enthused about that option but feeling he needed to let the world know he had made it back before too long.

“We could try calling Inspector Henderson if we still can’t reach the Foundation or Brown directly. Henderson works at the precinct, obviously, and I would trust him to help us,” she suggested after a moment of thought. “I’m sure he would be willing to escort us there or take a message himself.”

Kal-El nodded. “Okay, I like that plan better.”

“Well, I’ll be back in a moment. I left Daitch’s number in my purse,” she said. “And I am so going to let him know what I think about their unwillingness to point out the obvious!”

Chapter 11 – Discoveries

Eleanor returned to her apartment around 10 am. Now that things were calming down a bit and Kal-El was on the mend, going back home seemed sensible. Which was all well and good

as lunch approached.

“Jimmy should be here soon,” Lois said, sitting down at the kitchen table as Kal-El adjusted the kettle on the stove before retrieving a mug. “And you don’t mind if he learns about your amnesia or how you got here?”

“No. I don’t see the point of hiding it from him. You’ve asked him to help me, so you obviously trust him, and after last night, how can I not trust those you put your faith in?”

Lois smiled appreciatively. “Thanks. I’ll let him know then.”

Kal-El nodded as he put a tea bag into his cup in preparation for the hot water and set it on the table.

“You seem to like tea a lot. That’s got to be your fifth cup since this morning,” Lois pointed out, amused.

Kal-El smiled sheepishly. “I suppose I do. Granted, I think it’s going to be a few days before I even think about wanting to drink anything cold.”

Lois nodded softly at that and took a closer look at him. He looked better than he had that morning, but the sag in his shoulders hinted at fatigue and his gait suggested tender muscles.

“How are you feeling now, really?” she finally asked.

“Better. I still feel tired I think, but I’m not all that sore anymore, and I’m definitely not cold.” He rolled his shoulders, giving a barely detectable wince before rubbing the shoulder that had been particularly black and blue.

“Do you want to go rest? Maybe get more sun?” she prompted.

“I might after I meet your friend,” he said before looking thoughtful. “I must admit that I’m curious.” He increased the heat under the kettle.

“Oh, about what exactly?” she asked.

“About who you work with, how well you work with them, what they’re like,” he said. “Normal stuff I suppose.”

She grew nervous, her nickname ‘Mad-dog Lane’ coming to mind.

“Um, yeah, about that...”

He turned to her directly at that, concerned. “What?”

“I’m not exactly ... a pleasant person to be around all the time, especially at work,” she admitted.

He tilted his head at her, clearly trying to picture that. “Why?”

She blinked. “Well, I suppose a lot of it is due to being a female journalist in a way. I’m not saying this to complain, just stating the way it is. I knew I was entering a male dominated profession, so I expected certain things, but after a while, I learned I needed to go after the story and make no apologies. That’s made me into someone ... less than friendly sometimes.”

“What happened?” he asked, knowing it was a sensitive topic due to her expression and tone.

She laughed sardonically. “I was an idiot. Trusted a guy at work and got into a romantic relationship with him.” She huffed, still furious with herself. “He got what he wanted, along with my story. Never going to let *that* happen again.”

Kal-El frowned. “How long ago?”

She took a deep breath and collected herself, somewhat startled that she had just shared something she had never willingly shared with anyone. “Years ago. When I was a rookie reporter. First year, actually.”

“It sounds like you blame yourself more than him,” he said softly as she wiped her eyes before they could get too moist and make her feel more exposed than she did already.

That whole month was still painful to recall.

“Lois, I don’t know how I know this, but those kinds of guys – I won’t call them men – are parasites. They’re cowards and are so good at manipulation that they can twist your perception of them no matter how good you are at seeing the truth. Don’t let him continue to manipulate you by not allowing yourself to put the blame where it belongs. Behind you, on him.”

Lois wiped her face again, now smothering a sob choked laugh. “Goodness, look at me. No, better yet, don’t look at me.”

“I’ll do whichever you prefer, but I would rather look at you,” he said good-naturedly, earning a tender smile from Lois.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“You’re welcome, Lois,” he said, returning the smile before turning back to the stove, anticipating the kettle’s call.

He was right, as it released its high pitched screech two seconds later.

Kal-El flinched violently at the noise, bringing his free hand up over one of his ears as he turned his head away. Lois jumped in alarm.

“Yikes, that’s loud,” he said, quickly pulling the kettle off the heat and putting it aside. The squeal waned and then fell silent.

“Are you all right?” Lois asked, getting up from her chair.

He opened his mouth a few times as he rubbed his ears with his hands, as if trying to pop them, but it obviously didn’t help.

“Everything is becoming louder,” he said through a grimace before leaning to the side to support himself on the counter, now covering his ears firmly with his palms.

Lois hurried around the table and gripped his arm in case he ended up falling.

“Here, sit down,” Lois said, guiding him to the floor as it was very evident he wouldn’t be able to take a step without tipping over. “It’s got to be your super hearing; you need to regain control.”

“I’m trying, but it’s so loud,” he shouted, holding his head and bringing up his knees as Lois knelt in front of him.

“Try focusing on one sound; block out everything else,” Lois directed.

He closed his eyes, his breathing now growing labored under the din.

Kal-El did his best to do as Lois had suggested, but everything was **so loud**.

An explosive war movie played on a television in a neighboring apartment.

“Let the dog out!” a man shouted across the street.

A car rumbled down the road with its radio thundering a heavy bass.

Cats fought in an alley some place, cans echoing endlessly as they tipped over.

Bickering teenagers shouted across the way.

A baby cried in earnest somewhere.

Everything that made up city life pulsed through him. Sound upon sound with each building in volume.

Even Lois’ breathing was like a rush of razor blades to his ears.

He couldn’t cope. This was unendurable. He needed help. It was too much—

Suddenly, a memory came forward, unbidden.

A man he couldn’t see but could feel crouched over him. Strong and massive, he felt swallowed up but safe despite the agony in his head at the unending cacophony roaring around him.

“Focus on this, son,” he said, seizing Kal-El’s much smaller hand and placing it firmly at the side of his warm throat, on his pulse, as he pulled Kal-El against his wide chest.

Lois was close to panicking as pain continued to etch itself across Kal-El’s face and frame before he startled and his eyes snapped back open.

Lois stared back, concern clear in her expression.

With a grimace, Kal removed his right hand from shielding his ear and gently placed his fingertips against the side of her neck, just under her jaw, before closing his eyes again. Lois blinked in startled confusion at the odd contact but didn’t pull back. Instead, she placed her hand over his and waited as quietly

as she could.

She debated with herself about getting up and calling her father before too long, but fortunately it soon became evident that whatever Superman was doing was helping him.

The crows feet by his eyes slowly disappeared as his discomfort faded and finally evaporated completely.

He opened his eyes with a relieved, heavy sigh.

Abruptly realizing he was gently pressing his fingers against her throat, he pulled his hand away, uncertain and more than a little embarrassed.

“Sorry, that was just ... I remembered that that was what my dad made me do when I was little,” Superman softly explained. He looked over to the floor beside his hand and straightened his legs so they weren’t drawn near his chest.

“It’s fine. I’m glad I was able to help you,” she assured, retaking his hand before perking up. “You remembered your dad? That’s wonderful!”

“Well, I’m pretty sure he was my dad. He called me ‘son’, anyway.”

“Still, you remembered someone,” Lois said, happy for him. “Did you remember anything about him?”

“He’s big, although in my memory I was a little kid, so he might not actually be big. I must have been five or six years old. Anyway, his hands are rough, like he does a lot of manual labor, and he smells like earth. Not dirt because he’s dirty, but soil. The kind you can get anything to grow in.”

“So he’s a farmer? What does he look like?” she asked, a bit confused. This didn’t sound like the man who had made his spacecraft.

“I couldn’t see him. In my memory, I was pretty scared and upset. What little I saw was really blurry. I couldn’t even tell you the color of his skin.”

Lois nodded in understanding. “Having your hearing go into overdrive is alarming enough as an adult. I’d hate to imagine how it is perceived as a child.”

“Yeah, it was pretty scary. Especially when you don’t know why it’s happening.”

“Do you remember that?” Lois asked gently.

He nodded as she put her hand on his knee, causing him to meet her eyes.

“What?” he asked as she just continued to look at him contemplatively.

“I’m just, well, I was thinking about how it must have been like for you as a child – having to go through that. And that was just one of your abilities.” She took a breath, hoping she wasn’t sounding crazy. “I wonder.... The world suspects you arrived here before you were an adult, but maybe you were here before you were even a teenager,” she said, not sure how else to put her thoughts into words. “Your refusal to answer certain questions before Congress makes a great deal more sense now. You grew up here, were raised here.”

Kal-El smiled uncertainly. “I just wish I could remember more.”

“You will, you’ll see,” she encouraged, before they heard a knock at the door.

Jimmy knocked on Lois’ door, shopping bag in hand. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but he had learned a long time ago to just do whatever Lois said. There was always a reason behind her madness, and it was usually joined by a front page article.

The door opened after many clicks and unlocking of bolts.

“Come on in, Jimmy, hurry,” Lois urged, quickly closing the door behind him the moment he entered.

Bewildered, he turned and watched her dutifully relock everything.

“Good, you got his clothes,” she said, shoving two fifties into his hand after snatching the obvious clothing store bag from him.

“And I went ahead and got us lunch,” he said, unbothered by her lack of restraint as he lifted a second bag in his other hand.

“Oh, Jimmy, you’re a lifesaver!” she praised before looking in the clothing bag and bursting into laughter.

“Hey! What’s so funny? I thought you of all people would approve of what I got. And it’s comfortable and presentable!” he complained.

“Oh, I do approve, Jimmy, it’s just really funny that you got this shirt. Follow me to the kitchen and you’ll see why,” she said, still chuckling.

Bewildered but happy to finally learn a bit of what this was all about, he followed her into the kitchen.

A tea kettle was on the stove, and two steaming mugs were on the table with what he assumed to be a cup of sugar in front of a man seated in the far chair.

His feet were bare, and he was in gray sweatpants and a pale blue shirt covered in grease stains. Despite his haphazard attire, Jimmy couldn’t help but feel this man deserved respect, for he sat like his uncle who had been in the military and his frame just seemed to exude quiet confidence and power. Jimmy stopped a few paces from the kitchen table and looked closer, taking in the man’s slicked back black hair and his *very* familiar looking face.

Jimmy gaped.

“Jimmy, this is Kal-El, or Superman if you prefer. Kal-El, this is Jimmy Olsen, a photographer for the Daily Planet,” Lois introduced, thoroughly enjoying herself as she sat down in the chair beside Superman.

Closing his mouth with a snap, Jimmy quickly shook himself and hurried forward.

“Superman! It’s an honor to meet you! I’m so glad you’re okay!” Jimmy said, taking his offered hand. “Wow. This is ... wow.”

Superman smiled as he shook his hand. “Nice to meet you too, Jimmy. Lois tells me you take good pictures. You’ve worked at the Daily Planet for two years now?”

“Oh, yeah. Yes, started soon after high school.” He nodded enthusiastically.

“Would you like some tea, Jimmy?” Kal-El asked, standing up. “The water is still hot.”

Jimmy shuffled back, surprised by the offer and bewildered by the fact Superman would do anything in a kitchen. Granted, Lois was Lois, so...

“Sure, tea. Thanks,” he said before taking the empty chair Lois subtly indicated.

“You can relax, Jimmy,” Superman said, chuckling softly at Jimmy’s obvious nervousness as he prepared his cup.

“Okay, sorry, it’s just, you’re, well, Superman.” Jimmy paused and then laughed at himself before Lois and Superman joined him.

Superman stepped back to the table and handed Jimmy his freshly brewed cup of tea before sitting back down.

Jimmy took it and stared at it in awe for a moment, in disbelief that Superman had served him something.

“Well, while Jimmy gets over his stupor, here is what he got for you to wear,” Lois said, sliding the bag over to Superman.

Jimmy looked up just as Superman pulled out the sapphire blue t-shirt.

Lois bit her lip to keep from laughing as Superman blinked in surprise.

He held it up and looked at the great red and yellow crest boldly at its center.

“So this was what you were laughing about out there,” he said, amused, before smiling at Jimmy. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

“You’re welcome!” Jimmy said, ecstatic.

“So what’s for lunch?” Lois asked as Superman refolded the shirt.

“McDanny’s,” Jimmy answered, quickly laying out the

burgers before them.

They finished lunch quickly, and Kal-El mused that they had all been pretty hungry, himself included. He leaned back in the chair, wishing it would morph itself into a couch. He was mentally and, admittedly, emotionally exhausted, as well as physically weary. That bout with his super hearing had shaken him more than he had expressed to Lois, and he was still trying to come to grips with it himself.

He really was this ‘Superman’.

Yes, he had believed Lois, and he had seen the dozens of photos of himself in the articles she had shown him, but there is a difference between believing and knowing. And for that knowing to truly sink in.

He could remember his flight to Lois’ window. He couldn’t recall how, but he had flown.

He had defied gravity despite the throb of every movement, despite the suffocating struggle of breathing, because of an instinct, a refusal to die – the primal drive to get help, to live.

And that morning he had embraced the feeling of the sunlight as readily as breathing. He had felt the power of the sun revitalize his body, vaporizing the pain ebbing from his core, surging power through his veins, and pulsing life into his bones.

And then his hearing had surfaced.

He was Superman.

He looked at his hands, wondering how many lives he had saved with them.

According to the articles, he had saved millions over the years.

And last night he had saved over five and a half billion.

He had saved every single life on the planet.

He couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

“You okay, Superman?” Jimmy hesitantly asked, concerned.

“Yeah, just tired,” he said, straightening up.

“Why don’t you go and rest, Kal-El? I’ll make those calls and let you know if I’ve reached anyone when you wake,” Lois proposed, keeping her tone light – likely for Jimmy’s sake. “Shall I ask Henderson to come here if I can’t reach the Foundation?”

He nodded after a moment of thought. “Yes. It’s probably best discussed in person anyway.” He slowly stood from the chair with the bag of clothes and looked at Jimmy. “Thank you again for the clothes, Jimmy,” he said.

“No problem, Superman!” Jimmy said, standing as well.

“Do you need anything?” Lois asked. “I can get some more pillows. And take the bed again. That room gets the most sun.”

“Thanks. And no, I’m fine, but wake me up if I sleep for more than two hours. I’d like to know if you reach the Foundation or Henderson before too long.”

“Sure,” Lois said, her cheerful tone back.

“Thanks.” Kal-El felt their eyes on his back as he went to the bedroom.

He closed the door behind him and took his shirt off as he set the bag beside the bed and opened the curtains to the nearest window. Sunlight cascaded in, coating the bed in yellow warmth. He laid down on the bed, chest down, allowing his bare back to soak in the rays.

He fell asleep before he had fully relaxed into the pillow.

Lois and Jimmy looked at each other when they heard Kal-El close the door behind him.

“Is he really okay?” Jimmy asked softly.

Lois allowed her guard to drop slightly as she gave a quiet sigh.

“He’s doing much, *much* better than last night,” she said.

“So what happened? How did he get here? Can you tell me?” Jimmy asked, still talking just above a whisper.

“He got here on his own, somehow, but he was.... If my

neighbor hadn't been here with her oxygen, well ... I don't think I'd be talking with you right now. At least not like this."

"That bad?"

"Yeah."

"But once he got oxygen he was okay?" Jimmy said, hoping for reassurance that it had only been a matter of air supply.

Unfortunately, she couldn't lie to him, not after how much he had helped and would likely continue to help.

"No. He was hypothermic and covered in horrible bruises. Fortunately, all of that went away with sunlight, but—" She took a deep breath and met Jimmy's eyes. "Of everything, this next thing, I'm hoping this won't go public, at least not right away – that's my goal anyway. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand. I won't ever tell anyone ever, I swear."

"He has amnesia. Everything that happened before the asteroid, everything about himself, he forgot."

Lois looked as ill as Jimmy felt.

"That's ... that's – Horrible doesn't even begin to cover it," Jimmy managed.

"A few things have started to trickle back, so I'm hoping if we give him enough time and show him more about himself it'll all return," Lois explained, a bit more hopeful.

Jimmy nodded, determined. "I'll go pick up some news tapes. Maybe seeing himself in action will help, as well as ones of the committee hearing. I'm sure he'd like a recording of his father's message." Jimmy frowned. "He probably doesn't remember where he kept any of his things, huh?"

Lois shook her head 'no'. "They might be at the Foundation but I don't know. Well, I need to make a few calls," she said.

"I'll go and get those tapes and be back," he said, now on a mission.

"Thanks, Jimmy. Oh, and Perry knows he's here, so just tell him to wait. We'll still have the exclusive, but Kal-El wants to reach the Foundation to make the announcement of his return that way before anything."

Jimmy nodded. "Makes sense. Does anyone else know yet?" Jimmy asked.

"Just my neighbor, Eleanor Lonham. She was why we had oxygen. She has COPD and was here when he arrived."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Her being here saved his life. I doubt the paramedics would have made it in time if I had called them," Lois admitted.

Jimmy slowly stood up, trying not to think too hard on the fact the world had almost lost Superman.

"Let me know if you need me to pick anything else up while I'm out," Jimmy said.

"I will. Thank you, Jimmy," she said gratefully.

Jimmy smiled and left soon after.

Lois turned to her phone after locking the door behind Jimmy. She called the Foundation first, but was once again greeted with the same message of no one being able to take her call, although a wait time estimate of five hours was added. Of course, she tried to leave a message, but the voicemail was still full.

A similar roadblock occurred after dialing Murray Brown's number, as well as Daitch's, so, as she had discussed with Kal-El, she resorted to calling Henderson.

"Henderson speaking," he answered.

She exhaled heavily, grateful that she hadn't been taken to a voicemail.

"Bill, it's Lois. Can you come to my apartment as soon as you can, subtly?" she asked in a rush. "It's very important."

Henderson didn't answer immediately, taking in the inflection of her voice. He couldn't immediately tell if it was a good sort of strain or a bad 'I'm in trouble' sort of strain.

"Is this good news?" he asked.

"Yes, but delicate," she replied.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," he said.

"Thanks," Lois said, before hanging up.

Henderson approached the door and lightly knocked.

The door opened a moment later, which might have been a record of how fast anyone could unlock seven locks, but Henderson was much more interested in who had opened the door.

"Bill, thanks for coming," she said, inviting him in. "Feel free to sit on the couch," she continued as she relocked the door.

Henderson obeyed, quickly spotting dozens of papers strewn throughout the living room—her investigation of what had happened at EPRAD.

He sat down on a paper free cushion.

"So is this about what you've uncovered?" he asked, a bit confused about why she would want to discuss it with him first. Did it require action from law enforcement? Did it have a tie to one of her prior investigations—namely the one involving the bombings and LexCorp?

"Actually no," she said before putting her hands on her knees and taking a deep breath after sitting down. She smiled at him. "Kal-El got back last night. I won't go into specifics right now, but he's currently sleeping." She motioned to her bedroom.

Henderson straightened, stunned and absolutely relieved.

"So he's okay? He actually survived and made it back?" he asked, understandably wanting verification.

"He's physically okay now, but he's not completely back to normal. His normal, I mean. But I'll get to that in a moment. Anyway, he wants to contact the Foundation, but we haven't been able to reach anyone, and publicizing the fact he's back before his own Foundation knows wouldn't be right and would raise questions," Lois began.

"I'm not surprised you haven't been able to reach the Foundation. They have been swamped by well-wishers, reporters, and the like. Have you seen the news at all?" he asked.

"A bit, which is why Kal-El wants to let people know he's back. We saw that there are search teams looking for him."

Henderson nodded glumly. "I can't really blame them, but I'll also admit I'm looking forward to when they learn their energy can be focused elsewhere."

Lois nodded her understanding, easily imagining how such groups of people could muddle ordinary support efforts, even though they have good intentions.

"Okay, so back to the Foundation, I take it you want me to bring them a message and get you in contact with someone from over there?"

"Please. I would go myself, but I'm a little hesitant in doing so because I don't think they would let me leave soon after telling them he's back. They would want to know details and things he's not ready to share. Besides, there's the investigation to consider. Someone tried to kill him, Bill."

He frowned. "The message he sent, the sabotage, has he said anything about it?"

Lois stilled but decided to just be honest. "About him not being completely back to normal, there's no nice way to say this – he has amnesia. He doesn't remember anything before the collision."

"What?" Henderson breathed, horrified.

"Yeah," Lois sighed. "Jimmy's gone to get tapes for him to watch that will hopefully jog his memory, and I've been answering his questions as best I can."

"So he doesn't remember *anything*?" Henderson asked.

She shook her head. "He's had a few things he's remembered, but right now, for all intents and purposes, he doesn't remember much at all about himself or what's happened."

"Should he see a doctor?" Henderson asked.

"I'm not sure if that would be helpful, but he's agreed to see one if he doesn't begin remembering more."

Henderson nodded, his thoughts quickly turning to what the

public response would be if they knew their savior has lost his memory.

“This isn’t going public, correct?” Henderson asked after a moment.

Lois took a deep breath. “I would like to avoid it for as long as possible,” Lois said, deciding not to voice Kal’s apparent hesitancy in that just yet.

“Good,” he said, trying to think what the next step should be. “Have you uncovered anything in your investigation yet? A possible culprit?”

“I have a few suspects, people who had access to some of the systems affected, but I’m not entirely sure of everything they would have needed,” she said before shuffling through some of the pages. “I suspect they not only severed communications but redirected them. If they had only severed them, why would Kal-El begin showing signs of distress before EPRAD knew something was wrong? There’s also the fact he knew the rocket had been sabotaged. How could he know that unless the person responsible had been in contact with him? I don’t know, it all just seems worse than an assassination attempt. Whoever did this didn’t care about what could have happened to Earth. They endangered the whole world in their attempt to kill him.” Lois clenched her jaw and looked at Henderson. “I know it probably sounds like I’m reaching, but something is telling me this was ... I don’t know, personal almost.”

“Have you started looking into connections with LexCorp? Former employees of LexCorp now working for EPRAD? Things like that?”

She nodded. “I found one, but there are a few dozen left to check. I also need to consider blackmail. Someone LexCorp might have wanted to pressure or something. There’s also the chance this was someone completely unrelated. Unfortunately, there are probably people out there who just don’t like Kal-El for where he’s from.” She shook her head, saddened by the likely truth of that statement.

“I can start running background checks if you like,” Henderson suggested.

“Okay, just make sure you’re the one doing them. We can’t trust anyone,” Lois warned.

“I will. Send me the list when you have it, but until then, what exactly do you need me to do with the Foundation?” he asked.

“I think delivering a letter and giving Director Ervin my number should be enough for now. We could try meeting with Ervin or something after Kal-El is feeling more like himself though,” Lois decided.

Henderson nodded his agreement but turned when he heard a noise.

“Kal-El!” Lois said, happy but a little surprised to see him up. “We didn’t wake you, did we?”

Henderson quickly stood and faced the recently downed superhero.

He was wearing dark blue jeans and a t-shirt strikingly reminiscent of his standard uniform, which was joined by white socks. His hair was slicked back, and his expression was fairly relaxed.

“No, I woke on my own. The sunlight helped a lot. I should have done that earlier,” he admitted before looking at Henderson.

“Oh! Kal-El, this is Inspector Bill Henderson,” Lois introduced.

Superman stepped up and shook his hand.

“Good afternoon, Inspector,” he said.

“Relieved to see you made it back, Superman,” Henderson returned.

Superman tilted his head. “Have we met before? You seem familiar.”

Henderson straightened, partly in surprise but also in hope

and a bit of pride. “Yes, a few times, and those meetings mainly concerned the bombings that occurred a few months ago.”

Superman slowly nodded, confused. Admittedly, it was unnerving to see such an expression on someone so powerful.

“Well, I’ve updated Henderson on everything so we just need to let him know exactly what to tell the Foundation,” Lois explained.

“Okay. Thank you, Inspector,” Superman said before coming around as Lois cleared a place for him on the couch. “I’ve given a little more thought on what to do, so this is what I think....”

Mav looked up as the Foundation’s head security guard, Howard Stone, escorted a man into his office.

“This is Inspector Henderson. He says he has a message from Superman,” Howard said.

Mav quickly put down the phone, abandoning the unending task of clearing voicemail. Julie and the handful of volunteers were busy answering the phones while Brown was busy with reporters and the like at the moment since Mav had handled things that morning.

“Yes?” Mav asked.

He of course recognized Henderson’s name and trusted Howard to not allow some nut into the building and waste time.

“I was asked to ensure you read it and read it in private,” Henderson said, glancing apologetically at Howard as he held out an envelope.

Howard raised his hands and politely excused himself, not about to hinder the delivery of Superman’s message, whatever it said.

Howard shut the door behind him as Mav took the letter.

Mav opened the envelope and quickly read the contents. He sagged in relief, placing his right hand on the corner of his desk to ensure he remained stable.

“I’ll schedule the press conference for this evening after he arrives,” he said with a wide, grateful smile. “Thank you for delivering the message. I assume you know its contents?”

“I was there when it was written,” Henderson said honestly.

“All right. Entering from the side door will probably be best, and I’ll have security keep a more watchful eye all around when it’s time for him to arrive,” Mav said.

Henderson nodded. “Thank you. I’ll orchestrate things with the police department as well.”

“I trust he has been resting? I know some good, trustworthy doctors, so if you feel it necessary, I can give you their contact information or even ask them to come here for you,” Mav suggested.

Although the letter didn’t outright say, there was enough to suggest that it would be a while before Kal-El could return to actual superhero duties.

Henderson hesitated but nodded his head after a moment. “I’ll take their names and numbers.”

Mav hid his concern fairly well as he quickly jotted down the information.

“They’re unconventional, but Kal-El being who he is....”

Mav said delicately, handing the paper to Henderson.

“I understand. Thank you,” Henderson said, taking the sheet.

Mav suspected the inspector would run background checks on each name, which he certainly didn’t fault him for.

Henderson departed soon after.

Paul Isaacs was giddy but nervous.

Superman was coming.

Mr. Ervin had informed them a few hours before, and now they were expecting him to arrive within the next half hour. They were told he would arrive in a dark blue SUV driven by Inspector Henderson, whom a couple of them had seen earlier that day – presumably delivering a message from the Man of Steel himself.

Working with the police department, who had officers in civilian clothing around the building for added security on top of a handful of uniformed officers, they were as ready as they could be.

Over the past few hours, they had gently guided the crowd of well-wishers far enough away from the building to cordon off the side entrance. Hopefully, Superman would be able to enter that way without too many people noticing him.

No one asked why he was coming by car.

Paul glanced back through the glass doors behind him. There were many, many more volunteers than there were earlier in the week, or even that morning. Not long before the news of Nightfall came out, the Foundation added more than twenty new individuals to their staff, and the word was that Superman had given the go for it in preparation for the efforts that would be needed. Over a dozen were on the second floor, going through supplies and organizing where things were needed now that shelters were no longer necessary for Nightfall. Three were on the first floor, doing their best to go through the long list of people waiting on the phone lines while two others were going through the Foundation's voice mail and recording pertinent messages to be addressed later, if not immediately.

He did not envy them.

Suddenly, his radio gave a chirp and his boss' voice followed. "Five minutes away."

Paul straightened, glancing at Kathy, a fellow guard, standing at the back corner of the building.

She tossed him an uneasy smile, all the while the crowd filling the majority of the surrounding streets continued their quiet vigil.

Vehicles had been coming and going from the Foundation throughout the course of the day, delivering and receiving donations to and from a plethora of locations across the city and beyond. Hopefully, the coming SUV would not garner any more attention than those vehicles.

It was mind boggling how many people had come together to help prepare for what they had all feared could come. Thankfully, Nightfall had been diverted and all of their preparations could now be repurposed.

Kathy lifted her arm, signaling to him that a vehicle was coming down the street; by the look on her face, he knew it was the blue SUV.

Less than a minute later, the inspector's vehicle turned into view, and Paul felt his pulse quicken.

It stopped at the curb, a pace from his right, and the back passenger door was directly across the Foundation's side entrance.

He broke himself from his stupor and opened the car door, before promptly freezing as he took in the form sitting just within the car.

The man had on a black leather jacket and a black beanie with blue jeans and simple sneakers.

Paul couldn't help but wonder if there had been some mistake, but before he could do anything, the man who was presumably Superman got out of the car.

"Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome," Paul said automatically, closing the door behind him before a volunteer within the Foundation hurriedly opened the side door and waved them in.

Paul glanced back to look at the driver, but the SUV was already pulling away as the crowd on the main street began to press in curiously.

They made it inside a moment later, and Mav was there to greet them. Mav apparently had no doubt this man was Superman despite his attire and clasped his offered hand.

The few people within stopped what they were doing and stared.

Mav was not a big man but average in height and build. His thick glasses told of aging eyes and though his white hair further

supported his advanced years, his mobility and energy seemed to mock time as he welcomed the young man before him.

"It's a relief to see you well, but let's get you upstairs before anything else, Kal-El," Mav said, looking up at him.

Unfortunately, the stairs lay on the other side of the reception area, which was completely viewable to anyone looking in from the front of the building – including the packed street.

Paul refused to look toward the vigil occurring outside as he joined the tiny entourage that now also included Julie Heinz, the Foundation's Coordinator, and Howard Stone, his immediate boss, the Head of Security.

Going toward the stairwell, Superman took off his hat, revealing slicked back, black hair while giving Paul a much better look at him. His face was calm and inviting, although not as serious as the news often showed. His olive skin was unblemished, but there was the barest hint of a five o'clock shadow on his face.

It was in that moment, as the group headed up the stairs without him, when realization came over Paul.

This really was Superman.

Chapter 12 – See

They stepped onto the third floor, and Howard held the door open for her.

Julie glanced at Mav before brushing her silver bangs from her forehead as she took the lead and guided them to the lounge area straight ahead.

"Before we discuss anything else, Kal-El, this is Howard Stone, our new Head of Security," Mav said as they all sat down.

Stone held out his beefy hand, which Kal-El amiably shook.

"Nice to meet you," Kal-El said.

"Likewise," Stone said, restraining his excitement behind a stoic yet friendly, bearded face.

"He's retired military. Marines. I've worked with him a number of times and trust him implicitly."

Stone shifted silently as Mav continued.

"Counting Mr. Stone, we now have eight security guards, all part time, save Mr. Stone. They're on a twelve hour rotation, two on each shift. As for the rest of the Foundation, we now have fourteen volunteers who help with the phones and organizing the donations, and five full time aids who direct the volunteers and assist Julie and myself."

Kal-El nodded. "Do we have any other needs?"

"Not at this time. Murray is handling most of the rest, and he hasn't expressed any concerns to me. But back to more pressing matters, how are you?" Mav asked, his white eyebrows raised slightly in gentle concern.

"I'm better than when I first arrived, but I'm not back to myself yet," Kal admitted.

"Did Henderson discuss any of the doctors that I recommended with you?" Mav asked.

Kal nodded. "Dr. Bernard Klein seems to be the best match, but I'd rather wait until morning to call him. Although Henderson will be delivering something to his lab to be analyzed."

"That's fair. I must admit I was expecting you to appear worse off. I'm glad for the surprise," Mav said, although he quickly grew worried when Kal gave an uneasy, nervous sigh.

He decided to ask about what was being analyzed later.

"For now, this goes no further than this room," Kal said, looking at the three of them, clearly deciding something.

"Of course," Julie chimed in as Mav and Howard nodded firmly.

"I don't remember anything before the asteroid. Well, I don't remember much. I've started having flashes of things, but" Kal-El brought his free hand up to his chest and unzipped the jacket, revealing a very familiar emblem. "I seem to have dissociative amnesia. This morning I didn't even know my name. I've been reading articles, watching video tapes, as well as the

news throughout the day to try to jog my memory, which has happened somewhat, but there is still a lot I don't remember yet."

He looked down at his clasped hands, not sure what else to say.

"What do you remember?" Julie asked softly.

"Bits of coming back to Earth, which I wish I didn't remember to be honest, and snippets from my childhood," he answered.

"When did you get back?" Mav asked.

"Around 10 last night. I was ... very lucky. Lucky that I made it back to Earth and lucky that I received help as soon as I landed."

"Was it Bill Henderson who helped you?" Julie asked.

He shook his head 'no'. "It was Lois Lane and one of her neighbors. Somehow, I knew where to go when I entered the atmosphere over the US. It was all instinct. The moment I came to in space, confused and weak, I was pretty much on auto-pilot."

"The press conference, what do you want me to share?" Mav asked.

"That I got back last night and that I've been recovering since. I don't want it ever known exactly where I landed or who helped me, only that I'm grateful for them and that they saved my life," he said, leaving no doubt about how serious he felt about it.

"I understand. Those details will remain a complete secret," Mav promised unequivocally.

"So other than your memory, are you all right?" Howard asked, speaking up for the first time.

"My injuries healed this morning, but my shoulder is still a little tight and I do feel like I could use another nap, but other than that, I feel fine. I don't hurt anywhere anyway. Although, you should know ... I don't remember how to fly or use my abilities, other than my hearing, which came back this morning," he said with a slight grimace as if recalling discomfort.

"All right. I'll keep things brief for the press then. The fact you're back and moving under your own power should be enough to appease the world – for tonight anyway," Mav assured. "I'll keep your amnesia under wraps."

"Thank you. And please, express my gratitude. From the prayerful vigils to all of the efforts in preparation and the like, it's amazing."

"I will," Mav said with an understanding nod as they all stood up.

"Your room is over there, first door," Julie said, indicating with her hand. "Are you hungry?"

"No, but I am thirsty," he said.

"We have a kitchen on the second floor with a fully stocked fridge. I can give you a tour once you've settled, tonight if you wish," Julie said.

"That sounds good. Hopefully being around familiar things will help me remember more," he said.

"Well, if you have any questions or need anything, don't hesitate to ask. One of us will always be in the building," Mav said.

"All right. Thank you," Kal said, before making his way to his room.

The streets were completely packed, and not from vehicle traffic, but *people*. The colors red and blue dominated the streets with posters and flags bearing Superman's shield. The evening was pleasantly warm with a refreshing breeze. Certainly a blessing with the amount of bodies currently standing so close to one another, waiting for the press conference to start.

Lois stepped out of the cab four blocks from the Superman Foundation.

With her press pass in hand, she slowly edged her way forward to the modest three story building dwarfed by most of the surrounding white collar businesses in the area.

Fortunately, her fame aided her, as people stepped aside when

they saw who she was – Lois Lane, the one who had introduced their hero to them all. The one who their hero had chosen to act as his unofficial press agent.

Henderson had taken Kal-El to the Superman Foundation soon after a lengthy discussion about their options. Ultimately, they decided Kal-El returning to his Foundation was the best choice. Along with informing the world that he had returned and was well – at least physically – they hoped being around familiar things would help jog his memory. The other reason was to allow Lois a chance to focus on her investigation so they could discover what exactly had happened and who was responsible for the sabotage.

Kal had thanked her again before he left, promising that he would continue to keep in touch, as it was clear he had before the asteroid. She wasn't too sure of his desire to be open and upfront with the public about how he was doing, but she decided she could do nothing less than support him no matter what.

The man had saved the world, after all.

Lois smiled to herself as she continued to cut through the crowd littered with Superman insignia and written signs of well wishes for Kal-El. There were even people obviously praying, with and without prayer beads.

She came to a stop at the edge of the press corps as Director Maverick Ervin stepped out and onto the podium covered with microphones that had been set up in front of the glass doors of the building's entrance. Jimmy came to a stop behind her, out of breath.

"Thank you for your patience. I know you all have been anxious to hear a statement from us, but until recently, we had nothing to really tell you. That has changed," Mav said to the nervous and somewhat fearful assembled masses before breaking into a big smile. "A few hours ago, at roughly 3:30pm, we got a message from Superman that he had returned and was in a safe place recuperating."

The crowd responded as she expected – ecstatically. The cheers and cries of joy were insurmountable.

Mav lifted his hand after a moment for silence. Amazingly, or perhaps not so amazingly, he got it.

"After communicating with him, we felt this conference should wait until after he had arrived here," he said, to the astonishment of most listening. "We spoke briefly when he arrived, and he wanted me to express his gratitude for all of the prayers and good thoughts sent for his sake and for all of the efforts taken around the world to prepare for what thankfully has been stopped," he said, doing a remarkable job of ignoring all of the flashing cameras. "He is currently residing in his chambers above us and stated he hopes to make an appearance tomorrow. I will take a few questions now."

Many people who were not even reporters called out, but the primary question was obvious.

"How is he?"

"Is he okay?"

"Has a doctor seen him?"

"Was he hurt?"

Mav lifted a hand and was once again immediately answered with jittery silence.

"He was injured but has recovered from the worst of it. I have not inquired on specifics, but I can tell you that he has no visible wounds now and can walk completely unassisted. He did admit to feeling tired and having a stiff shoulder, but I believe a good night's sleep will tend to that. In either case, we have made arrangements for him to be seen by a doctor, just to be safe," Mav answered.

"Where did he land?"

"Did he get any help?"

The director's hand gently came up again. "He didn't tell me where he landed, only that he is grateful to the individuals who

helped him. He said he was lucky to have made it back to Earth and lucky to have received help so quickly upon his return. The people who helped him saved his life.”

“Who saved him?”

“He told me they didn’t want to be known,” Mav said plainly. “Understandably, he wants to respect their wishes, so I will leave it at that.”

“So he will be seen by a doctor?” someone called out, clearly latching onto the tidbit of Superman being looked over.

“Yes. But we are not prepared to give any further details at this time,” Mav explained before clearing his throat. “Well, I need to cut things here. Expect another statement sometime tomorrow, providing an update, and thank you all again for your patience and prayers. Superman deeply appreciates it. Good night.”

He reentered the building as the crowd eased back, relieved and very pleased with what they had learned. They could now go home and rest easy knowing Superman had returned to them.

Martha and Jonathan remained on the street for a long time after the reporters and majority of the well-wishers had left.

“What do you want to do?” Jonathan asked, his eyes still on the building.

“I don’t know. We could go to his apartment and wait for tomorrow’s statement, or we could go back home. I just wish I knew why he hasn’t contacted us yet,” Martha said.

“Maybe he hasn’t had the opportunity. I doubt he’s had much time alone, and that’s before we consider ... injuries,” Jonathan softly pointed out.

“We’ll wait to hear the statement tomorrow and then decide from there. If we’re assured he’s all right, we’ll go back to Smallville and wait for him there,” Martha decided.

“All right,” Jonathan said, glad his son had had the forethought to give them a spare key to his apartment.

Bernard Klein was escorted in through the back entrance, torn between being thrilled and horrified.

He was a scientist, not a practicing medical physician! Granted, he did have a major in Biology, had an M.D., and was known in the medical community as being the go-to person for obscure medical research, such as radioactive therapy and cell mutation.

“This way, doctor,” the Co-Director, Julie Heinz, said.

They went up the stairs, and Bernard tried not to feel too nervous. He had been given a brief overview, but he knew he hadn’t been told everything.

Stepping onto the third floor, he immediately spotted Superman waiting for them on one of the couches directly ahead. He wasn’t wearing the suit, but the blue t-shirt with his emblem was more than enough to help identify him.

Superman quickly stood up as they approached.

“It’s a great honor to meet you, Superman,” Klein said, shaking his hand.

“Likewise. Your work on cellular decay and recovery was groundbreaking. I hope you continue making strides in that research,” he said.

Klein blinked, surprised, as Heinz stepped aside to allow Paul and another guard carry in the equipment he had requested.

“Where would you like this, doc?” Paul asked.

“Over here will work,” Klein directed, pointing at a position beside the main couch before looking to Superman and Heinz.

“Unless, of course, there is somewhere else more preferred?”

“There is fine,” Superman said.

“Yes, this whole floor is at your disposal, doctor,” Heinz assured.

Paul placed the equipment where indicated, noting to himself that most of the equipment was pretty basic and wasn’t nearly as fancy as he would have thought.

“Thanks,” Klein said.

“Well, if you need anything, we’ll be downstairs,” Heinz said.

“Thank you, Julie,” Superman said as they left them.

Klein busied himself with setting up the heart monitor as the door shut, suddenly very aware he was now alone with the most powerful and arguably most revered man alive on the face of the planet.

“So you read my report on cell de- and re-generation?”

Bernard asked, seeking to fill the silence as Superman sat down on the couch and faced him.

“Yes. Bill was very thorough in his efforts to ensure I could make an informed decision on who to help me. So, just a question, how would you feel about being my doctor?”

Bernard stilled. “Officially?”

Kal-El nodded.

Bernard straightened. “Honored. Helping you is more than I could have ever dreamed. Helping you long term would be infinitely more so,” Klein said. “Although, you should know, I had my residency over ten years ago and haven’t practiced in a medical setting in over five. I’m a researcher at heart. It’s why I went into the field I’m in now.” Klein took a deep breath, suspecting his next words would greatly shape his relationship with the Kryptonian. “I would love to couple my strength in research with helping you in any way I can, and although I imagine you’re likely a bit apprehensive about anyone essentially studying you, I must admit that the prospect of possibly getting the chance to do so, to any degree you allow, is quite exciting to me.”

Superman nodded thoughtfully. “I must admit I am curious myself about figuring out how exactly I fly and such. I’m not sure I would want results publicized, but knowing it for myself would actually be a big help.”

“Is there anything specific you would want us to investigate?” he asked, relieved that revealing his curiosity had not put Superman off while slightly surprised by the relief he could make out in his eyes.

“Well, that actually is part of why you’re here. As I’m sure you might have guessed, I’m not quite myself,” Superman admitted.

Retrieving his stethoscope and one of the lines from the monitor, he sat on the corner of the table across from Superman.

“Okay, let’s start from the beginning, from the moment after you struck the asteroid. Don’t leave anything out about yourself. The bigger the picture I have, the better,” Klein said, putting talk of research aside for now as his more important purpose galvanized.

“I woke up in the asteroid’s cloud of dust,” he began as Klein started taking his vitals.

Klein listened closely as Superman told him of his struggle back to Earth and couldn’t help but grow concerned as he realized he had experienced at least the beginning of anoxia and a moderate form of hypothermia.

But then Dr. Klein learned of his amnesia.

“Nothing?” Barnard asked numbly.

“I’ve gotten a few flashes of things since I got back, but the majority...” Superman said uneasily.

“All right, well, the fact some memories have returned is a good sign. Were there things that triggered them, or did they surface randomly?”

“Definitely triggered.”

“Good. So we should be able to trigger more, especially with them surfacing so soon after the trauma.”

“I’ve been watching videos and reading articles involving myself, and it seems to be helping. The events feel familiar at least, even though I don’t remember actually being present.”

Klein hummed thoughtfully, looking over a document and comparing it to the readouts on the machine. “Your body temperature seems to be lower than what EPRAD recorded from

you. About two degrees under. How do you feel?"

"I could probably use some more sun. I don't feel cold, but I'm not as comfortable as I think I could be."

"And your powers?"

"My hearing acted up yesterday, but I now have it under control. I can turn it on and off pretty easily now. As for my other abilities ... I don't remember how to use them. I've tried to use some of my special vision abilities: x-ray and telescopic vision, but I'm either doing it wrong or I don't have them back."

"Don't have them back?" Klein asked, concerned.

"Apparently, I normally have to use heat vision to shave because razors don't work on my hair, but I shaved with one this morning without a problem," he said, brushing his hand across his smooth cheek. "I read about it in an article last night and wanted to see if my hair really is cut proof. It wasn't, at least it's not anymore."

Klein's eyes widened. "Okay, so you must have energy reserves that fuel your abilities. It could explain your lower body temperature. It may indicate your level of strength. Did you nick yourself with the blade at all?"

"No, which honestly surprised me. I, uh, fumbled a bit with the razor. Unlike most other things since getting back to Earth, shaving felt completely new and foreign."

"Hm. Would you mind if we verified your skin's imperviousness?" Klein asked before quickly clarifying. "It would just be a pin prick, to see how close your skin is to being impenetrable again, assuming it's not already."

"Uh, all right. I suppose that would be good to know. After reading that I can catch bullets and all, it's hard for me to believe I can do that after having bruises yesterday. Granted, they did disappear once I was in the sun."

"That is so amazing!" Klein said excitedly before firing off questions – to which Superman quickly answered to the best of his ability.

"You must absorb sunlight and store its energy in your cells, and that energy is what enables you to use your powers. And you've been here for years, likely absorbing more energy than you could ever need for typical super activities. However, since you no doubt had to drain those reserves to survive the impact and get back, it makes sense that it'll take time to return to your normal level of power. And when combined with the anoxia, hypothermia, and injuries, I imagine you're starting from scratch, like an empty battery," Klein rattled off before giving a single clap with his hands in excited realization. "And the fact you were covered with that tar substance – which I've finished analyzing by the way – it makes a lot of sense!"

"What was that black stuff? What did you learn?" Kal-El asked, quickly cutting in.

They had decided to provide only his ruined uniform. The sample Eleanor had procured from his hacking fit was currently sealed away in Lois' apartment and would remain there unless analysis of it was absolutely necessary. As disgusting as it was, they understood its value but at the same time didn't want to just hand over anything that likely contained his DNA. He would wait and see if Klein was worthy of such trust.

"Oh! Right! Well, taking what I could from your uniform, the description Henderson initially gave me, 'space tar', is fairly apt. It was definitely tar, although with a much higher concentration of carbon, which makes sense due to the explosives and fuel in the rocket. However, there was also a notable amount of nickel, lead, and cadmium, which was likely residue from the asteroid itself. All of this explains why you were so weak when you returned. Had it not been for the tar, you likely would have returned in better condition because you would have been taking in direct sunlight. At the very least you probably wouldn't have been covered in bruises, although you might have still suffered from memory loss. I think that was due to the impact itself. The amount

of energy..." He shook his head in wonder before nodding to himself. "I'm going to send for some full spectrum lamps. I want you under either direct sunlight or those lamps as much as possible. We should focus on getting your energy levels up before anything else."

"Doctor's orders?" Superman asked teasingly, notably pleased.

Klein smiled somewhat shyly while deciding his life had just become a lot more interesting.

Lois circled a second name, her suspicions rising as she continued following the trail of clues and rather alarming 'coincidences'.

Liam Price, former assistant to the late Dr. Baines, was part of the Launch and Telemetry System crew of *The Asgard* rocket for EPRAD and had been transferred there not long after her death.

He had the means and opportunity to sabotage *The Asgard*, but did he have motive? Could he have been coerced or bribed?

"What if the helicopter crash wasn't an accident?" Lois whispered to herself, recalling Baines' demise. "What if it was a means to take out loose ends? What if Dr. Baines knew something?"

She frowned and took a bite of her double double chocolate fudge ice cream.

"Or maybe she was in on it? She could have been double crossed."

She shook her head, knowing those particulars didn't really matter now as she looked deeper into Price's history.

"Well, that's certainly something."

During college, he had worked as an intern for LexCorp before being hired by EPRAD and working under Baines.

"You've just made the top of my list, buddy," she said, picking up her phone to call Henderson to ask for a thorough background check on those she had flagged.

Kal took a deep breath, suddenly questioning his decision, but it was too late now. The press were eagerly waiting just outside.

Was it possible for a superman to get stage fright?

He looked down, reassuring himself that 'going casual' was the right course. He didn't want to suggest that he was ready to get back to performing rescues, and wearing his shield t-shirt with simple jeans and shoes would hopefully make that loud and clear.

"You'll do fine. Just take it slow. You crashed into an asteroid and made your way back across over a million miles of space. You've already surpassed all expectations," Julie said softly as she came to a stop beside him.

He nodded his thanks and squared his shoulders as he allowed his hearing to extend out of the building.

He was getting good at controlling his hearing. Dr. Klein had excitedly helped him hone it further that morning after finishing his physical exam.

The crowd's murmurs reached his ears, surprising him by being quieter than he had expected. However, there was still a lot to hear. There were inquiries about what they would soon learn, wondering if Superman would make an appearance or not and how injured he may still be. Others shared their concerns, fearing that things were worse than what the Foundation was letting on.

"All right, we're all set," Mav said, pulling Kal back to his immediate surroundings.

Mav looked at Kal, as if to confirm. Kal gave a nod. They had already discussed how to go about the conference.

They went to the ground floor, and Kal didn't bother to extend his hearing again as they came into view of the windows. It was very obvious when those outside saw and recognized him.

It was a good thing he had gotten his super hearing under control.

The cheering rattled the windows.

Julie stepped out first, and before he knew it he was standing beside Mav who came to a stop directly behind the podium.

“Thank you,” Mav said. “Thank you.”

The cheers softened and the crowd that stretched down both directions of the street stilled despite the bubbling anticipation.

“As promised, an update, which I think will be best delivered by Superman himself,” Mav said, foregoing a long lead in and stepping aside.

Kal stepped forward, placing his right hand on the edge of the podium and taking a deep breath before smiling softly at the enraptured people before him. He did his best to ignore the mics not far from his face and the cameras all directed at him throughout the masses.

“Thank you all for your prayers and well-wishes. I cannot fully put my gratitude into words. I am blown away. Thank you.” The crowd gave a whoop before quieting again.

“I got back around 10 pm the night before last. I won’t mince words; I was not in good shape. I was suffering from lack of oxygen, severe cold, multiple contusions, and extreme exhaustion, but I received help and, as you can see, am doing much better. However, as you can also see, I am not wearing my typical attire, as I am not yet fully recovered and cannot in good conscience return to my normal activities until then.”

Many people watching glanced at one another in concern before quickly refocusing on Superman, hoping for clarification. Superman’s expression did not exactly reassure them.

“From what we can determine, I have a form of Dissociative Amnesia, which, to put it simply, is a form of amnesia where you can’t recall anything about yourself. Fortunately, I have regained some of my memories and have started reviewing articles and the like to help things along. The fact my memories are already returning is a good sign, and my doctor is confident I just need time.”

Murmurs sparked throughout the crowd but were instantly cut off when he continued.

“I want to take this time to reassure the world that the Treaty I signed is still valid in my eyes. I am still Lord Kal-El and I will always honor my agreements. Also, the Foundation will continue to be run as it has since its inception.

“I promise the world will be kept informed on my continued progress through the Foundation. Thank you again for your prayers, support, and understanding. I will now take three questions.”

The reporters would have clamored forward had there been room, but their flailing arms more than adequately expressed their eagerness to ask a question.

Kal pointed to one of the least spastic.

“John Pierce, CBI News. Are you going to remain here for your recovery?” the reporter asked.

“Yes, unless advised otherwise by my doctor, but I don’t foresee that happening,” Superman answered.

He pointed to another more or less composed reporter.

“David Kamet, BBN. How do you feel about the world’s response to the EMP and other reactions to current events, including your temporary disappearance?” he asked, neatly combining multiple topics into one question.

“Amazed and touched. I read an article that contained some of my comments leading up to the mission to Nightfall, and I am exceedingly proud that Earth has responded so well. I don’t think I can ever properly thank everyone who looked for me and took action to help alleviate the challenges caused by the EMP, but I will say, even though I can’t yet remember how things were myself, I believe we have proven that we can do anything together.”

Enthusiastic cheers roared up in agreement before quieting. Superman selected a reporter to give the last question.

“William Dox, ETN. Other than your memories, have you fully recovered?”

He expected the question but couldn’t help but feel the rise of unease that went through him. He knew his answer would not calm anyone, but he refused to lie or obscure the truth when asked outright.

“No.”

“Could you clarify?” Dox asked tentatively.

“My doctor suspects I’ve recovered fifteen percent of my full capabilities. Unfortunately, because of my memory and the fact we do not have anything substantial to compare to my current state, we can just estimate. However, I feel I should be set physically in two to three weeks.”

Kal-El blinked and hid a frown as he cast his eyes across the immense crowd. For some reason he was suddenly having a hard time focusing. It was almost as if his vision was blurring a bit – no, it was definitely blurring, but before it could get too bad it would stabilize again, as if he was looking through an uneven lens that was slowly tilting back and forth.

He needed to finish this up and get inside before it got worse.

“Well, per doctor’s orders, I shall close this up here. Thank you all again for your prayers and support,” he said with a wave, turning with Julie to go back into the building as the crowd belloyed their enthusiasm.

Mav remained and gave a closing statement, assuring they would continue to keep the world informed on his progress.

Kal-El was grateful when his back was to the crowd, but he quickly realized there would be no reprieve. Not only was he still within full view of the street and would remain so even after entering, since the doors were made of glass, but his vision suddenly swam wildly. He managed to catch himself on the door frame and make it appear that he was merely stepping through, but the expression on his face was apparently enough for the security guard by Julie to move toward him.

He wasn’t sure if it was Stone or not; his vision was so blurry and warped that he could only make out the man’s vested form, but he didn’t hesitate to take hold of the guard’s offered shoulder to support himself.

He wasn’t weak, just utterly disoriented.

“I need to get upstairs,” he said quickly, forcing himself to move smoothly even though all he wanted to do was sit down right there and shut his eyes.

They made it across the reception area as everyone else within did an admirable job of not panicking and drawing undue attention to them – although people outside looking in would have to have been blind not to realize something was going on.

“What’s happening, Kal?” Julie asked as they made it into the stairwell and blessedly out of sight from the street.

“My vision is—” he began, only to startle as his attempt to get what he was seeing under control backfired spectacularly.

His vision focused, becoming sharper than he had ever thought possible, and then it zoomed in.

He saw each and every detail within a square inch of the beige paint on the far wall, flakes of dirt and even dead skin stuck out on the rough surface, and then his view sharply slammed back out before zeroing back in again, but then the wall seemed to evaporate.

Two-by-fours and insulation, followed by exterior wall facade solidified and then bled away before his eyes, revealing hundreds of people clustered beyond. Nauseous with the unending visual movement, he slowly lowered himself onto the steps, hoping he wouldn’t alarm those with him too much. He tightly gripped the handrail, and he felt the surface give slightly beneath his finger tips.

“Kal-El!” Julie said, moving into his field of view as he sat down, which unfortunately didn’t help matters.

Before he could blink, he saw her face give way to muscle,

tissue, blood vessels, bone, brain, hair, and then the wall once more.

He tightly closed his eyes, bringing his forearm over them as well as he found the wall with his shoulder.

"I'll call for Dr. Klein," the security guard said worriedly.

"No. Help me get him up to his room first," Julie said.

"All right," he said.

"It's like my hearing. I just need to remember how to control it," Kal said out loud, more to himself than to anyone else.

Julie touched his arm. "Do you think you can walk upstairs?" she asked.

"I can't see the walls. I'm seeing through everything," Kal tried to explain. "Even myself."

"Your x-ray vision?" Julie asked.

"Yeah, and my tele- and microscopic vision as well," he said, exhaling thickly. "I don't feel I should move."

"Do you feel like you might throw up?" the guard asked.

Releasing a soft hum of uncertain admission, Kal decided this couldn't be Howard Stone. His voice didn't sound familiar, but he didn't dare risk looking at him. At the moment, he was staring through his arm and partially up into the ceiling. He was counting the nails in the floor above, hoping the task would limit how much his eyes would waver.

"Wait here. I'll get a wet cloth. It may even help ground you," the man said, getting up and leaving Kal alone with Julie.

"Ground?" Kal asked himself as he realized that's how he was able to regain control over his hearing with Lois. So how could he ground himself enough to ignore what he was seeing and figure out how to turn off his advanced sight?

He heard the stairwell door open again and some people enter, but he was too busy wracking his brain over how to regain control, even as his sight pierced through the third floor of the Foundation and up into the roof where some bird droppings lay beside an AC unit.

"His sight is going haywire like his hearing apparently did yesterday," someone said as a wet cloth was draped across the back of his neck.

"Get Dr. Klein here," Mav said.

"Yes, sir."

Kal grimaced as his sight shot back down and swam in and out through his arm and to the steps overhead through the floor, making his stomach lurch at the disorienting movement that was counter to what his inner ear sensed.

"Kal-El, how are you doing?" Mav asked softly, kneeling down beside him.

Abandoning caution, he lowered his arm and tried to look at the older man. His vision wavered and warped horribly, throwing his body's equilibrium into a seeming death spiral.

There was nothing to grab onto. At least with his hearing, he could lock onto something physical that coincided with a sound and drown out the others to regain control, but this ... this was like drowning in a whirlpool of slashing waves. He could see and focus on one wave for a time, but it would soon bash against him and be replaced with one that would blindside him.

Blind.

Blind.

"Are you blind, L.T.! I know it's hard to accept, but there is nothing alive under there! We need to shift our efforts where there are still people to save," a captain hissed sharply at him, mindful of the ears above on the hill.

"Sir, please, I could have sworn I heard something," he said.

"You have ten minutes, and then I expect you up top and helping with the remaining efforts. I know you knew some of these people from before, but we can't lose sight of our mission, and that is to help those still living," the man said, relenting slightly before walking off.

Kal turned away and peered through the earth, his sight

slipping through stone and rubble, ash and grime. Blood and bone.

What had happened?

A bomb. He was looking at a war zone. He was standing in a war zone.

His eyes stopped on a body, cocooned between a beam and a car, beneath a slab of roof and a coating of dust.

He dug.

He could save him.

There was still life.

He had seen his chest move.

He could hear his heartbeat.

"Captain! I found someone!" he bellowed up.

The memory shifted....

They had to be found, and everything indicated the sad truth to be encapsulated here.

His eyes panned the abandoned, rusty factory, seeing beyond what was otherwise impossible to be perceived by everyone else on earth.

And then there was a void.

Grimacing as suspicion rose, he pulled out the key he had procured.

He approached the wall and forced it aside, engaging a hidden gear in the floor allowing its movement.

A case lay beyond it.

A padlocked case.

A case he could not see into.

He unlocked it and, resigned, opened it.

He wished he hadn't.

He'd found them.

But there was no life, and there would be no recovery, or at least none of the sort those remaining wished for.

But he had found them.

There would be closure.

The memory snapped out of place, engulfing him in that moment that may have been better never remembered.

The sound of the unending echo resounding through the floors of the empty metal tomb that had once housed clanking machinery and hundreds of working men.

The sight of the body, the missing person, heartlessly enclosed in a box placed to be forgotten and never found.

And the smell.

Mold and dried blood and putrid rot.

He gasped, choking.

A hand gripped his upper arm as he gagged.

He twisted, relieved as the memory bled away, and he found himself on his knees with his hands flat on the stairs and his forehead resting against the cold concrete between them.

A small, thin hand was on his back, rubbing firm, confident circles.

He blinked back tears, although whether they were produced from emotional or physical onslaught, he couldn't say. He exhaled shakily as another memory surfaced.

"Honey, it'll come, just try not to force it," a female voice said by his ear as she rubbed his back, soothing away the fear.

Calm, slow circles. Grounding.

"But it's hard, mom. It just comes on randomly. This morning it was all I could do to sit still in my chair. I saw my teacher's heart! His heart, with flowing blood and pulsating chambers! Not to mention his lungs and all the rest."

"Hmm. Is there anything you've noticed that you can't see through?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"How about lead? You're seeing through things, like an x-ray. Maybe there's a way to stop your sight in the same way?"

"Can we try?" he asked, hopeful.

"I'll talk to Dad when he gets home. We might still have some

old lead paint somewhere.”

He relaxed as the memory drifted away.

“Lead. I need lead. I can’t see through lead,” he said softly.

“That might help until I relearn how to control this,” he said after a moment.

There was some shuffling and someone got up.

“I’m on it,” someone said.

“Kal, do you think you can get upstairs with us guiding you?”

Mav asked as the door opened and closed again.

“Yeah,” he said with a swallow, hoping his stomach would settle.

Slowly, he stood up and, with the help of Mav, a security guard he didn’t know, and Julie’s encouraging touch on his back, they made their way up the two flights of stairs.

Martha and Jonathan hugged each other as they pulled away from the dissolving crowd.

“Our boy is back and he’s alive,” Martha whispered to him, tightly gripping his sleeve.

“Yes,” Jonathan said, just as wrought with emotion.

“What should we do?” she asked.

Seeing Clark so close, and yet so far away. . .

He didn’t remember them, that much was clear. His eyes had passed over them without any flicker of recognition. If he remembered them, he would have made eye contact, would have given some indication to them that he was all right and just couldn’t contact them directly just yet. But he hadn’t.

“We should stay at his apartment. If anyone asks, we can say we’re keeping it up for him until he gets back. We’ll say he may be awhile since he’s following a lead on some case, which will line up with what he told Henderson and the others he communicates with,” Jonathan advised.

Martha nodded her head.

“Should we try to send something to him? To help him remember or tell him things he may need to know?” Martha asked before gasping, scared. “Jonathan, what if he doesn’t remember how to control his powers?”

Jonathan frowned, suddenly just as disturbed. He recalled very well how overwhelming his boy’s powers had been in the beginning. Would he experience that again? Would he have to relearn everything that he had discovered about his abilities?

“We’ll write a letter and find a way to get it to him without it being able to be tracked back to us. If nothing else, it’ll let him know he has people who really know and care about him, which may be the most important thing for him right now,” he said softly.

Martha nodded in agreement.

Chapter 13 – Proof

Lois hurried into the control room of EPRAD as Mark Leon, an assistant to Dr. Daitch, waved her over.

“Thanks for getting here so quickly, Ms. Lane,” he said as he motioned to the chair beside him facing a few computer screens.

The area was still a bustle of activity, but security was high, and everything was being watched and evaluated. This corner of the control room was somewhat secluded but within sight of the whole room and several security officers. The investigation was being conducted with a seriousness rarely seen, even in such high profile situations. Granted, it was hardly a surprise. Whatever or whoever had caused the rocket’s malfunction had nearly cost Earth everything, not to mention her greatest protector.

“When I heard you had found something important, I dropped everything to get here,” she said, hoping this was worth it, considering she had passed on the responsibility of attending the press conference at the Foundation that occurred at twelve.

Jimmy and George, a fellow reporter at the Planet, better remember what a huge favor she had done for them.

“It is, Ms. Lane. I’ve only told Daitch about it,” he said.

“He’s getting something and is informing the investigators.”

“Do you not have anyone else helping you?” she asked, surprised.

“Most everyone else is looking into the last readings of the rocket’s control systems and the like. We’ve also limited a great deal of the personnel from helping in the investigation. We suspect an inside man. We can’t risk them destroying any signs of their handiwork or worse.”

Lois nodded, relieved, before thinking of something.

“Can I see a list of the people involved in the investigation?” she asked.

“You’d have to ask Daitch, but I don’t see why not. Do you have a suspect?” he asked.

She nodded. “Two actually. I just want to be sure.”

Mark smiled gravely. “Good idea. Anyway, here is what I’ve found.”

He worked some magic on the screen and handed her a headset to listen to something.

“This is the recording of the broadcast a few minutes before we knew anything was wrong,” he said as she put the headset on.

It was just soft static, since no one was talking, but then she heard a slight blurb sound within the static. If she didn’t know there was something to be heard, she would have missed it.

“Did you hear it?” he asked.

“Yeah, that little hiccup?” she said, not quite certain.

He nodded. “I think the broadcast was spliced into in that moment.”

“Which means . . . ?” she asked.

“What we all heard that day may not have contained everything that went across the coms. If it were me, I would have inserted a redirective path. It would have allowed Superman’s transmissions to be intercepted and taken back while leaving the broadcast void of the transmission.”

“Whoa,” Lois said, taken aback.

So her theory was possible: someone may have communicated with Kal-El without them knowing.

“Yeah. But what I’m hoping is that Superman’s helmet transferred a delayed feedback loop into the system -it’s how we make backup recordings- bypassing the redirective path. We might be able to retrieve the data and listen to what had been sent, assuming anything was sent.” He frowned and softly added, “At the very least, we should be able to hear anything Superman may have said in those last moments.”

Lois pursed her lips, not sure how she felt about that as she recalled his heart rate. It must have been horrifying, knowing he was about to hit the asteroid with a rocket full of explosives.

Did he suspect he was going to die? Probably.

Mark looked behind her, an expression of concern passing over his face.

“Mark, Ms. Lane, good afternoon,” said a familiar voice.

Lois turned to find Dr. Daitch behind her.

“Doctor,” she said.

“Has Mark brought you up to speed?” he asked, forgoing pleasantries, which Lois was perfectly fine with.

“I just finished,” Mark said. “Did you find it?”

Daitch nodded, passing him a flash drive. “I made several copies. And I’m glad you’re here, Ms. Lane. There’s several things you need to know.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve just notified EPRAD Command, but the original feedback loop from Superman’s helmet in our communication system was deleted. Fortunately, I was able to retrieve a backup, which I have here, and I just gave the list of everyone who has access to that system to General Zeitlin,” he explained.

“Surely that’s not why you look so worried,” Lois inquired.

“No. I just learned that Prometheus’ orbital control systems are failing. They have less than three days before they reenter the

atmosphere. They won't be able to stabilize their decent, and it's doubtful that even if they could they would be able to prevent burn up. The space station wasn't designed for it."

"Can't we do something?" Lois asked, seeking a solution.

"We don't have time to outfit a rocket and shuttle to provide equipment and commence repairs," he said gravely. "If you recall, the closest available rocket, *the Phoenix*, had been gutted and filled with explosives. We can't undo those changes and prepare what we need in time to help."

"That's terrible!"

"We've sent an urgent message to the Superman Foundation, but considering what he said earlier today, I doubt he'll be able to help either – with the rocket or otherwise," Daitech said regretfully, brushing his hair back with his hand in despair.

Lois covered her mouth in equal dismay.

All those people....

Sitting on his bed on the third floor of the Foundation, Kal-El put his face in his hands as the light from the lamps Dr. Klein had vastly improved shined down on his bare back.

Word about Prometheus had reached him, and he couldn't do anything to help. He felt so utterly useless.

He didn't know how to use, let alone control, over half of what he was supposed to be able to do. It had taken almost an hour to regain his normal sight, even with the lead vest they had procured from the nearby hospital's radiology department. He didn't even want to imagine how long it would have taken him without it.

Currently, fine control was still beyond his reach, but at least he had learned how to turn each of his vision abilities on and off – for whatever good that did.

If only he could remember!

He shook his head. Rebuking himself.

Sitting there feeling sorry for himself wasn't going to help.

He stood up, giving up on getting the rest Dr. Klein had recommended him to take. He wasn't tired anyway. But he did unplug and pick up one of the lamps to take with him after putting his blue shirt back on. He decided to forgo his shoes though. They were a little on the small side. Socks should be fine, since the second floor was carpeted and much more relaxed than the first floor that was fairly open to the public.

Stepping from the stairwell onto the second floor, he found a dozen volunteers still working through the donations and mail that had just arrived. Unbelievably, it was only 3 o'clock. A few people were seated around one of the tables while the rest were sitting on the carpet among dozens of boxes and supplies.

"Sup—Kal-El, were we being too loud?" the head volunteer, Leia, asked worriedly while glancing in confusion at the lamp he was carrying.

"No, I'm just not tired. Is there anything I can help you all with?" he asked, ignoring the awe-filled looks of the other volunteers.

Honestly, there wasn't a single fully composed person in his presence at the moment, but they were getting better.

"Oh! Uh, sure. We're organizing package donations and opening mail, as you can see. We could use more help with either," she said.

He smiled and made his way to the table, sitting down on the empty chair at the corner beside a teenage boy after plugging in the lamp and turning it on so he could continue soaking in some concentrated rays. Everyone grinned at him, each with varying amounts of excited nervousness.

"So we have packages and letters. Which do you prefer?" Leia asked, deciding not to ask about the lamp.

"Letters will be fine," he said, seeing that pile was much larger.

A teenage girl across from him shyly slid over a stack for him

to begin going through.

The first handful were pretty simple; they were all addressed to the Superman Foundation and thanking them for their work. Of those, several included a request for Superman to make an appearance at their fundraiser or the like while others included a check. There were over five hundred dollars in three letters alone.

"Is this typical?" he asked after setting the envelope aside and jotting down the sender and amount donated on the clipboard set aside for such record keeping.

"Yes, although this is the largest shipment we've received to date," Leia said.

He resumed by opening the next letter; this one was addressed to himself.

"All letters addressed to you we open, prioritize, and set aside for you. Mr. Ervin said you see to them once a week," Leia said quietly upon seeing the envelope's sender information.

By the child's handwriting, it was clear this was not a formal letter from some organization seeking favor or offering support.

He slowly nodded and pulled out a single, folded sheet of paper. Above a crayon drawn image of what could only be himself lifting an ambulance, Kal read a child's scrawl.

Superman,

My **brother's name** is Luke. You **saved his life** after a semi-truck **hit** his school bus. You **froze him** and **then** flew the ambulance to the hospital so he **would** make it to the doctors in time. I know you don't **remember** right now, **but** I wanted **you** to know. I **also** sent you a **picture** of him so you **can** see **what** he looks like. Maybe it will help.

I **hope** you get **better** and **remember** again soon.

Thank you,

Tal/y

He picked up the picture that fell free from the folded letter flap, taking in the boy's band uniform and spotting the trombone placed on display in the corner behind him. He couldn't have been older than 13.

"We get a lot of letters like those," Leia said softly.

"I don't remember doing any of these feats," he said, automatically memorizing the boy's features for a reason he didn't fully understand as his vision seemed to cloud around the edges.

Missing persons.

Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, from all over the world. Boys and girls, men and women, young and old.

He must keep an eye out.

Always. Just in case.

Because he could.

A girl. A Chinese girl, in a market of the most despicable kind.

The scene manifested before his eyes, and he was no longer aware of the table he was sitting at with volunteers sifting through letters.

Faces passed before his mind's eye, each bringing forth emotions that lacked an origin or cause he could recall. But they were all powerful.

Some brought forth resounding sadness: an unspoken acknowledgment that the soul they represented would never be seen again in this life.

Many pulled up rage within his heart, and he was reminded of the first scene containing a Chinese child among filth and unimaginable abuse.

Who were these people?

But others surged up the sensation of peace, as if they were now safe and home again. It soothed his soul and incited something that shocked him: pride and accomplishment – in himself.

The feelings rose and fell so rapidly upon each face that he couldn't process or think on each for more than a blink before the next came and went. Nameless faces that held such importance to

unscathed either, although thankfully he didn't need to worry about his dignity.

Mid-thigh down to his knees, the front of his jeans were charred and in tatters, no doubt from where he had brought his legs up over the bomb to better contain it.

But his exposed skin was unharmed. It wasn't even red.

"Let me see that water," Harvey said, removing his outer shirt and bunching it up before taking the offered gallon of water, which he then poured over his shirt. He offered it to Superman. "Here, you probably want to get that stuff off your skin."

"Thank you," Superman said, gratefully taking it and cleaning his face as best he could. "We will need to give this to forensics. Although unlikely, they'll want to make sure there's no evidence on it."

"No problem," Harvey said, unconcerned about the shirt as they heard sirens of the approaching ambulance the driver had called.

Harvey swallowed, taking a moment to just look at what was before him now that things had calmed down and no one was in immediate danger. Superman wasn't even wearing shoes. He must have spotted the bomb just as it had been about to go off. At least he wasn't breathing heavily anymore.

The ambulance arrived and pulled up beside them as the traffic obediently cleared out – although people along the sidewalks continued to gather in hopes of getting a better view of Superman.

"No, Superman, let them check you over first," Harvey said quickly when Superman moved to get up.

Superman stopped and eased himself back onto the pavement with an agreeable nod as the paramedics came out.

Harvey was astonished by his own audacity but was even more stunned by the fact Superman had actually listened to him.

"We are going to need everyone to back up to the sidewalk please," the front paramedic said. He was a large black man who could have doubled as a linebacker for the Buffalo Bills. He then looked down in mild surprise at Superman who was still resting against the woman's vehicle. "Hey, Superman, back in action already? Weren't you supposed to take it easy for two to three weeks? Going against doctor's orders already?" he teased.

"Yeah well, you know how it is," Superman returned with a smile. "I get bored easily."

The paramedic knelt down, and Harvey wished he could remain to watch but knew better than to risk getting in the way.

Al Berkins knelt down beside the last person he thought he would ever be meeting as the bystanders grudgingly pulled back.

"Bored, eh?" he asked, trying not to stare too hard at the damage the bomb had done to Superman's clothing while his flesh beneath revealed no damage at all. "All right, let's see how you're doing," he said, taking out a flashlight while a second paramedic put a pulse oximeter on his forefinger.

"I think I'm okay now. I was disoriented more than anything," Superman said.

"Well, from what I remember from your stats on the broadcast of Nightfall, I agree with you, although your body temperature is notably lower," Al said after quickly completing the basic patient evaluation.

Superman frowned. "How much lower?"

"Three degrees. You're sitting right at 97.5 degrees Fahrenheit."

"Shoot. I lost a degree. I guess this proves my doctor's theory," Superman sighed.

"Theory?" Al asked, intrigued and very curious to learn about their planet's literal savior.

"My body temperature is pretty much an indication of how I'm doing," he explained vaguely.

"I see," Al said, wondering how much this had set the

Kryptonian back. "Think you can stand?"

He nodded, prompting Al and another paramedic to help him up, although it quickly became apparent he didn't really need it as the growing crowd cheered as he rose.

It took Mark an hour to retrieve and convert the data into something they could listen to and actually hear. The only good thing about the wait was that it provided General Zeitlin and others heading the investigation with enough time to join them so they could listen as well.

"All right, I think I got it. I had to max out the sensitivity since the feedback loop seems to have muffled everything. Hopefully, we'll be able to hear what was recorded," Mark said, trying not to display his nervousness since several people present could easily dictate his future at EPRAD.

"Let's hear it then," Zeitlin stated, not the only one growing impatient.

Lois had to stop herself from tapping her foot.

The small but important group huddled behind the computer, hoping what they were about to hear would be the piece to the puzzle they needed to figure out what had happened.

The computer's speakers seemed to strain against what was being demanded of them, but after a moment the static gave way to speech.

"Superman, you have a choice to make in the next minute or so. The rocket has been rigged to veer off course and detonate prematurely if it no longer detects your presence, so you can either allow the mission to fail – and potentially make the overall situation worse – or remain with the rocket to the end," a voice said, positively dripping with glee. **"I already know what you're going to do, of course, but the illusion of choice and all that. But even if you were to choose the second option, I have contingencies. The new world would need to have a ruler, no? But either way, I really just couldn't allow myself to miss such a wonderful opportunity after you lost me billions without even knowing. After all, I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't recognize and remove threats. So, any last words?"**

"You are setting the groundwork for your own downfall. The truth will be known sooner or later, and in the end you will have to answer for everything you have done, in this life or the next, Luthor," Superman said.

Ten seconds passed before they heard the alarm alerting Superman to release the rocket. Soon after, a reply to Superman's words came.

"So your hearing is as excellent as they say; I wasn't completely sure if you'd be able to hear me, let alone recognize my voice. But no matter, I admit I will grieve the loss of such a worthy opponent. Farewell, Superman."

Luthor severed his com, and suddenly all they could really hear was Superman's breathing for two long seconds, before the silence was broken.

"I will make it back. I will not die. I will not let a deranged narcissist dictate my end. I swear it."

His breathing quickly changed to the point it sounded as if he was hyperventilating. Lois knew he was trying to empty his lungs as much as possible to inhale all the fresh oxygen he could. And then he took a long deep breath before —

There was a horrendous sound of crunching metal followed by a high pitched whine signaling the lack of a signal. Mark stopped the playback.

No one spoke for a long moment. Everyone was completely speechless. Until it was broken by a gruff explicit.

Lois wasn't sure who spoke, but she couldn't agree more.

"By the end of the day, either Luthor will be arrested or I'll give up every single star on my shoulder," General Zeitlin declared before storming out, enraged, with Lois hot on his heels.

“General!” she shouted, jogging to his side. He didn’t slow but glanced at her in silent invitation. She took it. “I have some things you might want to know...”

Lex Luthor stared at the screen, watching the recording yet again.

It just never got old.

Although it had not ended the way he had hoped, it was progress, and watching the beginning especially was very satisfying.

Watching Superman’s body flip uncontrollably through the air from the explosion before plummeting like a brick ... he got a warm shiver of pleasure up his spine every time he watched it. He, Lex Luthor, brought down a god. And one day, he would do it permanently.

The information he managed to retrieve from the audio recordings proved it was just a matter of time and planning.

The video cameras unfortunately didn’t capture the alien’s landing but the mics had, and they had also captured a nice little tidbit from Superman himself. Explosions did affect him, so much so that it, apparently, was measurable. There was a chink in his armor, he just needed to keep chipping at it hard enough that the ‘Man of Steel’ wouldn’t be able to recover fast enough before receiving a fatal blow.

He grinned as he pushed ‘rewind’ before pushing play again.

At the moment where Superman blurred out of the building, he suddenly heard a commotion outside his private quarters. Odd. He rose from his chair, about to yell at Mrs. Cox about not disturbing him as he paused the video, leaving the screen frozen on the shot of Superman’s form tumbling from the ball of fire and smoke.

However, before he could inquire, the double doors into his locked, private office were suddenly bashed down and over a dozen men in full tactical gear stormed in.

“Get down on the floor!” the front man roared as two others rushed forward and pulled Luthor, none too gently, onto the floor, yanking his arms behind his back.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Luthor bellowed, actually a bit stunned that they didn’t give him more forewarning – or a forewarning at all.

“You are under arrest!” the head man declared as handcuffs were tightly applied to his wrists.

“For what?!” Luthor spat, enraged.

“Conspiracy to commit mass murder, sabotage, the murder of Miranda Fairchild, and a load of other charges too numerous to mention,” he answered before rattling off his Miranda Rights while glancing at the television. His eyes narrowed.

“I’ll have your badge for this! I can afford a thousand attorneys! I’ll have all of your heads for this!” Luthor screamed as they hoisted him up and carried him away, completely unimpressed by his words and disgusted by the paused scene still frozen on the television screen behind him.

Lois took a deep breath as she dug into her double chocolate fudge ice cream.

That evening’s edition of the Daily Planet was a record making page turner with nearly every single article being first page material.

LEX LUTHOR ARRESTED FOR SABOTAGE OF ASGARD!

SUPERMAN THWARTS BOMBING OF FOUNDATION!

PROMETHEUS ORBIT IN DANGER

SUPERMAN’S RECOVERY SET BACK

LUTHOR, SUSPECTED CRIME BOSS

Perry was beside himself with glee, declaring he was as happy as Elvis had been singing ‘It’s Now or Never’, the King’s favorite song. The follow up stories would no doubt branch

beyond the new year and likely be page ones more often than not. From uncovering the heinous crimes Luthor’s empire (and yes, empire) had orchestrated to updating the public on EPRAD and Superman’s activities and progress, the Daily Planet would not have a shortage of enticing stories to report on any time soon.

Lois eased herself back on the couch, wondering if Henderson had heard from Mav at all. She wondered how Kal was doing.

She, of course, had been horrified to learn what had happened at the Foundation but was even more concerned when she learned Kal had been blown up (again) and the fact that an ambulance had been called out. Thankfully, they had not really been needed and had merely looked him over before driving him back to his Foundation, but still.

It was an hour later when Mav gave the public an update saying Superman’s physician had indicated that the bombing had set his recovery back, but they couldn’t be sure by how much.

However, despite that, he was doing fine and suffered no injuries.

Lois sighed, hoping Kal-El was resting, as her phone rang.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Hi, Lois? It’s Kal-El.”

She immediately straightened up, almost dropping her ice cream covered spoon on herself. Some of it dripped off.

“Kal, hi!” she said, now attempting to mop up some of the spilled ice cream from her shirt while trying to maintain control of the phone and spoon.

“I just wanted to congratulate you. Dr. Daitch called Mav and gave us a summary of the things that had transpired leading up to Luthor’s arrest. He felt we had a right to know,” Kal said.

“Oh, thanks. Things moved pretty fast after we heard the backup of your helmet’s recording. I’m glad that what I found during my investigation and what Henderson had gotten from a PI was able to help things along,” she said, giving up on salvaging her shirt and just putting her spoon down. “It certainly helped convince the judge to act as swiftly as he did, otherwise it would have just all been on that single recording. The evidence that Luthor’s likely a crime boss on top of it all provided the last push.”

“I gather there is going to be some follow up? Daitch mentioned a few other people at EPRAD getting arrested and some of Luthor’s secretaries or something?”

“Yeah, Liam Price, the mole in EPRAD was caught, and there are things linking back to the attempted sabotage of Prometheus that are sending up more red flags. As for people around Luthor, yeah, his personal assistant, Mrs. Cox, and his butler, Nigel St John, have been arrested. Apparently the PI I mentioned before had gathered evidence against the butler and had contacted the British government before Nightfall, so Britain is going to get involved there before too long.”

“Who’s the PI?” Kal asked.

“A friend of Henderson, Clark Kent. I haven’t met him, but, from what I’ve heard and seen, he’s good at what he does.”

“Good to know. Has anything more been uncovered about Luthor?” Kal asked.

Lois laughed. “Oh, most definitely. As soon as they were able to get that No-Knock Warrant against Luthor, more evidence just poured from the walls – according to Henderson anyway. There’s going to be a lot more arrests coming. Luthor had his fingers in everything,” Lois said, still baffled with it all herself.

She had known Luthor had been the Boss, but actually hearing from Henderson about everything they were finding. . . . It was nuts.

“It’s nuts,” Lois said. “And there’s talk that International Court is going to get involved and prosecute him for Crimes Against Humanity. Of course, there’s some legal questions with it all, but as far as I’m concerned, he knowingly put the entire world at risk in an attempt to get revenge while accepting and preparing

for the chance of his sabotage working too well and giving him a chance to become the ruler of the ‘new world’. If that isn’t a crime against humanity, what the heck is!?”

“That’s a good point,” Kal agreed.

“Sorry, sorta fell into a rant there.”

“Well, you’re not wrong. What he’s done is reprehensible. Evil really.”

“Yeah. Anyway, how are you? I mean, I heard about what happened.”

Kal sighed. “It seems to have set me back a day or two. The only good thing is that I seem to have full control of my visual abilities now and my speed is definitely back online. Flight is still touchy, but we suspect I just don’t have enough energy yet to really maintain it.”

“You remember how to fly?” she asked, thrilled for him.

“Float would be a more fitting word at the moment,” Kal admitted. “But I suppose it’s progress.”

“Progress is progress.... And your memories?” she asked after a moment.

“They’re ... confusing. I’ve had some more flashes, a few frankly disturbing but, well, I don’t really want to talk about them right now to be honest. I’m hoping I’ll remember more so I can make better sense of them.”

“I understand. I’m glad things are coming back though, even if they’re not making sense at the moment,” Lois answered, idly stirring her melting ice cream while hoping the amount spilled wouldn’t stain.

“Well, I better go. The doc wants me under his new lamps and to try to get some sleep. He’s hoping they’ll be more effective since he focused the wave lengths.”

“Alright. I should head to bed myself as well.”

“Good night, Lois.”

“Good night.”

Kal hung up, leaving Lois content despite a bowl of uneaten, melted double chocolate fudge ice cream sitting in front of her.

Chapter 14 – Recall

Mav made his way up the stairs, his hand pausing briefly over the imprints Kal-El had made on the railing with his fingers when his amazing eyesight had been out of control.

He wasn’t sure what to think about the letter in his grasp, but he couldn’t keep it to himself. When Leia had given it to him with skeptical optimism, he initially assumed it was a hoax. A hateful, cruel hoax.

But then, what if it wasn’t?

He really hoped it wasn’t.

They could really use a break.

He stopped at the door and knocked.

“Come in,” Kal replied.

Mav entered and found Kal speed reading through yet another stack of newspapers.

“Everything alright?” Kal-El asked, looking up and revealing a fairly dark five o’clock shadow.

“Yes, but you just got a letter I believe you should see sooner rather than later,” he said, going to him and holding out the letter.

Kal-El took it curiously.

“It was priority mail. The return address is an office depot across town,” Mav quickly informed him as he pulled out the sheet and unfolded it.

He blinked, quickly taking in the typed words before him.

Son,

We are writing to you while knowing you do not remember us, but we could not remain silent on the likelihood of you not knowing how to control your abilities. We know we are taking a risk, but your well-being is more important than our own.

Outlined below are your abilities and how to control each.

Super-hearing: concentrate on a single, steady sound, such

as a heartbeat. When you were younger, I had you put your hand on my neck to feel my pulse and that allowed you to gain control.

X-Ray Vision: You can’t see through lead. Use that to limit yourself and practice.

.

.

.

Kal looked up at that, gripping the bottom corner tightly.

“Who else has read this?” he asked.

“Just myself and Leia. All of our volunteers sign ironclad privacy agreements, but Leia reiterated to me that she wouldn’t tell anyone about the letter.”

Kal-El nodded his thanks, his eyes returning to the page.

“You believe it is genuine then?” Mav asked softly after a moment.

Quietly, Kal answered. “Yes. No one would have been able to correctly guess half of this.”

“Shall I discreetly ask Henderson. . . .” Mav trailed off. He wasn’t sure if Kal wanted to try to find out who had sent this letter. There were pros and cons to both options.

“No. I’m not seeing any fingerprints anyway,” he said, squinting at the page with some effort before shaking his head. “They must have been very careful.”

“Shall I call Dr. Klein? He might be able to help you implement some of the methods listed,” Mav suggested.

“Sure, it couldn’t hurt, especially since razors no longer work for me,” he said before looking down at the letter again.

.

.

.

Flight: You once explained that it is mental more than anything, willing yourself to float or move despite gravity. You said it does take some physical effort, but it’s mainly an internal strain that is most comparable to reaching for something.

The memory hit hard and fast, and the sense of exhilaration tore through him stronger than anything he could remember.

He was above the clouds, weaving in and around them, above and through them, freer than a bird and faster than any car. The land rushed under him, blue water and green fields among dots of buildings and vehicles. He laughed as he shot forward, releasing the crack of a sonic boom.

“Kal-El?” Mav asked, breaking him from his memory.

“I think I can fly now. Call Daitch and ask him what exactly Prometheus needs. Don’t make any promises yet, but I want to know what is needed to keep her in orbit,” Kal said, quickly deciding on a possible course of action.

“Alright, I’ll contact Dr. Klein and Dr. Daitch. Anything else?” Mav asked, hopeful upon seeing a glimmer of the old, decisive Kal-El.

“No. Thank you, Mav,” Kal said. “I think I’ll try some of what the letter suggests.”

Mav nodded his understanding before heading out.

Lois was nearing disbelief. For some time, she had known the Boss had been involved in a lot of horrible activities and orchestrated most of the substantial organized crimes in Metropolis, but this was beyond anything she had imagined.

Everything from drugs, prostitution, the cyborg fighters to even the smart kid serum, Lex Luthor had had a part in all of it. Nigel St. John had been arrested, and the British government was in the process of working out the extradition of the old man with the United States. The cases being solved just kept on coming, and there was no end in sight, with the number of arrests climbing into the hundreds.

And the evidence from Kent had been beyond helpful. Henderson was still making arrests thanks to his intel coupled with

recently found information. The PI was a force to be reckoned with, and she couldn't help but wish the man was around so she could ask how he managed to do what he had on his own.

Liam Price, the mole within EPRAD who had been a former assistant to the late Dr. Baines and part of the Launch and Telemetry System crew of the Asgard rocket for EPRAD, was singing like a canary.

His testimony would be yet another nail in Luthor's coffin. Apparently, the billionaire had arranged for Baines' death (as suggested by Kent's investigation) and had ordered Price to sabotage the Asgard.

"Lois! Got that article on Price yet?" White bellowed.

"Sending now, Chief!" she answered, pushing down on the key and picking up her briefcase.

She wanted to pay EPRAD another visit.

Klein sat down on the couch, deciding that pacing outside the bathroom door would be rude and possibly distracting.

It seemed that Kal was getting the hang of his abilities, which, putting it lightly, was very fortunate. He just might be able to help Prometheus out before it was too late. Daitch should be getting back to them soon.

"OUCH!"

Klein scrambled off the couch and hurried to the bathroom door.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Bernard asked, hesitating even as his hand wrapped around the door handle.

"Y-yeah, I'm okay. Just nicked myself a bit. I—oh! It just healed," Superman said from the other side.

Klein really wanted to see for himself but didn't dare open the door while Kal-EI could still be using his heat vision.

Suddenly, the door opened and Superman stepped out, now his clean-shaven self.

"There. That's done now," he said, very pleased.

"So, what do you think about this power? Easy to control? Is it difficult to maintain focus?" Klein asked, seeking whatever insight he may be able to get that may help him understand how it works.

"Hm, it's easier than it was. One thing I noticed is that the laser's focus increases without any conscious effort on my part. It's how I burned myself. I have to pull back the strength after about twenty seconds."

"When things settle, I'd like to have you experiment a bit if that's okay. My current guess is that this focus has something to do with the energy in your eyes stabilizing, but until we investigate it's only a theory," Klein said, doing his best to keep his excitement in check.

"I think that's a good idea. Any word from Daitch?" Kal asked.

"Not yet, but—" he stopped as Julie suddenly came up from the stairs.

"Sorry for interrupting," she said, "But Dr. Daitch just called from EPRAD. He's on line one."

"Oh, thanks," Kal said, quickly going over to the nearby phone and picking it up. "Dr. Daitch? This is Superman."

Klein and Julie watched as Kal quietly listened before nodding.

"I understand. I'll be there as soon as I can."

He hung up the phone and looked at Julie. "Please schedule a press conference. Before I leave, I'll give you my statement to read."

"So you're going to EPRAD?" Klein asked.

"Yes. Apparently Prometheus has less time than they previously thought. Their most recent communications they've managed to have with the ground crew have revealed that systems that should have been regulating power consumption were not online due to the electromagnetic pulse, and the majority of their

solar panels were destroyed by the pulse so nothing has been recharging...."

"How much time do they actually have?" Klein asked.

"Instead of two days, they have less than one. They believe the decaying orbit will be unrecoverable in a few hours. The other issue is the micrometeoroid and orbital debris. At the lower elevations, the chances of being hit by something goes up, and since they can't move out of the way – assuming they successfully detect any substantial objects – it's a serious concern."

"I'll have Howard pull up a car around the side," Julie said, deciding their head of security would be the best person for the job.

"No, I just need a map so I know where to go. I think I should fly there. It's faster, and I need the practice," Kal correctly gently but confidently.

"Give me five minutes, and you'll have the directions," Julie said with a smile.

He had the marked map in two minutes.

The sonic boom rocked over Metropolis, startling many people before instilling a spark of hope and excitement.

There could only be one cause for that sound within city limits.

Superman landed a little heavily, leaving a cluster of hairline fractures on the pavement in front of the main doors of EPRAD but didn't pause as he followed Dr. Daitch's instructions to immediately go in and make his way up to the balcony.

He could answer any questions from the press after he returned.

"Superman! Thank you for coming so quickly. Now you're sure you're up for this?" Daitch asked as a group of technicians and scientists came up beside him, along with General Robert Zeitlin.

"Yes. I'm not 100% yet, but my doctor and I feel I am well enough for this," Superman assured them, glad they didn't seem too perturbed by his attire.

Even though he had seen pictures and videos of himself wearing the red and blue, he couldn't help but feel a little self-conscious. After all, most of his uniform had less than two millimeters of material separating his bare skin from the outside world.

"Very well. The astronauts up there have already started spacewalk preparations, so by the time you get up there, they'll be able to start the EVA," Daitch said. "We have everything needed in Bay 4, including your gear. As I mentioned before, you'll likely need to take three to four trips. There's a lot of electronics that need to be replaced."

"Alright. As long as I know where to go and how to get back, delivering the equipment shouldn't be a problem," he said as he followed Daitch and his team, ignoring the chatter his ears suddenly picked up beyond the doors.

Amy Platt nervously looked out the window as her mother and the other colonists hurried throughout the space station.

EPRAD was preparing to send them replacement parts to repair the station, or at least that is what she had managed to overhear. She wasn't sure what had taken so long for EPRAD to realize they needed help, but even now that help was coming she could tell the adults were still concerned.

Their orbit may not be recovered in time.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the far end of the station, where the radio and other communication systems were located.

"Oh, thank heavens!"

"Kraig and his men are ready to go out, right?" someone asked.

"Yeah, they're suited up. I'm glad we went ahead and prepared, even though we hadn't been sure," another answered.

Movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention, movement on the *other* side of the window.

“Superman!” she shouted excitedly.

The external lights on the station illuminated the surrounding area with the earth as the backdrop. Currently, the station was in Earth’s shadow.

And there, with a large box in his arms, was Superman with a space helmet and vest. She noted his lack of cape with some surprise before realizing it would be too cumbersome with the air tank and other equipment he had on.

People clamored behind her to look out as well while a voice over the intercom announced preparation to open the docking bay.

Before too long, he disappeared around the side and then returned without the box. She stared as he turned and his form became smaller and smaller, returning back to Earth.

There were shouts of joy as quick directions were given. She was giddy with relief and excitement.

Superman was helping them himself!

Amy’s nose was practically glued to the glass, waiting for Superman to return. He did eight minutes later, this time with a crate.

“He’s helping Kraig’s team remove the damaged thruster panels, and we should be able to regain orbit within an hour,” her mom said behind her.

Kraig Levian managed to keep his focus on the task at hand, although all he wanted to do was stare at the man (Kryptonian?) flying around the space station under his own power.

They were halfway done with the most serious repairs, but he was growing nervous despite that. They were getting closer to the region heavy with orbital debris. Although he was now confident they would be able to recover their orbit in time, the question on whether they would suffer any impacts weighed heavily on his mind.

“Colonel Levian?” Superman’s voice came from his helmet’s radio.

“Yes?” Kraig did his best to maneuver himself so he could face Superman, but fortunately he didn’t need to try too hard since Superman floated in front of him when he noticed his difficulty.

“I’ve completed installing the last panel on that side,” Superman said.

Even though he knew Superman had ‘super speed’, knowing that the thrusters on the starboard side were ready to go so quickly was still hard to believe – granted, everything about the guy was unbelievable.

“Thank you, Superman. As soon as I finish this one, my team and I will return to the station and we’ll fire those thrusters,” he said into his helmet radio.

He returned his attention back to connecting the remaining cables as sunlight began to crest around the curve of the earth, lighting up the far edge of Prometheus and, from the corner of his eye, bathing Superman in golden light.

“Superman, this is EPRAD Control. Everything okay?” Kraig heard through his helmet, and he wondered for a split second why they had communicated on the shared com instead of simply talking to Superman directly but then realized maybe they *wanted* him to hear.

“Yes. Why?” Superman asked.

“How do you feel? Your vitals just spiked and your temperature—” EPRAD trailed off uncertainly.

“I feel fine, better than when I left actually. I’m in sunlight now, that must be why,” he said, looking at his bare hands in the yellow glow of Sol.

“That must be it. Your vitals have stabilized and now match what they had been during the start of the Nightfall mission. Okay, what is the status of the repairs?” Control asked, deciding to move on with the matter at hand.

“Just completed,” Keith answered with a glance at Superman who was still examining his hands. “Team Alpha, let’s head back inside,” he said, addressing his team.

Superman looked up and smiled as he gave a quick, two fingered salute. “I’ll pull back and stay out of the way,” he said.

Mayson set down one of the several files on what was likely to be the case of the century.

Lex Luthor was currently detained in the high security prison just outside the city. Every single guard in the wing had been cleared personally by herself, General Zeitlin, or someone they unequivocally knew could be trusted. He was watched by two guards 24/7, and all food was prepared and tested for contaminants/poisons in front of another guard before said guard took it to Luthor. They were not going to allow the scumbag to escape, either physically or through suicide.

She rubbed her eyes, her thoughts wandering.

When would Clark be back in town? Had he heard about Luthor? Surely he had. It was international news. But why hadn’t he called? She wished he had been there when they brought Luthor in. A great deal of his work was going to be responsible for putting the immensely evil man away. Although, that’s assuming there was anything left over after the international court was through with him, especially when the death penalty was already being discussed in certain circles.

Personally, she didn’t care what his final fate was, as long as Justice was served, which meant him facing every single charge upon him and the truth being displayed for all the world to see. His victims deserved that at the very least, recent and distant past.

Mayson shook her head, still finding it hard to believe that Superman was one of those victims.

Well, at least he seemed to be doing better. He had managed to help Prometheus recover her orbit after thwarting Luthor again.

What a sick, perverted man.

Kal woke up to the sound of cars driving outside the Foundation. It was early and, stretching his senses, he knew none of the volunteers had arrived yet and only the security guards and Julie were in the building.

The previous day had been intense, and it hadn’t been hard to retire to his room for the remainder of the day after giving the press a quick wave and an honest statement of needing to turn in due to orders from his persistent doctor. The reporters laughed and asked no further questions from him.

Standing up, Kal glanced over at his desk. The letter from his apparent adopted family – his mom and dad – was still on the surface.

He had checked for fingerprints the first time he read it but hadn’t seen any – at least none besides those belonging to Leia or Mav. He went over and picked the letter up again and looked it over.

He sighed as he proved to himself once again that there were no fingerprints and no trace of —

Wait.

What was that?

He put it down and leaned over, peering at it firmly.

Indentations. Very faint, almost undetectable. It was as if the page had been under a stack of papers someone had then written on. He could see lines and curves – no. They were letters.

Squinting, he strained to make them out while hoping he wouldn’t accidentally activate his heat vision.

Son,

344 Clinton Street

Love,

Mom

He sat down in the chair and gripped the page as tightly as he dared. If there had been any doubt about whether the people who

had sent him this letter were legit or not, it was gone now. Only someone with intimate knowledge of his abilities would have left him a message in this way, clearly in the hope he would rediscover it in his examination of the letter. So now he needed to decide what he should do next.

It didn't take him long to decide.

He called down to the Foundation's main office.

"Julie, it's Kal. I've just come across something, and I'm going to check it out. I think it'll help with my memories, but I don't know how long I'll be."

"Okay, Kal. Mav and I'll take care of the press if they inquire. Take as long as you need, but keep your pager on you in case we need to get ahold of you," she said.

"Will do, thank you," he said.

He changed and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. He didn't want people to recognize him, so what could he do?

Fortunately, Mav had been kind enough to get him a few sets of clothes after the bomb had ruined his first. Two were close to the original and included his family crest, while the third was more formal and lacked his emblem. He chose the formal one and quickly buttoned the front and fixed the collar. He then messed up his hair, hoping the tousled-do would provide a sufficient disguise. He wasn't going to be out in public for long, just long enough to walk to the address from the nearest deserted alley, so hopefully it wouldn't matter anyway.

Taking a map Julie had provided him the day before, he searched the street names, assuming the address was in Metropolis – why else would his ... mom not specify the city?

He found it quickly and barely restrained himself when he then left the Foundation from the roof and shot across the city. Taking to the air, he managed to remind himself to fly slow enough not to cause a sonic boom and high enough to stay out of sight in the clouds.

He was going to get answers very soon.

He could feel it.

Martha looked at the clock again as the muted television continued to display the news behind her.

Would Clark find the message, and, if he did, would he come?—assuming he even received the letter to begin with.

"He got the letter," Jonathan said randomly.

She wasn't sure if he was trying to convince her or himself.

"You know how much he trusts Mav and spoke well of Julie. Maybe he just hasn't noticed the message yet," he continued, filling the silence more than assuring her.

Maybe he hadn't believed the letter and thought it was from some sick fraud so had ignored it.

If that was the case, hopefully he hadn't asked the FBI to find out who had sent it, believing someone was trying to take advantage of him – which was why they had been so careful about not leaving anything that could be traced back to them.

She sighed, wondering if the information about his powers had been helpful to him at all, no matter how he may have perceived it.

He was flying again, which was certainly good, but what about his other powers?

They had contacted Burton and, though there wasn't anything he could risk doing at the moment, he promised to provide them with any assistance he could that would not endanger their secret to the world. Martha and Jonathan both appreciated his caution and understood it wasn't just for their sake, but for the nation's.

If the world or even certain government officials learned about the fact that a high ranking member of the U.S. military (who once ran Bureau 39!) had had contact with Kal-El prior to his debut and hadn't reported it, things would get dicey very quickly.

They could not risk disrupting the positive relationship

Superman had with the world. Maybe one day the world would be more understanding of such a secret, but not now. If it came out now, it would be viewed as a break in sacred trust.

A knock on the door broke her from her thoughts and Jonathan's ceaseless pacing, before both quickly rushed to the door.

The door was suddenly open, and it took all Martha had to stop herself from crying out in relief.

"Uh, hello," her son said uncertainly.

"Come in, son, come in," Jonathan quickly ushered before closing the door after Clark stepped in.

Martha and Jonathan both clasped their hands in front of themselves, wanting to hug him but instantly hesitating when they saw how uncomfortable and nervous he was.

"We're relieved to see you, Clark," Jonathan said, not sure what else to say as he took in his sharp, tan slacks, black dress shirt, and his lack of eye glasses.

Clark startled, no doubt surprised by the name and loving tone used.

"Let's go sit down," Martha said, carefully leading the way to the living room couch.

"Okay," he said, taking a brief moment to look around.

They sat down, all of them anxious.

"We weren't sure if you would get our message, but we had to try," Martha said, fiddling with her hands, wanting to reach out to him but uncertain of his state of mind.

Right now, he wasn't quite her son. He was Kal-El, hero to the world, with all the expectations that came with it. Not Clark Kent, P.I. and Air Force veteran – their son.

"I'm glad you did. It was ... helpful," Clark said before taking a deep breath. "So, I take it you're my adopted parents?"

"Yes. I'm Martha and this is Jonathan. Here, why don't we start from the beginning," she said, getting up.

She quickly retrieved a photo album from the packed bookshelf and then sat back down next to him with Jonathan on his other side.

She opened the album to the first page, revealing a photo of their farm house with Jonathan and herself standing in front of it.

"We live in Smallville, Kansas, which is where we found and raised you," she said, turning to the second page.

"You found me?" he asked, a million questions suddenly surging up in his eyes.

"Your spaceship crash landed in Shuster's Field. At first we thought it was a meteor, but then found you. You were about three months old. Absolutely adorable."

"Three months? I thought I came here a little older," he said, amazed as he looked down and saw what he assumed was himself in the arms of the couple sitting beside him.

"This is the first picture we took together as a family," Jonathan said, no doubt recalling the wondrous feeling of that day. "This was taken on the steps of the court house, the day you were officially ours."

"So, I have a birth certificate and everything? I'm an American citizen?" Clark asked, astonished.

"We kept you in secret for about a month to ensure your arrival didn't coincide with the crash. We did hide the ship and impact but didn't know if anyone else had seen it – more on that later – and when we called the police and reported that you were left on our front porch, we started the adoption process," Martha summarized, unable to voice the fear and worry they had experienced during that time. Doing so would likely give way to tears.

Jonathan nodded. "Thankfully, the judge was a family friend and got everything squared away quickly."

"So ... I have a normal life?" Clark asked in wonder, almost beyond words, no doubt having believed such a thing was impossible for him.

Martha wanted to cry as she instantly placed her hand over his. “Oh, Clark.”

“Clark, this is *your* apartment,” Jonathan said, seeing Martha’s tearful expression.

Clark quickly looked around with much more interest than before. He slowly stood up, causing Martha and Jonathan to stand as well. Clark’s eyes scanned the whole room, taking in the furniture, photos, and art on the walls. He went to the wall covered in bookshelves, bearing a plethora of books. All of this was his.

“You’ve been here for almost a year. You’re a private investigator and focus on finding missing persons. You’ve solved hundreds of cases from all around the world,” Jonathan explained as he locked eyes with him. “When you’re not Superman, you’re Clark Kent, our son.”

Jonathan finally lost his composure and pulled him into a hug, album forgotten as Martha quickly joined the hug.

At first Clark was stiff, stunned, but after a moment he calmed and took a deep breath.

Peace rose within her. Things were going to be okay. They were with him and —

Jonathan suddenly grunted, and it took Martha a split second to realize why. Clark had gone completely limp.

“Clark?!” Martha gasped.

“Help me lower him!” Jonathan cried, barely managing to keep him up right as he began slipping from his arms.

They were halfway down to the floor when Clark’s eyes snapped open and he stood up, helping them both back to their feet. Breathing heavily, he beamed at them, although not as carefree as she might have hoped.

“I remember Smallville. I remember the farm,” he said.

“Your memory’s back?” Jonathan asked hopefully.

“I don’t remember much after leaving Smallville after high school, but now that I know this much can return, why can’t the rest?”

They hugged him again.

“Let’s take you back to Smallville. Maybe that will help. We can show you your ship and all of the rest. And I’m sure Burton will want to see you,” Martha said, so relieved.

“Burton?”

“He’s a general. You helped him with a long term case. Long story,” Martha explained.

“Well, I have time, Mom,” Clark returned with a grin.

Smallville hadn’t changed much from what he could recall, which was surprising since he thought something should be notably different after ten years, but maybe that’s just how small towns operate.

What did come as a shock to him was the fact he was a former Air Force officer, but that was a far second to the effectiveness of a pair of glasses as a disguise.

“You sure no one is going to notice?” he asked as they pulled up to his parents’ house.

Martha laughed. “Clark, you’ve been Clark to them for your whole life. Many of the people in town watched you grow up. Even imagining you as anyone else would be like them imagining I’m the Queen of England. It just isn’t something that would enter their thoughts – as long as they don’t see you do anything super.”

“I’ll be careful,” Clark promised.

“You always have been,” Jonathan assured. “Now, Burton is on his way here, but before he arrives, I figured we could show you your ship.”

“Definitely,” Clark said eagerly.

“Come on, it’s near the barn,” Jonathan said.

Clark gave him a disbelieving look, but Jonathan was already leading the way.

They stopped behind the barn in front of a tiny shed holding simple farmer’s tools.

“Trick entrance. Even if someone were to scan the ground with fancy equipment, they would just think what’s below is part of the barn’s foundation and cellar. They’d have to do a thorough check to realize there’s actually a room down here,” Jonathan explained, going to the back corner and lifting a well hidden trap door. “Burton confirmed the effectiveness of it all after you built it.”

“Very nice,” Clark said, impressed as they went down.

Jonathan turned on a flashlight he had pulled from the wall and aimed it.

The chamber was very small, but it was enough to hold the craft and have two of them stand before it, although Martha had to remain on the stairs.

“The globe is back here with the crystal I told you about. You felt it was safer here than at your apartment,” Jonathan said, indicating a shelf in the corner.

Clark ran his hand over the blue edge and inscription.

“‘Behold Kal-El the Noble of Krypton, born from the House of Lo and into the House of El’,” Clark read before placing his hand on the hand sized imprint beside it.

“Your parents didn’t outright say, but it seems you’re betrothed to someone from the House of Ra. Someone named Zara. And from what we were able to discern, your mother didn’t quite agree. Or at least that’s what I inferred, since she pointblank said you don’t owe any of your people anything,” Martha said, sounding very much like she agreed with his mother while deciding not to comment on Clark’s re-found ability to read Kryptonian.

“Well, Burton has likely made it in town and is driving to the house by now,” Jonathan said.

“Okay. I do want to hear more about who I am before learning about all of this anyway,” Clark admitted, waving his hand toward the blue, space-faring cradle and globe beyond.

“I’ll start fixing dinner,” Martha said as they entered the farmhouse. “I hope frozen pizza is alright for everyone.”

“That’s fine, honey. I’ll run to the store tomorrow,” Jonathan said.

Less than ten minutes later, Burton Newcomb arrived and was invited in by Jonathan. Clark stood back, not quite sure what to say to the man.

He was not what he expected.

He looked to be more like a grandfather than a general who oversaw top secret government investigations and operations.

“It’s good to see you, Clark,” he said, moving past Jonathan. “I understand you don’t remember me quite yet, but feel free to ask anything you wish.” The tone of Burton’s voice was gruff, but there was plain compassion and concern within.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Burton, please. You’ve been a friend for years, there’s no need to be so formal,” Burton assured, heartily shaking his hand.

Clark blinked and tilted his head, his eyes going vacant for a long moment.

“Clark?” Burton asked as Jonathan approached in concern.

“There’s something that can hurt me?” he asked suddenly.

“Just remembered that?” Burton asked, quickly coming to the most logical conclusion.

“Yes,” he said with a frown.

“All of it is secured in Cheyenne Mountain. No one but those within this house knows what it really is and what it can do,” Burton said plainly.

Clark exhaled, shaking away the brief memory of pain and disorientation.

“That’s a relief,” he said as Martha came in with news that the pizza was ready.

Lois turned off the television as Director Ervin left the podium after informing the world that Superman would be gone

for an undetermined amount of time in hopes of recovering his memories but has kept a means of contact in case of emergencies.

Considering everything, she felt the crowd and reporters handled it well and were very understanding. Granted, knowing he could be called if something happened was reassuring. Which got her wondering. How long would it be before Luthor's first court date? Would Kal be needed to testify? The recording of the Nightfall mission was pretty damning and stood on its own. What else would Kal be able to add? Bringing further attention to the seriousness of the accusations by being present at the proceedings made a bit of sense, but beyond that?

She hoped he would be back and fully recovered soon, but if he had to be away for a longer period of time to get all of his memories back, so be it. She just wished he had left her a way to contact him directly.

Kal, or Clark rather, sat down on the bed. He was still in Smallville and just finished a nice long evening with his folks and Burton, discussing his life well past 2 am.

He was tired and ready to sleep.

And yet he wasn't.

His thoughts kept straying to the globe and crystal his parents had mentioned.

He stood up, admitting to himself that he wasn't going to be able to sleep until he had at least seen his father's messages.

Jimmy, thanks to Lois, had procured him the recording of the committee meeting where he had presented the globe to the world, but he knew there was more. His parents had confirmed his suspicions.

He closed his eyes and listened, quickly identifying the sound of his parents sleeping soundly and Burton sleeping in the guest bedroom.

Pushing away the slight feeling of guilt for not waiting until his parents woke later that morning, he silently left the house and made his way to the shed behind the barn.

Not bothering with the flashlight hanging from the nail on the shelf, he swiftly cut to the back of the shed and lifted the trap door before descending into one of the greatest secrets on the planet.

He trailed his hand along the edge of the ship as he went straight to the back shelf draped with a thick cloth that concealed the sphere of deep blue and molten red with the small, plain crystal shard beside it. His right shoulder brushed the wall as he picked up the crystal. It was cool to the touch and was heavier than it looked. Rolling it to the center of his palm, he closed his hand and reached for the globe.

He planned on taking them to his room and trying to get the globe to work there; however, as soon as his hand closed around the sphere, light erupted.

All sensation vaporized with a pulse of raw power; however, it did not originate from the globe or the crystal, but from Clark himself.

He collapsed into a heap on the floor. The globe rolled from his hand and stopped under the ship as the light slowly faded.

.

.

.

.

"Clark!"

Martha charged down the stairs with Jonathan on her heels the instant her flashlight fell on his form.

Squeezing between the ship and the wall, she knelt over his form.

"Clark?" she asked again before glancing back at Jonathan as he began to stir.

"Mom?" he asked.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He smiled at her and slowly sat up, his eyes bright. "I remember ... everything."

Clark stepped into the precinct bustling with activity from officers and attorneys.

"Kent! Glad to see you back in town!" Henderson shouted over the conversations.

Many people looked over and gave him appraising and appreciative looks, knowing he was the reason why they were busy with so many cases involving Luthor.

"Yeah, just got back. Sorry I missed all the action last week," he said as Henderson led the way to his office.

"No problem. You did most of the work for us anyway, so you just missed the excitement," Henderson said as Clark closed the door.

"Is there anything left for me?" he asked good-naturedly.

"Not a whole lot on the immediate front, although I'm sure some people will want to talk to you before Luthor's trial, including Lois Lane. Anyway, we've been fielding questions from dozens of governments. That man had his hands in more things than I ever thought possible, and though I never doubted your work, I must admit I was hoping you were wrong about some of your suspicions and findings."

"Believe me, I wish I was wrong about a few things too," Clark said, recalling some of the even more shady aspects of LexCorp. "How far does it go?"

"Safe houses are being found around the world for him. He would have been on par with Superman for flight risk if we hadn't had an ironclad case preventing bail from being an option." Henderson shook his head, still in disbelief. "Fortunately, the world governments are working with us on the investigation. Everyone, no matter their nationality, is concerned about Superman and disgusted by what Luthor did and wants to help in every way they can."

"So no turf wars?" Clark asked, a little surprised.

"Not as much as I had expected. FBI and CIA agents have beat their chests a few times, but considering how much evidence was brought to light through your work, and thus through the Police Department, we're holding our own and we're all actually working quite well. Granted, that's in part due to Mayson working so well with General Zeitlin. He's been given oversight privileges of all things Luthor, even working within the UN."

"Has the trial date been set?" Clark asked.

"End of next month. The U.S. and U.N. have agreed to hold all charges against him in one court of law – International Court. Things are too interwoven not to bring everything out in the open at once."

Clark's eyebrows rose.

"Yeah, I know, we're in for a long trial, but overall this will be much faster," Henderson said. "And it's a heck of a lot safer."

"Worried about an escape attempt?" Clark asked.

"Yeah, but there's also the reality that a great amount of people just want him dead now and don't understand the need for due process."

"That is an unfortunate truth," Clark admitted.

"The death penalty is obviously on the table, but before that likely outcome, I want the entire truth to get out there," Henderson continued.

"Couldn't agree more," Clark said. "So, what's the next step?"

"Well, I've been working on a list," he said, pulling out a notebook from his desk and handing it to Clark. "So far, these are the people we've arrested due to evidence collected within the last week linking them to Luthor's illegal activities. I'd like you to take a look and add anything you feel would help those proceedings."

"Alright. I'll start right away," Clark promised.

"Thanks, Clark," Bill said, looking more relaxed than he had a minute prior.

Back to work.

Clark decided he would wait a bit before Superman would return to the Foundation and inform them his memories had all returned. Taking his parents' advice, he decided he could use a little bit of time reacclimating to his 'normal' life before diving back in.

It had nearly been a full week since his visit to Smallville, and the world was slowly recovering from the upheaval that had resulted from Nightfall and Luthor's exposure.

Unfortunately, he still hadn't had the chance to meet with Lois Lane. Granted, a part of him was relieved, if only because he wasn't sure if she would manage to recognize him, *and* he wasn't sure how he felt about her figuring it out or being unable to see through his deception.

Admittedly, he wasn't sure who was pretend – or if any of them were. Aspects of his core existed in all three, well, two identities. Superman and Kal-El were more or less the same identity, but Clark... Clark was so much more and yet less.

However, since regaining his memory, he knew one thing: He needed to be Kal-El as much as he needed to be Clark.

He could not be whole otherwise.

Entering his apartment, he turned on the television, preparing to wind down and call it a night. Unfortunately, what he saw on the news channel instantly changed his mind.

A sonic boom roared overhead, signaling to all that Superman had returned to Metropolis.

THE END

Of Part 1

Read the sequel – [“Investigate: Intergang”](#)