

Investigate: Keeper

By [Blueowl \(blueowl617@yahoo.com\)](mailto:blueowl617@yahoo.com)

Rated: PG

Submitted: January 2023

Summary: 3rd act of the author's AU series *Investigate*. The world has embraced the Man of Steel, which is good, because the future holds more than he may be able to handle on his own.

Story Size: 73,753 words (412Kb as text)

A/N: Once again, a special thanks to Ksarasara and Chereche who helped beta this fic and acted as soundboards ^_^ . And thanks to those on FOLC's Skype group who helped me clarify ideas.

A/N: In other locations on the internet, this Act is separated in two. Here, I combined the halves.

Read the earlier stories in the series:

[Investigate](#)

[Investigate: Intergang](#)

[Investigate: Time Interlude](#)

[Chapter 1: Baked]

Lois looked around, impressed by the set up. A dozen long tables were evenly spaced out in four rows of three on the city park's lawn, each covered by a blue tablecloth and most bearing dozens upon dozens of baked goods. Beyond that were a few inflated bouncy houses and activities for children on the other side of a stand where Maverick Ervin, Director of the Superman Foundation, had given a statement to the press before officially starting the event.

It was the first bake sale organized by the Superman Foundation. Proceeds would go to local hospitals, and most of the goods had been made by Superman himself.

People were already perusing the tables and area, eager to see Superman and try some super-cookies as they participated in what people were already hoping would become an annual event. Already, Superman's chocolate fudge cookies were becoming a favorite, closely followed by the apple pie.

Among the tables of cakes, pies, and cookies, there was a table for face painting where a few volunteers were putting colorful cartoons and designs on children's (and a few adults') cheeks, foreheads and arms. Of course, the most popular choice was Superman's emblem. Lois was tempted to get one on her upper arm, in part because she wanted to see how Clark would react, but also just because

she wanted one.

News crews were scattered along the perimeter, near the street, but they were being considerate and not forcing their way amongst the crowds. Granted, where they were positioned gave them all a good view of the event without catching other camera crews in frame.

The past few weeks had been chaotic to say the least on the news front due to the downfall — or perhaps the surrender — of Intergang. However, the most riveting part of the whole thing was the incorporation of CostMart into the Superman Foundation. Bill Church Sr. had put his money where his mouth was and had completely given all of his shares of CostMart over to the Foundation (before confessing to police) and promised to give all remaining cash from Intergang (if ever released from authorities) to the communities they had impacted to help reverse any damage done by the crime syndicate. Church stated he hoped that those efforts would prevent future crime from rising in the attempt to fill the void left behind by Intergang.

It was a marvel, to say the least, and Lois (like most everyone else) could still scarcely believe it.

She shook her head and refocused.

Superman was seated at the end of the second row of tables, signing autographs, posing and greeting everyone who approached. He would remain for the whole day, barring a high level emergency.

Lois slowly walked among the crowd, snacking on her recently purchased bag of cookies while observing and getting a few quotes from people as Jimmy took photos.

"You made all of this, Superman?!" a little boy asked, his eyes wide as he looked at the tables.

"Most of it. Everything I baked I made at the Culinary Arts School of Metropolis Community College. They have eight ovens for teaching, and they let me work there this last weekend," Superman answered warmly. "Local Mom & Pop stores donated the ingredients I used. You can see their signs on the tables."

"Wow."

The line moved along, and soon a mother and father with a girl and a boy approached. The boy was in a wheelchair and was being pushed by his father while the girl happily held onto the arm of the chair.

"Luke?" Superman asked, looking at the teenage boy in happy recognition.

The boy beamed while his parents startled at hearing the Man of Steel state their son's name like he was an old friend.

"See, I told you he'd remember!" the girl exclaimed.

"And you must be Tally," Superman stated, this time causing Luke's sister to jump.

"You remember them?" their mother asked, astonished.

“Of course. I remember every face I encounter and every name I learn,” Superman explained simply, even as the people near whispered excitedly. “I saved Luke from the bus accident and Tally later wrote me a thank you letter when I had been recovering after Nightfall.”

Superman looked back at Luke, his eyes gliding over him.

“How is physical therapy? I see you’ve been making progress,” Superman praised, still seated.

“I can walk now! The doctors didn’t think I’d be able to do that much, but I can!” Luke said proudly. “I just get tired easily.”

“Are you still playing the trombone?” Superman asked, causing Luke’s parents to stare in further amazement.

“A little. I hope to return to Band next year. Do you play?” Luke asked curiously.

“Uh, no. The one time I tried I broke it, and I haven’t really tried since, to be honest,” he admitted.

“Really? Well, maybe it wasn’t your instrument,” Luke considered.

“Hm. What instrument should I try instead then?” Superman asked. “And it doesn’t have to be a band instrument.”

Luke thought for a moment. “Well, I would have to say piano. You have good posture and your hands look like they would be able to move on keys pretty well,” he said, recalling pointers from his old music teachers.

Superman chuckled. “Okay. I’ll consider it, thank you.”

Luke grinned as Superman looked at his parents.

“We can never express how grateful we are to you for saving our son,” the father said, holding out his hand over the table. “Thank you.”

Superman grasped the man’s hand firmly as Luke’s mom teared up while nodding in agreement. “Happy I could help,” Superman said.

Lois smiled as Jimmy took a picture, certain this would not be the last family to thank Superman that day, although this scene might be the most memorable considering Luke had been the first individual Superman had saved using his cold breath.

Luke had been in a horrific bus crash and the only reason he made it to the hospital was because Superman had decided to cool his body to the point where his heart barely beat. The decision had caused some tissue damage, but it had provided enough time for the boy to make it to surgery where doctors were able to save his life.

Luke and his family moved on as Superman resumed signing autographs and conversing with excited and grateful people, young and old.

“I gather there’s pie?” a man asked, approaching the table.

“There’s apple and pumpkin on that table, Paul,” Superman answered, greeting the burly gentleman in amusement.

Paul Mohr was a fireman and had been the first individual to visibly interact with Superman, which had been at an apartment fire - Superman’s first open rescue.

The crowd instantly recognized Paul and cheered as he shook Superman’s hand, although Superman’s gaze soon focused on a petite young woman with a squirming toddler on her hip just behind Paul.

“Kal-El, meet Alice Grall and her son, Cooper. Ms. Grall, Cooper, meet Superman,” Paul introduced. “You saved Cooper from the apartment fire where you first met me.”

“Hello, ma’am,” Superman said. “And hi, Cooper.”

“Superman, thank you,” Alice stated, torn between gratitude, shyness, and awe all at once. Her son, however, was expressing only one emotion with his warm brown eyes: curiosity.

Cooper stretched out his open hand, no doubt in hopes of getting closer to the colorful man.

“You’re welcome,” Superman said with a smile, stretching out his hand and allowing the toddler to grasp his fingers.

Lois wasn’t really into kids, but the sight was extremely endearing, especially when the boy began to babble excitedly at Superman. Silently, Lois decided that Kal-El, or Clark, would be a good dad.

The fallout from the collapse of Intergang was thankfully calming and the last few weeks had allowed her to better grasp her change in relationship with Clark. Admittedly, at times she had trouble remembering what to call him, Clark or Kal-El, but the eye-glasses rule certainly helped. Glasses equaled Clark, no glasses (and/or blue suit) equaled Kal-El. She completely understood why he talked about himself in the third person, which was really the only thing she felt she would ever disagree with Martha about.

“The Chief is going to love these photos,” Jimmy declared as the young mother and her son both waved goodbye and followed Paul. “I think I can find the picture of Superman holding the boy as an infant and that should tie in nicely, don’t you think, Lois? Lois?” he asked, suddenly realizing Lois wasn’t really paying attention to him.

“Oh. Yeah, it sure will, Jimmy,” Lois agreed, attempting to snap out of her state.

Jimmy frowned at her but went back to taking pictures with a shrug. Lois was glad.

People came and went as the bake sale continued, and by the amount of cash changing hands it was clear to Lois that the hospitals would be receiving a nice donation by

the end of it. It was really amazing how much Kal-El had managed to bake. However, it was a good thing the Foundation had stipulated that it was first come, first serve because it was doubtful that there would be anything left by the end of the event. Which, she supposed, was the point.

Superman left the table to walk around, heading toward the bouncy house and painting table. Noon had passed and more people were participating in the offered activities.

Lois fleetingly wondered if Kal would opt to get his face painted, but she suddenly realized there was very little that could be painted on him that wouldn't clash horribly with his colorful uniform. Perhaps a simple smiley face on his cheek?

Sidelining her silly thought, she couldn't help but laugh as children began excitedly clustering around Superman the moment he stopped in front of the inflated playhouse. Even from a distance, she could see their happy expressions as they held up their hands in the wild hope of the Man of Steel picking one of them up.

And then he did!

And gently tossed the delighted child up into the air after a count of three before catching her again. The kids were ecstatic and immediately formed a line as Superman set the thrilled little girl back down on her feet. He then picked up the next child.

The parents looked on in amusement and glee, many taking pictures the moment their child's turn came. Soon enough, all of the kids had received some time in the sky and were essentially walking on air due to how happy they were.

It was very interesting to see how at ease all the children were with Superman, while most of the adults were skittish, even though they were clearly excited. Lois supposed they were star struck, which she could completely understand. She looked back at Superman.

Superman gently began to ease himself away from the gaggle of children, expertly and patiently circumventing their pleas for more play.

He really was a natural and she smiled at the sight.

But then something happened that instantly got everyone's attention.

He froze. Completely halted all movement as his eyes widened in startled bewilderment.

All of the children immediately pulled back, uncertain, as he closed his eyes and went down to one knee and pressed his right hand flat against the grass covered ground.

The crowd stilled, watching him in confusion. What was happening? Was he hearing something?

He turned his head, his eyes still closed, but, before anyone could voice their confusion, he simply . . .

vanished.

The sonic boom thundered over them.

The rumble was like nothing he had ever heard before. It was so deep and low that the sound seemed to penetrate into the marrow of his bones.

At first he thought it was an earthquake, for he could feel the vibrations through the Earth, but then he realized it was more than that.

Worse than that.

He flew toward the source, heading far to the northwest.

The plume of thick, acidic black smoke and gray ash roiling skyward was massive. It already dwarfed the mountain beneath it and it wasn't slowing in its expanse. The mountain had abruptly woken from its slumber.

He hovered in midair for a second, his eyes scanning the landscape. There was a bustling city less than thirty miles from the mountain base with suburbs branching out much closer. On the other side was a large spread of forest and fields with streams and lakes. Looking back to the mountain and peering through earth and rock, he knew deadly lahars - volcanic mudflows - were possible, if not likely to happen soon.

What could he do in the face of this?

All his years of aiding nations after natural disasters when he had been a Special Field Support Officer in the Air Force came to mind, and the only thing he could think about was what he would have to do if he didn't find a way to prevent the mountain from swallowing the thousands of lives currently under its shadow.

If he helped in the evacuations, it would help reduce the number of people lost, but it wouldn't be enough, and the fallout of ash would reach around the world after the immediate area had been decimated by lahars. He had to be more proactive. He had to limit the damage from the volcano and direct its path of destruction away from human and animal life as much as possible. It would be better for the world and for the people nearby. Flying above the mountain and over the city, he quickly came up with a plan and prayed it would work. Using his x-ray vision, he closed his eyes and decided his path.

He shot forward, fists extended. He crashed through stone and pushed through hot gas and boiling water before he penetrated into red hot magma. He felt his cape and his boots burn and pull away. His protective aura only extended a few millimeters from his skin and did not extend to fully cover his cape and boots. However, his focus remained steadfast. Thankful that he could see through his own eyelids (even though using his x-ray vision while moving fast made him nauseous), he curved under the slope of the mountain. Guiding the molten rock

to less volatile earth, away from the massive pockets of water underground, he eliminated what would have been additional fallout of soot and mudflows.

He blasted out of the back base of the mountain, relieving the pressure that had been building near the crest that would have resulted in additional violent explosions, possibly more severe than the first.

Lava poured out, and Kal didn't spare a moment to shake off the hot sticky liquid from his form but instead cut a ditch in the ground several hundred yards long to further guide the life blood of the Earth safely away.

With the lava now flowing to an uninhabited location, he turned back to the mountain and looked up at the still growing cloud of choking ash. He could also see a number of helicopters observing a fair distance away and could hear distant alarms and emergency broadcasts urging people to evacuate - even as the churning of rock and soot continued to growl within the mountain.

He rocketed toward the city to survey the scene from above once more, ignoring the fact that his feet were bare and his back was capeless.

Frank couldn't believe what he was seeing. The dense cloud rose ominously into the sky with gray and white mounds whirling with black folds of ash and dust. It was unreal and he had never felt so small.

He heard one of his coworkers shout that Superman was there, but he didn't see him. He prayed they were right, but he couldn't help but wonder what one man, even a superpowered one, could really do to help, other than carry people to safety. No matter what, this was going to be a catastrophe.

There was nothing anyone could do to prevent the volcano from continuing to erupt, and nothing anyone could do to prevent the exploded material from raining down or mountain slopes from collapsing into a mudslide.

The ground beneath him continued to rumble as they scrambled toward their vehicles.

"If that slope goes, we're screwed!" his friend bellowed.

They were one mile from the base of the mountain and had been surveying the land for logging. Well, it was doubtful there would be any logging done now.

"We're screwed no matter what! The ash cloud will be on us soon, look!" another cried.

"Come on!" Frank shouted, wishing his coworkers would just shut up and focus on running. "In the jeep!"

All four of them piled into his jeep, immediately deciding not to waste time in taking different vehicles, their stuff be damned. They all wanted the same thing. Off the mountain!

He turned the ignition and floored it, speeding down

the road as quickly as he dared. He skid on the dirt path but stayed on course, refusing to look back.

"Go, go, go!" his friend urged, his voice thick with fear as the other two started cursing, horrified.

"We're going to die!" someone cried, he wasn't sure who, as he glanced at his rear view mirror.

The cloud was upon them and he could feel the heat. The sound of the jeep's engine was swallowed by the roar behind them.

The slope had given way. Mud, rock, dirt, and debris beneath the surging shadow of ash.

He gripped the steering wheel, still trying to navigate the road even though he knew they weren't going to make it.

And then the whole vehicle lurched horribly. His seatbelt clenched hard into his chest, jolting him back just before the front of the jeep suddenly launched . . . up?

"Superman!"

Frank looked back, seeing an ash-caked man in the tattered remnants of the familiar red and blue uniform at the back corner of the jeep as he numbly realized the entire vehicle was airborne and speeding over trees and ground far faster than he had ever moved.

They outpaced the mass behind them and in what felt like no time at all they landed on the side of the highway at the edge of the city. Fortunately, he had the wherewithal to put the jeep in park.

Superman approached the driver's side as traffic continued to crawl slowly pass. The exodus from the city and suburbs was well underway.

"Everyone alright?" Superman asked.

"Yes, yes, thank you!" Frank said, too astonished to even care that Superman had no cape and was covered in blots of soot and mud from head to toe.

"No problem. Now keep going. I don't know how far this is going to go," Superman advised.

"Yes, Superman. Thank you again," Frank said, before doing exactly what he was told. He sped off, joining the thousands of other vehicles fleeing the region.

News of the eruption spread quickly, and soon news channels were reporting all they could to the world. From showing views from helicopters to wiring in reporters calling in from payphones within view of Mount Nime, the frightening reality was blatant.

This was reminiscent of Mount St. Helens, only worse because it was closer to a densely populated area.

"Moments ago, Superman was seen flying a car to safety. He was without his cape and boots, and it is believed he had flown into the mountain itself moments before. A helicopter pilot stated he spotted a trail of lava exiting the base of Nime on the other side with a trail of it

running through a deep furrow cut through the forest there,” a reporter stated on a television in the Daily Planet, overlooking the erupting volcano.

The reporter put her hand against her ear and quickly turned to face the smoking mountain.

“Superman appears to be blowing his ice breath on the mud slurry sliding down the slopes. We’re shifting to the helicopter to learn more,” she said.

The view instantly changed, displaying Mt. Nime from high above with the sound of helicopter blades turning overhead. And there, far below, was a form everyone instantly identified as Superman, even though he was without his red cape and boots. He was hovering over the slope nearest the city, finishing up his application of frost onto the formerly sliding earth and debris.

“Jason Green reporting. It appears Superman has slowed the progression of the lahar. This will no doubt give invaluable time to the evacuation efforts,” Jason stated, grateful.

The camera continued to track Superman, but what got everyone’s attention was when the Man of Steel changed course and began to get closer, approaching the helicopter.

“Superman?!” Jason asked.

Superman came to a stop just outside the helicopter’s open side, hovering in midair. The cameraman hurriedly shifted back as much as he could to include the awestruck news anchor, Jason, in frame while capturing the rather disheveled looking Kryptonian.

His uniform was filthy, and though it was still intact, his emblem was blemished with black smudges and clumps of what they could only assume was cooled lava! His face was smudged with soot and his hair was caked in ash.

“Could you tell air traffic control to direct all aircraft further away from the ash cloud, please? Five miles out at least I think would be best. I’m going to try something,” Superman stated loudly, making sure they could hear him over the helicopter blades and the fact they all had helmets on.

“Of course, Superman! What are you going to try?” the pilot asked.

“To make a tornado,” he answered simply.

“Oh! Okay. Do you need anything else?”

“Actually, do you happen to have a spare set of goggles I could use?” Superman asked.

The co-pilot began to shuffle through a pouch attached to the side of his chair.

“Here, Superman. I hope this helps,” he said, holding out close-fitting goggles that had clearly seen better days, but they were whole, and the band was still strong.

Superman took them gratefully. “Thank you. I was not looking forward to doing it with my eyes closed.”

Not sure what to say to that, they nodded in bewilderment.

“Now go on out, five miles or so. As soon as I don’t see anyone near, I’ll start,” Superman said, putting on the goggles and swiftly adjusting the band.

“Alright. Godspeed, Superman. And thanks,” the pilot said.

They pulled out soon after, still trying to keep Superman in sight as the co-pilot radioed in Superman’s request.

The last helicopter flew beyond the immediate airspace, providing Superman with the confidence to attempt what he still wasn’t sure would even work. But he would try anyway.

With a deep breath, he began to circle the bulging tower of black death blanketing the sky. He ignored the glancing blow of a boulder just expelled from the shattered peak as he super-spined around and around, encompassing the black expanse before slowly squeezing it into a condensed funnel. Faster and faster he swirled the hot soot and ash, siphoning it from the atmosphere and broken peak and slowly bending the funnel down toward an empty field a mile or so away.

He lost track of time, more concerned with preventing the deadly particles of dense dust from polluting the air and entering the weather cycle that would then transport it around the world. Another hour passed, and finally the plume pouring from the blunted peak slowed to a weak ebb and the sporadic spurts of blasting rock stopped. The mountain grew still.

Superman deposited the last sizable portion of ash onto the field, leaving a large mound of condensed volcanic sediment behind as he landed and allowed himself to collapse to his knees.

He took a moment to recenter himself, admittedly feeling dizzy from creating the tornado and sustaining it for so long. Once his head was no longer spinning, he looked up to see helicopters beginning to approach from far off in the distance.

He took off the goggles, glad they had served their purpose well. Even though he was invulnerable and didn’t have to worry about the glass-like dust actually hurting his eyes, it still wouldn’t have felt pleasant to have to deal with the grit, or to have to use x-ray vision to peer through his own eyelids while going in circles.

He looked down at himself.

Well, another ruined suit.

At least the Superman Foundation insisted on covering fabric costs. After Mav had learned his uniform was actually just made from normal fabric, no doubt having initially believed it was some exotic, alien material, he

quickly added it to the list of Foundation expenses. It wasn't a whole lot, but it was nice not having to worry about it anymore, or rather worrying about his parents insisting on covering the cost. Which reminded him, he needed to order another roll of blue fabric now.

Shaking himself from the wayward thought, he did his best to dust himself off, even though it was useless. He looked like a chimney sweeper, but worse, because he also had bits of cooled lava stuck to him too.

Oh well.

Turning his attention back up to the sky, the helicopters were now less than a mile away, their attention clearly on him and the small mountain of steaming volcanic ash beside him.

Calmly standing up before lifting into the air once more, he scanned the helicopters and quickly spotted the pilot and crew he had spoken with before. He flew to them, pushing aside his fatigue and allowing his face to turn toward the rays of the setting sun.

The world watched in awe as Superman collected the rising plume of ash by creating a massive tornado, bigger than any recorded, before doing something even more spectacular. He twisted and narrowed the tornado like a spaghetti noodle and arched it down like a hose to direct the ash to an empty field, sparing the world from a layer of choking dust.

The moment Superman was done, the funnel slowly faded and the millions upon millions of people watching couldn't help but gasp as the feat they had just witnessed was truly given scale.

Comparing it to Superman's descending form, it was essentially a mountain, taller than almost any skyscraper and just as wide as it was tall!

Superman landed beside the monumental pile of volcanic dust and immediately sank to his knees, oblivious to the concern that had suddenly surged for him around the world.

He had kept the tornado up for hours! Moved literally millions of tons of ash. He had to be tired! Granted, this was the same being who had gone up against Nightfall and won....

Jason Green, in the helicopter, cleared his throat after being told he was on the air. Knowing he should say something because that was his job, he mentally shook himself, but what should one say after witnessing what could be considered an act of a god?

"Superman seems to be recovering quickly after accomplishing the impossible. He's now getting to his feet, for those who are listening from a radio. The mound of ash he transported has got to be bigger than any New York City skyscraper and it's just as wide as it is tall," he

explained, falling to his tried and true, stick-to-the-facts reporting.

"And now Superman is flying toward us," he added after a blink.

Superman was covered in even more soot and ash than the last time they had seen him, but now, thanks to the goggles he had been wearing, there was a streak of less dirty skin across his eyes, making him look like some kind of reversed raccoon.

"Hello again," he greeted, sounding happy, but by his somewhat uneven flying, it was easy to conclude that he was at least a little tired.

"That was amazing, Superman!" the pilot returned.

Superman laughed. "Thanks. And thanks for these," he said, holding out the goggles. "I'm afraid one of the lenses cracked though. I'll have the Foundation reimburse you. My aura was only able to really protect the band and frame when the boulder hit me."

"Oh, don't worry about it, Superman," the co-pilot said as Jason handed the goggles to him. "I'm just happy that these old things were able to help!"

"Alright. Well, I'm going to do another once over, and then head out," Superman said. "Have I missed anything important about the evacuation?"

"Nothing of concern, Superman. The Park Rangers have everyone accounted for, and the lahars haven't extended as far as they had feared. They're still moving though, but everyone has made it out of their path," Jason explained before taking in his appearance a bit more. "Are you okay? I mean, how do you feel?"

"I'm fine, just a little dizzy," Superman said as the camera behind Jason continued to broadcast live. "Though I'll admit I'm looking forward to going to sleep tonight."

Jason and the others smiled before Superman eased himself back and gave a parting wave.

"Well, I think we can all say that the world will sleep well tonight, knowing the severity of Mt. Nime's eruption was greatly reduced thanks to the Man of Steel's herculean efforts. This is Jason Green, CLN news."

[Chapter 2: Interview]

Other than right after Nightfall, Clark couldn't remember ever feeling so exhausted. He stumbled when he landed on his balcony and all but staggered into the shower, desperate to rid himself of the ash and soot. He was grateful for the cold water that came from the showerhead and just stood there, staring down at the drain that was soon the destination of watery black goop.

It instantly reminded him of the black slop that he had coughed up several years before and he suddenly realized why he was so tired. He had been covered from head to toe in ash and chunks of lava for most of the day and on his

flight home. He hadn't been able to absorb much energy from the sun during that time. No wonder he was physically spent.

A knock on the door made it to his ears and he quickly focused his hearing. He smiled.

Lois' heartbeat was close.

The sound of his lock being jimmied soon followed.

She was in his apartment now and he heard her re-lock his front door.

He hurried out of the shower and clumsily spun into clean, casual clothing.

"Clark?" she called from his living room.

"Yes?" he answered, stepping out with a tired smile.

Lois gasped and rushed forward before stopping in front of him with her hand on his chest.

"Clark, you look awful!" she exclaimed.

"Do I?" he asked.

He hadn't looked in the mirror since that morning and he did feel very tired, so he suspected she was correct.

"Well, not awful-awful, but certainly exhausted. Here, you should sit down, if not go to bed, unless you're hungry?" she rambled.

"I could eat," he said, amused as he let himself be guided to the couch.

"Okay, you just rest and I'll order some take out," she insisted.

He did as she said and allowed himself to relax against the cushions. She ordered pizza in record time before joining him.

"So, are you really just tired?" she asked, concerned.

"Yeah. I'll be fine once I get some sun in the morning," he assured.

"You should get a sunlamp," she stated.

"I have a few at the Foundation," he said, unbothered.

"Why are they all there? Why isn't one here?" she asked pointedly, even as she cuddled up to his side.

"Never thought about it to be honest."

He glanced down at her face staring at him incredulously.

"I'll pick one of them up tomorrow," he quickly promised.

"Good," she said, pleased, before getting off the couch.

He looked up at her, confused, as she went around the couch and stopped behind him.

She placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Just relax," she said, before pressing her hands against his shoulders and massaging them.

He sighed and smiled up at her, reclining his head back.

"I watched you on the news from the bullpen in the Daily Planet. Everyone was gathered around the T.V.," she said, working along his neck now.

"It's still strange to know how much Superman is watched," he commented lightly.

"I bet, but is it really a surprise?" she asked, chuckling softly. "You do the impossible."

"I suppose," he said with a laugh before trailing off uncertainly. "Is . . . is that okay?"

Lois blinked at the change in tone, and she slowed her hands. "Why wouldn't it be?" she asked, bewildered by the question.

"We've never really discussed it. My abilities, I mean. Not in that way, anyway," he said hesitantly.

"I'm not sure what you're asking," she said, returning to her ministrations.

"I just . . . I don't want you to feel..." He paused, trying to figure out how to best explain. "Is it, I don't know, a lot to know what I can do? Is it scary?"

"Hm, it is a lot, but I don't think it's too much, if that's what you're concerned about. And if it was scary to me, I doubt we would have become friends when I just knew you as Kal-slash-Superman," she said, sounding as if she was humoring him now more than anything else.

"But you didn't know as much about me then as you do now," he pointed out.

"You flew out into space and survived a massive explosion that destroyed an asteroid over two times bigger than the one that took out the dinosaurs and **then** made it back to Earth in one piece," she deadpanned. "What else could be more impressive or impossible?"

He seemed to shrink into the couch.

"You seem a lot more concerned about this than I am. Are you afraid I'll stop liking you or something?" she asked, confused and edging toward looking uneasy.

"I . . . don't know. Thinking about it now, I'm not sure how I would feel if you had powers and I didn't. Having powers is normal to me. I don't know how it feels to not have them," he said nervously.

"You're afraid I'll compare myself to you and feel inadequate? Is that it?" she asked, confident in her deduction.

Clark frowned before slowly nodding. "Do you?"

"Do **you** think I'm inadequate?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No!" he immediately assured.

"Then why would I? You're not perfect, and you've needed my help before, despite your powers. That certainly prevents me from feeling inadequate. And as for comparing myself to you, I haven't really ever done that. You're you and I'm me. You have your things and I have mine. Like right now, there is plenty I can do that you can't," she pointed out.

"Like back massages?" he teased.

“Like taking care of you, Lunkhead, reminding you to bring a sunlamp where you spend most of your time to rest,” she corrected triumphantly.

Clark smiled softly before they were interrupted by a knock.

“Perfect timing,” she said, hurrying to the door.

After tipping the delivery boy, she set the pizza and drinks on the coffee table before putting on Lethal Weapon.

“So did I resolve your concerns?” she asked, now sitting next to him and grabbing a slice of pizza as the movie started.

“Yeah, you did,” he said, relaxed.

“Good,” she said.

They watched the movie and enjoyed dinner in relative silence side-by-side. As the movie continued and the pizza disappeared, Lois curled up against his side and his arm wrapped around her. His head tilted and touched hers a bit later. Finally, the movie finished.

“This will always be one of my favorite movies,” she said softly, before shifting to look at him.

She stilled and smiled tenderly at the sight before her.

He was sound asleep, his head leaning against the cushion.

“Clark, I couldn’t get a hold of you yesterday, everything alright?” Henderson asked as he walked into the precinct.

“Oh, sorry about that. Something came up and I had to get it squared away. It’s all settled now though. What do you need?” Clark asked, worried he had put Bill in a bind.

“I don’t actually need anything. Surprise, I know. No, I was asked to pass on a request to you. It’s a missing person case. Denny Milner. The person wanting to hire you is his brother, Jack Milner,” Henderson said, handing him a folder. “This is what I pulled from our files. Jack and his brother are orphans. They lived on the streets for a time, and Jack has some history, juvenile petty offenses mostly, but then they were picked up by the Superman Foundation. Unfortunately, two weeks ago, Denny, who Jack has custody of, disappeared.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully, opening the folder and scanning it.

“Denny was going to school while his brother went to work. Jack apparently insisted on paying his own way, though the Foundation picked up their rent for the first few months and arranged the interview for the job Jack ended up getting, and that was after he passed the GED.”

“Is Mr. Milner here?” Clark asked.

“No, but he told me if you wanted to talk to him that he’d be at the east docks. He works with a shipping company there. His contact information should be on the

second page,” Henderson said.

“Alright, thanks. I gather the PD didn’t pick up any leads?” Clark asked.

“No. Considering the situation, he could be a runaway, but this feels like something more.”

“Alright. I’ll check it out. I’ll see you later,” Clark said before heading off.

Lois shook her hands out above the keyboard. The follow up articles on the ongoing Intergang trials were certainly keeping her busy. From digging into the backstories of the individuals who turned themselves in, to uncovering the dark truths of others who resisted arrests, she had so much to do. And that was before one included Superman into the news.

Which reminded her, apparently Murray Brown, Superman’s representative in all things that might involve a copyright, had arranged a two-part, television interview for him. The first would air Saturday night and the second would air live the following week. She couldn’t wait.

Kal-El was not too enthused, but considering he was approaching the two year mark of being Superman, he decided it was about time to grant the request of a TV interview.

At least the host was respectable and would ask useful questions. Of course, she doubted Kal would have agreed to be interviewed by someone less than professional.

Which was why she was looking forward to it. Even though she was dating him, she was certain the interview would provide a different perspective, and she was looking forward to talking about what was discussed in the interview more in depth afterward. She was also curious to hear Martha and Jonathan’s thoughts on it later.

Clark had taken her to meet his parents a few days after they officially started dating. Of course, she ended up loving his parents. They were just so . . . not insane.

And then he had shown her all the endearing qualities of small-town life, before showing her the wonder that was his heritage.

Even though she had known Kal longer than she had known Clark, seeing the holograms of his parents was a lot to digest, especially after touring Smallville and eating the best home cooked meal she had ever had. Every aspect of life with him was more than she could ever have imagined. Even meals.

Hm, perhaps he’d pick up dinner again from that wonderful restaurant in Milan, Italy, the *Verticale!* She remembered the first time Kal brought her food from there. The Italian dishes were sophisticated and delicious while the wine they sipped tasted better than anything she had had in recent memory.

Wow, she was so spoiled.

Clark pulled away from the docks after speaking with Jack Milner. He was a devoted brother and hard-working young man. Clark took the case and offered to do it pro bono, but Jack wouldn't hear it.

He certainly had a great deal of pride and hated what he perceived to be handouts. The only reason he didn't hate the Superman Foundation (which he called the S.F.) was because he had to put in effort to reap the full benefits they provided, such as the GED, job, and housing programs.

He respected the dignity they offered people in need, and there was no dignity in completely providing everything to someone who was capable.

"My brother and I ain't gonna live our lives as victims. We're survivors and soon we'll be winners," Jack had told him. "And just like I told that lady at the S.F., we ain't gonna leech, and I'm done stealin', so just tell me what to do to help you get my brother back and I'll do it."

Clark felt he needed to look into what exactly he had meant with getting his brother back, because he felt there was a deeper meaning there. Which, considering Jack had custody of his brother, perhaps he had had to fight for that. Very likely, now that he thought about it.

Suddenly, his pager buzzed. Looking at it, he instantly recognized the number of Burton, the General. Going to the nearest payphone, he rang him up.

"Burton? It's Clark," Clark said as the phone picked up.

"Hey, Clark. It's nothing urgent, but when you get the chance, can you head over to my office?"

"Okay. Is now a good time?" he asked.

"Yeah, just come in your usual way," he said.

"Sure thing. See you in a bit," Clark promised.

Less than a minute later he was in the General's office.

"Hi, Clark. Although this isn't exactly urgent, I'm glad you got back with me so quickly," he said, motioning for Clark to take the seat across the desk.

"No problem. What's going on?" Clark asked.

"I wanted to give you an update on the kryptonite we sent to Cheyenne. Nothing bad, mind you, but I think you have a right to know. I was just given a report on what the scientists have been doing with it and what they've learned," he said.

"Alright," Clark said slowly, both curious and wary.

"They've learned that when exposed to living, human tissue, it doesn't seem to damage it like gamma or cosmic radiation would. Instead of damaging DNA, it merely slides past it. It actually seems to flow around cells. Odd, I know, but that's what they've found. What's more is that when placed beside solenoid coils, it induces current. The scientists are beside themselves. They believe that if they

can reproduce it, it could be a great, safe power source."

"Do you think that'll happen any time soon?" Clark asked.

"I imagine it's several years out before anything like that's even discussed. With these sorts of research and development projects, there's rarely a rush on things," Burton said.

"That reminds me, as Kal-El, I've started to work with Dr. Klein on some Kryptonian technology. Nothing too grand, but I suspect we might have a working data crystal in a year or so."

Burton laughed. "Nothing too grand? You know that would jump start the next technological revolution, right?"

"It's not much more than the recent advancements being done. I suspect soon we'll all have wireless phones and, within a decade, handheld, wireless computers," Clark theorized.

"That's certainly possible," he agreed. "Anyway, I just wanted to keep you in the loop. Oh, and while we're on the subject, would you want me to package up a small sample of each color for your doctor to examine? As much as I want to keep that stuff away from you, another part of me would like to understand why you reacted the way you had. And if this ever does become a mainstream technology, I'd prefer us not getting blindsided by its effects on you," Burton said tentatively.

"I see what you're saying, and agree. I do trust Bernie enough for this, but no one else can know about my weakness," Clark said.

"Completely agree," Burton said wholeheartedly. "No one will be told about what we're really doing with it. I'll just tell the higher ups I believe it would be beneficial to allow a single, outside scientist to take a look. With a scientist of Dr. Klein's sterling reputation, it shouldn't be too hard to convince them."

"Alright, just a tiny sample of both colors, and I'll pick them up from you once you get them," Clark said after a moment.

"I'll make the calls and let you know," Burton said.

"Thanks," Clark said.

"No problem. And have fun at your interview. My wife has been talking about it since learning about it," he said, grinning.

"I hope I don't regret agreeing to do it. It's two parts, you know. The first will be recorded tonight and aired this weekend, the second will be live next week. I have no idea what they're going to ask, though I've reserved the right not to answer."

"Just use it as an opportunity and everything will be fine. After your handling of the volcano, the world has been reminded of your power. Though I must say it was coupled nicely with that bake sale," Burton said with a

chuckle.

Clark shook his head good-naturedly before taking his leave.

Patricia Waters had never been so nervous before an interview in her life, and she had interviewed presidents, queens, princes, and CEOs of multi-billion dollar companies.

But she had never interviewed a god before.

Sure, he didn't seem to hold himself above humans or strut his powers, but the fact remained he was the most powerful being on the face of the planet. He was also the founder of a Foundation, which was now involved in nearly every humanitarian service in the world, and the holder of unknown alien knowledge that may one day be incorporated into Earth's technology and their way of life. He was a daunting figure no matter how one looked at him.

And he would be sitting across from her, answering essentially anything she asked.

Admittedly, she was a fan, but she preferred to believe she was one of the more reserved and realistic fans.

She liked what Superman stood for and liked what he was currently doing; however, she also knew people could change and that people often had ulterior motives no matter what. Usually those motives were harmless, or even good, but people rarely did anything without some level of selfishness - even if it was to make themselves feel good for being nice.

She looked at the clock. He should be here any time n

— .

"Pat, he's here," the breathless voice of her assistant said by the door. "Amanda is with him now."

Amanda was their head make-up artist and Patricia really hoped she wasn't currently pulling the Man of Steel into a dressing room and applying make-up with or without his permission. Amanda was shameless.

Patricia quickly got up and motioned for her assistant to lead the way.

Thankfully, Amanda was behaving - or at least wasn't being her usual self.

Coming to the stage, she found Superman sitting patiently on a stool in front of Amanda who was dutifully applying a powder on his face to serve as a foundation. The camera crew was out and about, trying to appear busy but really just trying not to be obvious about staring at Superman. Fortunately, they had already pre-prepped everything, so all they were really waiting on was her to give the go to begin recording.

"You know, you almost don't need any make-up. I have never seen skin so clear of blemishes, and it doesn't look like you have any oil, which is nice," Amanda said,

adding more base. "Oil causes glare on camera."

"Oh. Thank you." Superman actually looked bemused.

"This will simply prevent you from looking pale under the lights," she continued, dabbing at his forehead before leaning back and nodding to herself, pleased. "Okay. Now let's look at your hands."

Superman held out his hands and Amanda wasn't shy about taking them to examine his nails closely before turning them over.

"Alright, we're good," Amanda said, grinning.

"Great," Superman said, smiling kindly.

Patricia stepped forward. "Hello, Superman. I'm Patricia Waters," she said, holding out her hand.

Superman gently took it, and she was surprised by how normal his hand felt.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Waters," he said.

"Likewise. Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed," she said. "Well, if you're ready, do you have any questions before we start?"

"No, I don't have any questions at the moment. And I'm ready," he said amiably.

She smiled, glad they seemed to be starting on the right foot. It was always problematic when there was a misunderstanding initially or when someone got rubbed the wrong way.

They moved to their positions, settling into two comfortable chairs angled off a small table so both of them could reach glasses of water while having nothing directly between them. The area had been cleared and soft white curtains had been set up several yards behind them so there would be no distractions in the frame with them. The lighting was soft but wide.

"Now - I do this before every interview - per the agreement, after recording and editing the interview, we will submit it for your review and approval. Upon your approval, we will air it Saturday at 7:00pm Central time. Correct?" she asked, maintaining her habit of confirming the agreement before officially starting.

"Correct," he said.

"Alright," she said before looking at the camera and giving a nod. The cameraman gave her a thumbs up.

"Good evening, I'm Patricia Waters, and with me tonight is someone who, just over two years ago, had been among us in secret, but now is recognized around the world. Superman," she introduced passionately. "Superman, thank you so much for being here."

"Thank you for having me," he returned.

"Now, we're coming up on the two-year anniversary of Ms. Lois Lane's article of you, 'Superman Speaks', and since then you have prevented a nuclear meltdown, started a foundation that now impacts the entire world in its humanitarian efforts, stopped Nightfall, helped end

Intergang, and, more recently, tamed an erupting volcano. When you first revealed yourself, did you ever imagine doing any of that?"

Superman gave a small laugh. "No. And even a week ago I would have denied being able to do what I did with that volcano."

"But you did it," she pointed out.

"Yes, fortunately."

"So, at the time, you didn't know if what you were doing would work?" she asked, muting her surprise somewhat but not completely.

"Admittedly, when I do something for the first time, I usually don't know if I'll succeed. But I have to try. So, I do."

"What do you mean you 'have to try'?" she asked, pleased they were already going deep and getting into rich subject matter.

Sometimes it took fifteen or thirty minutes for the interviewee to open up enough to give interesting answers, instead of stiff bland ones.

"I just . . . do. I'd rather try and fail than wonder if I could have made a positive difference. When I — " He hesitated, and she was immediately intrigued.

"Go on. What were you going to say?"

The camera zoomed in on Superman's face before he answered.

"When I first arrived here, I was taken in by some very kind and loving people. They became my adopted family. And for as long as I've known them, they told me they found me for a reason and that I have a purpose. I just have to find it. What greater purpose is there than to serve life?"

Pat smiled, curiosity surging as she wondered if he'd actually answer anything about his adopted family. Could she risk it?

"So you grew up on Earth?" she asked, deciding that was a fair and expected question.

"Pretty much. A great deal of my childhood memories are from Earth, anyway," he said with a shrug.

"Did you always have powers?" she asked.

"Some of them. As I grew, more surfaced. But I've always been strong and fast."

"Were you invulnerable as a child?" she asked curiously.

"Physically, yes."

That was an interesting answer.

"How did your family react?" she asked.

"To me having powers? Surprised, afraid, I suppose. Not afraid *of* me, but *for* me. They knew if anyone outside the family learned how different I was, there was a high chance of me being taken away."

"But wouldn't you be able to escape?"

"Probably. But remember, at the time I was a child.

And even a super strong teenager is vulnerable to malicious words and threats. And what about my family? They don't have any powers."

"I see," she said, trying to imagine a young Superman under the care and protection of humans. "I'm glad everything worked out and that you were taken in by clearly amazing people."

Superman's face lit up at the compliment to his family. "They're the best."

Pat smiled, struck by how genuinely happy he was.

"What do they think about you being Superman?" she asked.

Superman laughed. "My mom sewed my uniform. They're thrilled, although at first they were nervous. My dad especially had always been concerned about how the world would respond when they learned I existed. That Humanity wasn't alone. But it didn't turn out to be a problem, and I'm eternally grateful for that. My family is exceedingly pleased that I can be myself and use my abilities to help people."

"I must admit, I'm surprised you're admitting to having a human family and giving the amount of details that you are," she said.

"Since the Congress Hearing, the world has known I've been on Earth for over fifteen years. I figured it would be reasonable to sate some curiosity on my person, even if it brings about more curiosity and attention. Also, I want people to know I have individuals I care about. That I have family just like everyone else. People who would miss me on the same level as they would a son if, for whatever reason, I didn't return to them - which almost happened with Nightfall. To hide that fact I think would be wrong and ignore the sacrifices my human family has made and are making for me. They share me with the world, after all. So I think it's fair if the world knows that.

"Maybe one day I'll introduce my family to the world, but until then, I'll reveal what I feel is safe. Fortunately, the world is a big place and everything I've said provides no concrete details about who they are or where they live. And if, by chance, they were to be discovered before my choosing, we'd deal.

"However, I must say, as Lord Kal-El, if any individual or organization, government or otherwise, were to ever target them, I would view it as an act of war and respond accordingly. And, as specified in the Treaty of El, I have the right to adamantly defend those who have cared for me over the years."

Pat blinked, stunned by the transformation before her. It was as if he was a General of an army, a King of a nation, a Lord of a world. And then he relaxed and the room came back on itself. He hadn't been scary exactly, but he had been daunting.

She swallowed.

“I think we can all understand and agree with the importance of protecting our families,” she said. She cleared her throat. “While I would love to continue asking you questions about your loved ones, I do have a few other questions I have to ask or I’ll be hearing about it from my producer,” she said with an apologetic smile.

It was a borderline fib, but she felt it was time to ease back to more lighthearted questions.

“What’s your favorite superpower?” she asked.

“Flying,” he said promptly.

“I admit that would be mine, although super speed would be helpful,” she commented.

“It can be,” Superman agreed.

“If you didn’t have powers, what would you want to do with your life? What job would you want?” she asked.

“You mean if I was human?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes.”

Superman shifted in his chair as he thought. “Well, I think I’d like to be in search and rescue, but if I couldn’t do that, maybe journalism. Bring attention to things that people need to know about.”

“Write articles?” she asked, trying to imagine Superman behind a computer.

“Sure, and investigate topics for stories.”

“Like Ms. Lane?”

“She did find me by investigating, so I’ll admit I’m curious about that sort of work,” he said, unbothered. “If I was human and I needed a job, I’d consider trying that one if search and rescue didn’t pan out.”

Pat nodded, hiding her surprise by the ease in which he was answering. She hoped it continued.

“Now, this next question concerns your Foundation and recent events. Due to all the media coverage, it’s well-known that Mr. Bill Church Sr. gave a sizable amount of CostMart shares to the Foundation and that an agreement was made between the CostMart company and your organization — essentially handing ownership and operational powers over to you — before Church Sr. came forward as the Head of Intergang and surrendered to police. It is fair to say the Foundation runs CostMart now, correct? Due to statements made by the District Attorney, the Police Department, and yourself, we know you were helping investigators and likely helped Mr. Church have a change of heart. Could you shed any light on how and why that came about and how you feel about how it turned out?” she asked.

Superman nodded, clearly having expected this chain of questions.

“The Foundation owns CostMart now, but doesn’t see to the day-to-day operations. Instead, we work with the company’s committee, which is cooperating fully with the

investigation, to ensure normal store and business operations continue. Mr. Church had been concerned that the tens of thousands of people CostMart employs would be instantly out of a job if he had not given ownership to me before going to police. He didn’t want his past criminal activity to hurt any more people. After all, he knew all of his finances and such would be seized by police and he didn’t want CostMart to be stuck in paperwork limbo, thus hurting the employees and those who shop at the stores all around the globe, so he handed it all to me. More or less.

“As for how it came about . . . all of this is already in my statements to police, as well as in evidence in the form of recordings, but to sum up, Mr. Church had initially tried to coerce me into turning a blind eye to certain illegal activities. I played along after informing a District Attorney about what was happening and getting my interactions with Intergang recorded. As I played along, I put stipulations on my ‘cooperation’ such as not harming children and avoiding any activities that could attract emergency medical personnel.”

“He was going to try to coerce you? How?” she asked.

“The usual, by threatening people,” he said, unbothered. “It’s been tried before and it doesn’t work on me. Threatening people just annoys me and makes me work harder on thwarting whoever is behind the threats.”

“I see,” she said, without really seeing. She just wasn’t sure she wanted to inquire further down that vein.

“Well, with my conditions stated, I learned something interesting. Intergang already had an unwritten code of ethics. They already tried to avoid harming children and ‘noncombatants’. Mr. Church despised getting everyday people involved in the underworld and preferred a mafia-like attitude. So, I decided to take a chance and pry into that. It paid off,” Superman explained.

“It certainly did. It’s amazing how much of Intergang followed his decision to confess to police and such,” she said.

“You’d be surprised to learn how many people tangled up in such situations are willing to change if given a serious chance,” he said.

Pat smiled. “Such as the halfway program the Foundation has created?”

“Yes. I have a devoted team who evaluates each individual who enters the program, and we hold each to high standards.”

“What if they don’t meet those standards?” Pat asked, curious.

“Then they are removed from the program. We don’t cater to individuals who are not serious about bettering themselves,” Superman said simply. “There are too many people who desperately want a second chance. We will not allow our resources to be misused or wasted on those who

don't care to put in the effort needed to better their lives."

Pat blinked, not having expected such a blunt answer, but she supposed he knew this interview would eventually be seen by the world, including those who might enter the program. Might as well make certain expectations clear.

"That does make sense," she agreed, before shifting topics. "Considering the bake sale you held, would it be fair to say you like food?" she asked.

"I love food, but I don't really need to eat."

Her eyebrows rose. "So does that mean you don't ever get hungry?"

"Not really. I crave food sometimes, wanting a particular flavor, but that's different from being hungry. I get what I need from sunlight."

"That's very interesting. Do you think you'd need to eat if it was cloudy for a while?" she asked.

"Yes, if I didn't decide to fly above the clouds. And actually, I had to eat after Nightfall. I probably could have chosen not to eat, but it would have taken me longer to recover," Superman explained.

"So, have you ever been sick? A cold, upset stomach?" she asked, allowing her curiosity to guide the questions for a moment.

"No. I've gotten headaches a few times, and have become nauseous from using some of my visual abilities in certain instances, but no, I've never had an actual illness."

Pat hummed thoughtfully before growing a little serious as she came upon her next batch of questions.

"If you would like to pass on this, just wave your hand and we'll edit it out," she said as she straightened in her chair.

"Alright."

"This next question might be considered too sensitive a question, but I think many in the world would like to know. Is being an alien difficult?"

Superman blinked, and she wondered if she should have led into that better.

"Sometimes." He cleared his throat. "But I'm here and I'm not going to dwell on things that I can't change, especially since, when it comes down to it, I'm happy that I am what I am. Growing up, I felt alone a lot of the time, felt that I didn't belong, even with my loving, adopted family. But that's part of every sentient life, I think. Everyone experiences self-doubt at least once, and feels that no one understands. And that's what too many people get stuck on. You don't need anyone to understand, you just need someone to be with you or to know that someone would be if they could. That makes all the difference and makes being an alien perfectly alright. Being the 'only one' doesn't have to mean you're alone."

Pat really tried not to tear up, but that was one of the most beautiful things she had ever heard.

"That is wise advice," she said as she collected herself before giving a sigh. "Unfortunately I think we'll need to close here though. Thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed and giving us the pleasure of learning more about you and your life."

"You're welcome," he said with a kind smile.

Two days later, after very little editing, the interview was approved, and the world was enraptured.

[Chapter 3: Child]

"You have something to show me?" Lois asked as she followed Clark across his apartment and to the open window.

"Yes," he said, looking back at her with a sly smile before spinning in place at super speed.

He stopped, his normal clothing replaced with red and blue. His cape slowed behind him as she laughed.

"Well, I haven't seen you do that before, but I don't think that's what you wanted to show me?" she said questioningly.

He chuckled. "No, I want to take you some place," he said, holding out his hand.

"Alright," she said, taking his hand as she moved forward.

He reduced the gap between them, pulling her close to him. "Hold on," he said.

They disappeared in a blur, and, before she knew it, they were somewhere high above the Earth in the night sky. She looked down to see the glow of civilization among blotches of darkness and then looked up to see the Milky Way against the backdrop of space.

"Wow," she breathed. "This is amazing."

"Yeah."

"If I could fly, I'd come here every night," she said, gazing back down at the city before lifting her eyes back to one of the grand masterpieces of Creation.

"I might be able to arrange that," he said with a grin.

She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "You can teach me to fly?"

"If I could, I would," he said as he took his cape and wrapped it around her with his free arm.

"Thanks," she said. It wasn't terribly cold, but it was a little brisk. "Do you come up here often?"

"I used to come here all the time. Not so much anymore though," he said.

"Oh?" she asked.

"I have you now."

Lois' breath caught, deeply touched.

"I used to drift," he said, his eyes scanning the horizon. "Not part of the stars, not part of the Earth, not really knowing where I fit in. My being a P.I. and becoming a military officer helped, but I didn't feel complete until I

met you.”

“Oh, Kal. I love you too,” she said, embracing him tightly.

After a moment, they pulled back.

“So, I should let you know, Perry, my boss, knows I’m dating now. It’s a funny story actually,” she said.

Clark smirked.

“After completing the article on that little project you and Klein have started, I just offhandedly said I had a date Friday night and the moment I did everyone just stopped talking and stared at me. You’d think I had said that I was pregnant by immaculate conception or something,” she said.

“Is the idea of you dating really that hard to believe?” he asked.

“It’s been years since I’ve had anything I would call a date. I’m sure there were many who believed I had sworn off men forever,” she said. “But anyway, Perry asked me who the lucky man was, so I told him, Clark Kent.”

“And?” Clark asked curiously.

“He was pleased,” she said, pinking up. “But anyway, what have you been up to at your work?”

“Oh, I’m working on a missing person case. Denny Milner. His brother, Jack Milner, hired me,” he said as they continued to just drift in each other’s embrace.

Lois nodded, wondering how hard that must be. She couldn’t imagine Lucy going missing.

“Cold case?” she asked.

“Actually, it’s fairly new. He went missing two weeks ago.”

“Does that make things harder or easier for you?” she asked, too absorbed in their conversation to pay much mind to their change in flight trajectory.

She had flown with him enough times to trust he knew what he was doing and that she would likely enjoy the destination.

“Usually, easier. I have a few leads already in this case, but every case is different and leads can lead to dead ends,” he said as they cut across the sky. His cape and his body heat protected her from the coolness of the night air.

“I hope you find him soon, and that it’s a happy ending,” she said softly.

“Me too, but nothing is guaranteed. In the end, sometimes the truth is all I can give,” he said, resigned as they slowed down.

“Sounds like being a P.I. is harder than being Superman at times,” she said.

“Both have highs and lows, but it’s work worth doing,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” she agreed, before looking back to the stars as they rotated about and slowly descended.

They touched down and Lois quickly recognized the

Kent Farm.

“What are we doing here?” she asked curiously.

“I wanted to show you my favorite spot as a kid,” he said, walking over to the massive, Sycamore tree before them. Its branches were large and crooked, spreading out and up as if reaching to touch the stars. Lois could just make out the nearly white bark with thin greenish-brown sheets peeling off. This was truly a king among trees.

“I thought your favorite spot was your fortress? Your treehouse?” she asked, confused.

“That was where I went when I wanted to be alone. But this place, this is where I hoped and dreamed as a child, and where I still do,” he said.

She looked around them and then focused her attention on the multitude of stars gleaming against the blackness of the night sky.

“Because of the view?” she asked.

The Kent farmhouse was in the distance and really did look picturesque under the Milky Way. Due to the lack of city or traffic lights, one could see so much more of the heavens.

“Not just the view,” he said before indicating the tree and pointing at the trunk.

And there, etched into the tree at chest level, were a list of names. Couples, starting with:

Mary Kotts & William Kent 1859

The names continued, each line carved in a slightly different writing style.

Elizabeth O’Neill & Thomas Kent 1887

Margaret McDaniel & Walter Kent 1910

Lillian Forks & Jerome Kent 1932

Martha Clark & Jonathan Kent 1957

Lois’ eyes widened. “Wow.”

“My dad showed me this when I was seven. He told me that, one day, my name could be placed underneath his. My powers were beginning to develop beyond just strength, and this gave me something to look forward to, something to imagine for myself that wasn’t scary.”

Lois approached the carved names and touched the scarred wood.

“I just wanted to share this with you, because this is where I first started to seriously think about my future,” he said.

Lois took a slow breath.

“When I was seven, I was more concerned with trying to impress my father than anything else. Show him I was just as good as a son. And then as I grew, the thought of having a life like my mother’s made me leery of even hoping for anything beyond a successful career,” she said softly.

She looked at him.

“I’m glad you showed me I don’t need to dread the

possibility of something else. That I can actually look forward to it,” she said, smiling shyly.

Clark, still in the red and blue, quickly closed the distance and kissed her, wrapping his arms around her as he slowly floated them up.

Leigh-Anne Stipanovic really hoped they would respond, assuming they had even read the whole letter and didn't immediately throw it out.

She wondered how many people wrote in, claiming to be pregnant with Superman's baby or some other such lunacy. But she hadn't claimed that. She had just asked for help, outlining the abilities her son was displaying and her fervent hope of obtaining assistance from the Foundation. Hopefully they were as kind as they led the world to believe. Superman certainly was, as he had already saved her son earlier that year by preventing a plane crash.

She forced her thoughts away from that time. She had just managed to get full custody of her son after a long, drawn-out fight with a man she had initially thought would be with her to stardom and beyond. Unfortunately, all he had done was destroy any hope of her having an acting career and had almost taken her baby away from her after releasing a criminal amount of slander against her. It could not be overstated that she was grateful that man was out of their lives.

She got up, wondering what her son was up to now. At least she didn't really have to worry about him getting hurt anymore.

She entered his bedroom. There were a few crushed toys scattered about, but he seemed to be doing a little better with that - although there was another imprint of his foot on the floor. She inwardly winced. How was she going to explain that to the landlord? She wasn't sure if it was better to have them on the floors or the walls. Well, at least he hadn't broken through the floor. Or worse, a wall.

How did Superman walk across the street without pulverizing the pavement under his tread?

She looked to Jesse's bed, finding her son levitating a foot or so above the mattress, clearly concentrating before weakly sinking back down to his blankets.

“Good job, you didn't crash this time,” she praised.

He beamed.

“Well, honey, do you think you'd be up to going to the store with me?” she asked.

They really needed to get groceries, but she wasn't about to ask her sister to watch him more than absolutely necessary. Her sister watched Jesse for her when she was at work, but she didn't want to abuse her sister's kindness. Their relationship had been rocky before Jesse and really only began to mend after she had swallowed her pride and asked for help when Jesse began displaying abilities.

“Yeah,” he said, though she could see his hesitance.

He wasn't stupid. He knew they needed to keep his abilities a secret. She had told him so soon after things began happening, and then when they had had to move after he accidentally ran through a wall in their last home....

She wished she hadn't cried in front of him, but she supposed it was better that he understood how serious this was than to not.

“Just let me know if you feel we need to leave, and we will immediately,” she said. “You can do it. You have before.”

He nodded, growing brave for his mom.

She smiled while hoping the Superman Foundation would respond soon. She wasn't sure how much longer they would be able to cope without serious help. Super help.

Leaving her son's room with him in tow, the phone suddenly rang.

Mav smiled as he finished reading that morning's article.

‘Superman Foundation Begins Work on First Memory Crystal, Kryptonian Technology,’ by Lois Lane.

If successful, the memory crystal would not immediately replace the current technology of the world, as it was actually fairly limited in capabilities at the moment, but it was a good first step: A small sampling of the technology from a world now gone, a world that had succeeded in sending their last son across the galaxy to a habitable world.

He knew the world governments and corporations would soon be clamoring for more information, in hopes of expanding on what Kal-El and Dr. Klein would likely demonstrate as possible. Data storage in a crystalline structure. The advancements in the digital world that could follow were astronomical. Mav could hardly wait.

“Mav.”

He looked up from his desk to find Julie Heinz, the Foundation's Coordinator, holding out a letter for him.

“I think one of us should call this woman. Call it mother's intuition, but I think she's genuine,” Julie stated seriously.

Mav frowned and quickly took the letter. His eyes scanned it.

*Dear Superman or Foundation Representative,
My name is Leigh-Anne Stipanovic and I need help. A few months ago, my son, Jesse, began doing superhuman things. Things only Superman can do. I have no idea why this is happening, as his father is undeniably human and, before three months ago, he was like any other child. But now, even though he's only four, he can pick up our fridge*

with ease and even hover in midair.

Please, we need help. Controlling what he can do is very hard for him. He's breaking his toys and he's even accidentally run through a wall! I'm afraid what will happen if the police or the city finds out. I can't lose my son and pray you can help him learn control and maybe even figure out why this is happening. I'll do whatever you say, even move to Metropolis. I don't know how much longer we can do this on our own.

Mav passed his eyes over the woman's phone number and address provided beneath her desperate message.

"Go and call her. Arrange a flight for her and her son as soon as they're available. I know Kal will want to see Jesse if this is legitimate. Private jet if the airlines are full. Murray can help you with the specifics if needed," he stated, agreeing with Julie's assessment as he handed the letter back. "Once things have been arranged, let me know and we'll update Kal."

She nodded and quickly left with the letter in hand.

Leigh-Anne hugged her son tightly as he dutifully kept his arms at his sides, afraid he would squeeze too hard if he hugged her. But that was okay. They would be getting help very soon.

Julie Heinz, the coordinator for the Foundation, had just called her and arranged for them to head to Metropolis the very next morning. It was a prayer come true! Sure, Mrs. Heinz had gently but directly warned her that if this was a hoax the Foundation would not stand for it, but Leigh-Anne had expected that and couldn't blame them.

Oh, she was so glad she had taken the chance and reached out!

"Alright. Let's go to the store and just pick up dinner, alright?" she said, pulling back.

Jesse smiled happily at her, no doubt also relieved to know things would soon be getting better.

They went to the store and Jesse carefully climbed into the large basket portion of the cart since he was too big to fit in the child seat. He kept his hands in his lap as she quickly pushed the cart through the store, picking out the ingredients to his favorite meal, spaghetti.

Less than ten minutes later they were in the check-out line, and Jesse had relaxed enough to help place a few items onto the conveyor belt as she got out her checkbook.

She was waiting for the checker to scan the last item and tell her the total cost when the sound of bending metal came to her ears.

Looking over as Jesse dropped the package of noodles onto the conveyor belt, her eyes spotted his little hand clenched around the crushed metal of the cart wall. His face snapped to hers, horrified, and the next thing she

knew was movement as her grasp on the checkbook slipped.

Jesse was crying as she suddenly realized they were standing by her car. Fortunately, her purse was still over her shoulder as she quickly opened the back door for him before she clamored into the driver's seat and immediately started the car.

"I'm sorry, mom! I'm sorry! It just broke!" he cried.

"It's okay, it's okay," she assured, while knowing it wasn't okay as she sped out of the parking lot and drove home as fast as she could.

Kal-El stood in front of Mav's desk as the news played on the television sitting on the dresser against the left wall.

"I'm glad you were already in contact with her," Kal stated as the news station replayed the scene captured by a parking lot security camera.

There was a blur from the store's front to a car near the middle of the parking lot where a woman and distraught child seemingly materialized before they piled into the car and sped away.

"I'm glad she called us again as soon as she made it home. She and her son are in the hotel near the private airport now and we'll have someone drive them directly from there to the plane tomorrow morning," Mav said. "I imagine the press will find out where she's living before the end of the day, especially since she told me she had dropped her checkbook during their . . . departure. Fortunately, it had her previous address, but the press will figure it out before too long."

Kal nodded but looked pensive. "I wonder if I should just go pick them up directly."

"It would likely be best for you to keep your distance. Keep it a Foundation issue where you are acting in the capacity as Superman alone. The press is already making assumptions," Mav stated as the news anchor came on the screen soon after and immediately proved his point.

"If I hadn't seen the surveillance video, I don't think I'd believe it, but since I have, could this boy be . . . the son of Superman?" the anchor asked.

A photo of the grocery cart was then displayed, zooming in on the area clearly crushed by a small hand.

Kal-El looked up to the ceiling, exasperated.

"Shall we give a statement?" Julie asked.

"No, I'll talk to the press directly once Ms. Stipanovic and her son arrive tomorrow," Kal stated. "I feel this needs to be delivered bluntly and with irrefutable force. Witnessing my interaction with her and her son in their view near the same time as my statement will likely bring about the right amount of shock and awe."

"You have an idea of what you want to say then?" Mav asked.

“An idea, yes, although I’m not clear on specifics yet. I just know I must nip this cleanly, otherwise this will get out of hand.”

Mav and Julie couldn’t agree more.

As Mav had foretold, the press had surrounded Leigh-Anne’s place of residence before the sun had set the previous day, and now, the next morning, over a dozen news stations were around the Superman Foundation as well. However, building security was keeping everyone a fair distance back while police helped to keep the road clear.

Handling the calls to the Foundation that morning had been a bear, but it seemed they had somewhat been appeased by the promise of Superman giving a statement later that morning directly to the public. And then, at 9:30 am, an SUV turned onto the street and made its way to the front of the Foundation.

The press pressed forward as much as they could as a security guard opened the back passenger door once the vehicle had stopped in front of the entrance. As Leigh-Anne and Jesse emerged, microphones were shoved in their faces and a torrent of voices with numerous queries rained down on them.

“Ms. Stipanovic, is your son the son of Superman?”

“Are you Superman’s girlfriend? Where did you and Superman first meet?”

Leigh-Anne did her best to ignore the shouted questions and gently guided her son forward as he kept as close as he could against her right leg, careful to only clench his fist around the loose fabric of her blouse.

“Ms. Stipanovic, do you have anything you wish to say?”

“Jesse, how strong are you?” another asked as the crowd beyond began to get even more excited.

“Did Superman leave you to care for your son alone?”

“Ms. Stipanovic, we spoke to your previous landlord. He said a child-sized hole had been made through an exterior wall. Is your son dangerous?”

“That’s enough.”

The entire street froze as the voice cut through it all like a lightning strike on a clear, rainless day. No one knew when the Man of Steel had appeared, but at that moment none of them cared, for none of them had ever seen him so displeased.

“Clear a path for Ms. Stipanovic and her son,” he stated, his cape listlessly waving behind him as he motioned the mother and child forward. “Ms. Stipanovic and Jesse, please go inside. You don’t need to answer anything.”

“Thank you, Superman,” Leigh-Anne said, tears in her eyes as Jesse stared at him from around his mother’s legs

in absolute awe.

Superman didn’t move or say anything else as they went past him and entered the building. Only once the door shut behind them did he shift his stance.

Everyone in the crowd was too afraid to break the silence as they waited, hoping Superman would get behind the podium to give a statement and then hopefully answer some questions.

Unfortunately for them, he had his own plan.

Crossing his arms, he gave his statement right there, his voice loud and strong enough to not need the microphones on the podium behind him. His voice just carried.

“I don’t know if Kryptonian and Human biology are compatible, but even if they are, it is impossible for me to have fathered this child simply because I have never been with anyone in that way,” he stated, ignoring the stunned reactions that admission instantly caused.

“Also, assuming I would ever abandon a child and leave the mother to cope on her own is downright insulting. If I were to ever father a child here, you can be sure I would love and raise them. Due to my Kryptonian parents and my adopted human family, I could and would do no less. So I’d appreciate it if such accusations and attacks on my character would cease.” His expression was stoney for a long moment before returning to merely firm.

“But that aside, I am personally looking into this, as the abilities the child has displayed are Kryptonian in nature and thus, in that regard, my responsibility to see that he receives all the attention and training his mother wishes me to provide. She reached out to the Foundation through a letter and we just received it yesterday and had actually contacted her before the incident at the store,” he explained flatly. “Now, I’m going to go and meet with them and see what I can do to help. Good day.”

He turned around and entered the building at normal, human speed.

No one asked any questions.

Superman ignored the press and crowd watching through the windows from the street as he went to Ms. Stipanovic and Jesse who were standing between Mav and Julie.

Kal could hear Jesse’s little heart hammering away just like his mother’s as he stopped less than six feet away from them.

He smiled, trying to put their minds at ease. It worked somewhat, as Ms. Stipanovic returned the smile and Jesse gave a nervous wave.

He knelt down to the four year old’s level, his cape fanning out along the floor on either side and behind him.

“I understand you have some abilities like I do, Jesse?” he asked, taking note of how Jesse was not holding his

mother's hand. Instead, he tightly gripped the bottom edge of her shirt while she kept her hand on his shoulder.

Jesse nodded frantically in answer to his question, his hair flopping back and forth before looking at him directly, no longer shying completely behind his mother.

Superman stilled, his eyes tracing the boy's unobscured face as his mind instantly did what it had been doing for over a decade. Memorize and, if possible, recall.

He recognized this boy. He had seen this child before.

He closed his eyes for several seconds, pulling at his memories before zeroing onto the exact moment he had seen this face. And he remembered. It was during a rescue that had quickly become unusual. Opening his eyes, he glanced up at Jesse's mother who, like everyone else, was a little confused by his actions before he looked back at Jesse.

"So, Jesse, do you remember being on an airplane I helped land during a storm?" he asked. "You were sitting right by the window over the wing."

Jesse grinned, "Yeah! I remember!"

"Did you know, I got struck by lightning during that rescue?" he asked, keeping his attention on Jesse although his words were also for the adults around them.

"You were?" Jesse asked, his eyes wide.

"I think that might be why you are so strong now. Some of my powers must have moved to you when that bolt hit me because I had been so close to you. If I'm right, which I have no reason to believe otherwise, you are like this now because of me," he said, deciding to be direct and honest.

Jesse blinked. "Oh."

"I'm sorry. I know how hard it is to have these abilities. I know how scary they can be. How they can even make you afraid of yourself," he said, his eyes soft. "But now that you're here, I can teach you how to control them. You won't ever need to be afraid of them again."

Jesse's form abruptly disappeared in a blur, dashing into Superman's welcoming arms as those around jumped in surprise. However, soon they were desperately trying to maintain their composure as the little boy just bawled on Superman's shoulder, his little arms hanging stiffly at his sides, too afraid to return the hug he was now receiving.

"It's alright. You can hug me. And soon you'll be able to hug your mom again," Superman said.

Jesse then clung to him, holding onto Superman as tightly as he could.

Still holding him, Superman stood up, still aware of the audience outside.

Although they couldn't hear what was being said, the visual was pretty clear.

"Let's continue this upstairs," he said as Ms. Stipanovic hurried to her son to reassure him, although it

seemed he was content in Superman's arms.

"Dr. Klein is upstairs. He's Kal's - Superman's - personal physician. Would it be alright for him to look at Jesse?" Mav asked Leigh-Anne as they began making their way to the stairs.

She nodded, although she was looking curiously at Superman. "You remember saving Jesse?"

Superman smiled softly. "I remember every face I see and, if I come across them again, I can recall where I had last seen them."

"And you can teach him to control it all?" she asked, her voice cracking with tearful hope.

"Yes. I learned how to control many of my powers as a child, and I didn't have anyone who knew what to expect. I suspect he will have an easier time of it than I did for that reason, that, and he is doing a fine job of controlling some of it on his own already," Superman answered as they made it to the stairwell.

[Chapter 4: Control]

Jesse looked up as Superman gently placed him on a padded bench. His mother was standing beside him and a number of other people were behind Superman. The room seemed to be a doctor's office but also felt like a living room. There was comfortable furniture about but also strange equipment.

"We'll be downstairs if you need us," a man who seemed to be important told Superman.

"Thank you, Mav," Superman said.

Mav and almost everyone else left, save for his mom, Superman, and a man in a white doctor's jacket.

"Alright, Jesse. I'm Dr. Klein, Superman's doctor. With your mom's permission, I'd like to listen to your heart and take a few measurements, okay?" the balding man said.

"Will it hurt?" Jesse asked.

The last time he had gone to the doctor they had given him a shot. Sure, he might have powers, but if this was Superman's doctor, maybe he had stuff that would even work on him.

"They'll want a few strands of your hair, Jesse, but that's as painful as it'll get," Superman interceded before reaching up to his own head and pulling a few strands of hair. "Dr. Klein needs it to compare them."

"Oh, thank you, Kal," Dr. Klein said, pulling out a small ziplock bag and allowing Superman to put them in.

Jesse blinked but copied the action without any fuss. They just wanted some hair?! That was fine with him!

"Thank you, Jesse," Dr. Klein said, before quickly labeling the hair samples.

Soon after, Klein did the normal things doctors and nurses did when he got a checkup. Listened to his heart

and lungs, weighed him and measured his height before checking his eyes, nose, ears and mouth. Jesse kept as still as he could the whole time and was proud when he didn't break anything. His mother looked relieved and gave him a pleased smile. At the end, Dr. Klein asked him to spit in a cup! That was fun.

"Well, nothing stands out. Everything reads as normal for a boy his age," Klein said. "Even his body temperature, which does surprise me a little, considering you run a little higher than humans," he commented, looking at Superman. "Of course, he is still human, even though he has your abilities. Anyway, I'll get started on analyzing these. If there are any answers to be found, they'll be found there, I would think."

"Thank you, doctor," his mom said before they watched him leave.

"So, are you ready to learn how to control your strength?" Superman asked cheerfully.

He nodded, suddenly excited. He wouldn't break his toys anymore and he wouldn't need to worry about accidentally hurting his mom!

"Alright," Superman said, going behind a table before picking up a box of . . . bananas?

"Bananas?" his mom asked. At least he wasn't the only one confused.

"It's one thing I used to learn to control my strength. My dad had me peel bananas until I could do so without bruising them. And then, once I could do that, I moved up to peeling oranges," he explained before removing a banana and holding it out to Jesse. "Want to try?"

"Okay," Jesse said, hesitantly taking it.

"Go ahead. And don't worry if it takes a few times before you see progress. By the time I could peel one without leaving a bruise, my mom was tired of making banana bread," Superman said, smiling at the memory.

Jesse smiled back before trying to open the banana. Unfortunately, this resulted in it pretty much exploding all over his hands.

He looked up apologetically but Superman merely smiled.

"I did that too. It just takes a lot of practice. You'll get it," Superman encouraged.

Jesse nodded, deciding not to be discouraged. He could do it!

Mayson shook her head at the television as she walked by the break room of the police department.

"Parasites," she muttered.

"The media?" Henderson asked, turning toward her with a mug of freshly brewed coffee.

"Of course," she stated.

"I'm a bit surprised, to be honest. I would have

expected you to change the channel," Henderson said.

"I'll admit I was tempted," she stated.

"So, what do you think?" he asked.

"About what?"

"The kid," Henderson said, nodding to the screen that was now showing a photo of Jesse exiting the car behind his mother.

"I don't think he's his, if that's what you're asking. And after what he said in front of the Foundation, I doubt anyone else does now either," Mayson said with an exasperated shake of her head.

She could not believe he had point blank said he was a virgin on national television! Sure, he hadn't said the 'V' word, but he might as well have screamed it.

Henderson laughed. "Yeah, I nearly spewed out my coffee, but he definitely ended all super-parentage speculation, which I think was his goal. Granted, I'm not sure he has realized what it's cost him, but either way I doubt he cares. He doesn't seem to be affected by certain things like the rest of us, and I'm not talking about his powers."

"He does view things differently," Mayson agreed. "And just between us, I wouldn't be surprised if he's unique even by Kryptonian standards."

"Neither would I," Henderson agreed.

After lunch, Jesse went through another dozen bananas before they noted an improvement.

"I did it!" he shouted, holding out a whole banana, although there were still finger indentations in a few spots.

"Good job," Kal said, just as enthused by the success as Jesse even though there were banana guts all over the place.

Now he had some idea how his parents felt watching and helping him as a child.

"I'm so sorry about the mess," Jesse's mother said, somewhat horrified by the yellow debris everywhere.

"It's no problem. I'll clean it up," he said, before zipping around in a blur and cleaning up all the gooey residue in a few seconds.

Reappearing back where he had been, he handed a clean, damp washcloth to Leigh-Anne for her to clean up banana remains from her son, as well as herself.

"Thank you," she said, blinking while Jesse beamed.

"No problem. Now, are you having any trouble with your hearing or vision?" Superman asked, looking at Jesse.

"No, not really. Things used to be really loud, but I just don't listen anymore," he said.

"That's good. When I was little, super hearing was one I struggled with for a long time. So I take it you just leave it off?" Superman asked.

"Uh, yeah. It's too scary to listen," Jesse admitted.

“That’s alright,” Kal said before a knock on the doorframe got his attention. “Doctor?”

“Sorry for interrupting, but I felt you all would like to know what I’ve just learned sooner rather than later,” Dr. Klein said.

“No problem, although I’m surprised you learned anything this quickly. Is there a problem?” Kal asked.

“No. Actually, I’m pretty sure this is very good news. I have reason to believe this - Jesse having powers, I mean - is temporary,” Dr. Klein said.

Ms. Stipanovic covered her chest in shock and hopeful relief.

“Why do you think that?” Kal asked, intrigued while inwardly torn for a reason he could not place in that moment.

“Here, I’ll just show you,” Dr. Klein said, holding out a hair as his other hand approached it with scissors. “This is Jesse’s hair. Right here is about two months old.” He cut, or at least tried to cut but he ended up breaking a portion of the scissors instead. Leigh-Anne and Jesse gasped. “But look when I cut here, which is maybe a week old,” he said as he adjusted his grip, turning the hair around so they could see the root. And then he cut it. The scissors remained intact, and the hair was cut as easily as any other human hair.

“Does that mean . . .?” Jesse’s mother asked, astonished.

Jesse was confused.

“The abilities he got from Superman are fading and I would wager will likely be out of his system completely in a month or so, if not sooner,” Dr. Klein explained.

“I’ll be normal again?” Jesse asked, his face an odd expression of bewildered relief and loss.

“Yes,” Dr. Klein answered.

Ms. Stipanovic immediately embraced her son in joy.

“If I may suggest, things could likely be sped along if he were to perform some strenuous super feats,” Klein proposed.

Superman hummed in thought. “Well, we could fly a bit. Would you like that, Jesse?”

“Yeah!” he shouted.

“Ms. Stipanovic, would that be alright?” Kal asked.

“We can stay within city limits, if you prefer.”

“Would that allow him to use up, uh, as much energy as he would otherwise?” she asked.

“Jesse would likely benefit from not being limited,” Dr. Klein interjected. “Under Kal’s guidance of course.”

“A-alright,” she said, not sure what to think but wanting her boy to return to how he had been before sooner rather than later. “You be good for Superman and do what he says,” she instructed her son.

“I will, Mommy,” he promised.

“I’ll keep him safe. We’ll be back by dinner time,” Kal promised before looking at Dr. Klein. “Could you brief Mav and ask him to begin working on a statement with Murray? I’ll review when we return.”

“Sure,” Klein said agreeably.

Kal and Jesse left from the roof a few minutes later, leaving the skies of Metropolis with two sonic booms.

Lois sighed as she overheard her coworkers’ discussion. The topic was one she had been hearing repeated throughout the day, and she understood their curiosity, but it was still getting old.

“He’s one lucky kid. How awesome would it be to have Superman’s powers, even just for a day?!” Jimmy exclaimed. “And to think he had them for months after that lightning strike!”

“I don’t know, having powers might be scary. I mean, what if you couldn’t control them? The kid had broken how many things?” Alli from purchasing pointed out.

“But imagine, being able to fly! And now we know it’s actually possible!”

“If you happen to be close enough to Superman when he gets struck by lightning. Yeah, that seems **safe**,” Alli said sarcastically.

“Lois, what do you think?” Jimmy asked.

“About having powers?” she asked.

“Yeah. You’ve spoken with Superman more than any of us, so tell us, would you want powers?” he asked.

“I suppose it depends on the circumstances. Of course the idea of flying and being invulnerable sounds great, but what comes with all of that?” she questioned.

“What do you mean?” Jimmy asked.

“Well, would they come on suddenly? Would I be able to control them? Would people be afraid of me? Would anyone else have powers? Would I be able to continue to live my life and keep my job?” she asked.

“Hmm. Okay. So, what if all those concerns you listed don’t apply? What would you do if you had powers for just one day?” Jimmy asked.

“What’s the point of these questions?” Lois asked.

“Come on, Lois,” Jimmy whined.

“Fine. I’d fly to the moon and back, go down and touch the ocean floor, fly around the world, go to the north pole and then the south pole, just so I could say I had done those things. Along with those things, I’d be sure to see all the wonders of the world and try as much of the world’s cuisine as possible, especially chocolate desserts,” Lois summarized.

“It sort of sounds like you’ve thought about this a lot,” Jimmy prodded.

“It’s most of my bucket list,” Lois shrugged.

“You want to go to the moon?” he asked, bewildered.

“I did sneak onto Space Station Prometheus,” she pointed out.

“Oh yeah. I can’t believe I forgot about that,” Jimmy said, bemused.

“Anyway, that’s what I’d do if I had Superman’s powers for a day,” Lois said.

“I wonder if Superman has done all of those things.”

Lois shrugged. “I can ask the next time I see him.”

“Oh, please do!” Jimmy said excitedly.

She nodded, glad the questioning was over.

Clark was relieved when he returned to investigating Denny Milner’s disappearance. He had been a little concerned that one of his leads would dry up if he didn’t pursue it quickly but fortunately he not only managed to latch onto it, he had gotten to the bottom of what had happened much sooner than even he had expected. Less than three days.

Denny Milner, like most other teenagers, felt he knew better than more experienced adults and had decided he could do a few grown up things if he felt like it.

Although his heart was in the right place, he had gotten into things he shouldn’t have by secretly getting a side job to help his brother cover the bills. Unfortunately, the side job was illegal (transporting packages of drugs), and as soon as he realized what he had done, he felt it was too late to fix it and that if he returned he would only get his brother into trouble - not to mention disappoint him.

Fortunately, through the power of compassionate coercion, Clark convinced him to return and to report the illegal activity. With the help of Henderson, Denny’s fear of serious legal action against him was put to rest - although community service was not out of the realm of possibility.

Consequences aside, Jack was extremely grateful for Clark’s work and became yet another individual who felt he was indebted to the P.I.. As for Clark himself, he was happy to see another missing person found and back with his family.

It was certainly a nice reprieve from recent events and he was even more grateful for it due to the Superman interview he would be giving the following night.

He suspected his mother was right. His earlier words would likely come back to slap him upside the head, and he could already feel his cheeks wanting to blush about the likely coming fallout.

Oh, well. His words had done what he had wanted them to do, and, if he went about it right, they would be beneficial in the long run as well, even though they were a little embarrassing. Well, very embarrassing.

All the more reason to distract himself with his upcoming date with Lois.

Their dishes had been perfectly seasoned and cooked, as one would expect of the high-end restaurant, Callard’s.

The atmosphere was romantic and relaxed, and now they had just received their desserts.

“So you hid it in your room?” Clark asked, glad the topic of discussion had shifted away from his upcoming interview and the likely questioning of his approach to Jesse, not to mention his ‘very patient’ self.

“In a paper bag in the back corner of my desk drawer, under a pillow case,” she clarified.

“Why? And why not just eat it?” Clark asked.

“I had to wait until I knew my mom wouldn’t catch me,” Lois said. “Only after I was certain she was asleep did I eat it.”

“So you went through all of that, just so your mom wouldn’t catch you eating it? Sneaking it in your backpack, managing to hide it when your mom checked for homework, and then somehow smuggling it into your room, all so she wouldn’t catch you eating it?” Clark asked, bewildered.

“Yup, and it was worth it. She still has no idea I did any of that,” Lois said.

“How did you prevent it from melting?”

“Divine intervention,” she said seriously, before snickering. “I had an ice pack.”

“An icepack?”

“My father is a doctor. We always had a few ice packs in the freezer,” she said with a shrug. “Anyway. That was the great escapade of the chocolate ice cream bar. From the ice cream truck to my mouth.”

Clark shook his head as they both chuckled and took a moment to enjoy their desserts.

“So, what about you? Did you ever sneak anything past your parents?” Lois asked.

Clark blinked, thinking for a long moment before smiling softly. “Once, but I didn’t succeed - for long anyway.”

“What did you sneak? Or try to sneak, I mean?” she asked, very intrigued.

“Sir Manti. I snuck him into my room, but my mom found out pretty fast. She had noticed I was acting strange and came in to check on me,” Clark explained.

“‘Sir Manti’?” Lois asked.

“A praying mantis. I wanted him to be my pet. I was five,” he explained.

“A bug?” she inquired, quickly imagining little Clark with a pet bug and finding it adorable, even though she wasn’t a fan of insects.

“Manti was an impressive bug. He would perch on my shoulder!” Clark said proudly.

“I see,” she said, blinking.

“Anyway, I was scared I was in trouble and that Manti was now in danger. I knew my mom didn’t like animals in the house, after all, and doubly so for bugs. But my mom wasn’t mad. Looking back, I’m pretty sure she found the whole situation funny, but she didn’t laugh either. Instead, she helped me bring Manti outside to her garden and even had dad build him a little gazebo to shield him from the rain.”

“That’s adorable,” Lois said.

“Yeah. As a kid, I was so relieved that I didn’t notice that my mom had used the incident to provide a lesson. She told me I shouldn’t try to hide things from them and that it was better to ask if I wanted something, even something I suspected would be denied. Sure, they could say no, but if I asked they would be more likely to offer a compromise rather than dish out punishment, which would likely occur after a failed attempt at sneaking.”

“That’s wise. Wish my parents had used that approach. If I had tried to do something like that, like bring in a ladybug, my mom would have squished it outright,” Lois said, resigned.

“I see why you don’t try to pursue spending time with them,” he said softly.

“What’s sad is that I used to, hoping they would change and we could still somehow become a happy family.”

“I don’t think that’s sad. What’s sad is that they don’t seem to have realized how much they’ve hurt you.”

“I think they know on some level, and mother has admitted to it and sort of apologized. Granted, she was drunk when she said it, trying to drown her sorrows, but I’ll take what I can get,” Lois stated before taking a big bite of her chocolate cheesecake.

Clark watched her in tender silence for a long moment.

“What’s your mom sad about?” he asked.

“Dad cheated on her, tried to hide it and failed miserably. After that, it just spiraled into a rancid pit of despair. Daddy stayed away as much as possible and she drank, leaving me and Lucy alone. I pretty much raised Lucy,” Lois brutally summarized.

“Your sister?” Clark asked. Even though he knew she had a sister, he hadn’t heard much about her from Lois.

“Yeah. Unfortunately, she’s responded differently than I have to it all. I couldn’t tell you how many horrible **boy**friends she’s had, and I emphasize the word ‘boy’ for a reason,” she said before taking a deep breath. “Sorry. So much for a romantic evening. I’ve turned it into a sob fest.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s important to have blunt conversations. It just means we trust each other enough to have them,” Clark assured.

“Blunt’ Ha! That’s one way of putting it,” she said,

calming down and smiling at him before looking down at their plates. “Well, I suppose we should call it a night,” she said softly.

“Yeah. I have that interview tomorrow,” Clark agreed, failing to hide a wince.

“You’ll do fine,” she reassured before grinning. “I must admit I’m looking forward to watching though.”

“You’re just as bad as my mom,” he said, feigning a groan.

“Then I’m in good company,” she said as the waiter approached with the bill.

Clark walked her home afterward, taking advantage of the moment to share a long blissful kiss before going home himself.

[Chapter 5: Questions]

“Aw, man, I missed the beginning?” Jimmy complained as he joined the rest of the Planet’s employees who had opted to stay late and participate in the pseudo viewing party of Superman’s live television interview.

“You didn’t miss anything, just the standard introductions,” Lois said, rolling her eyes as he took the chair just behind her.

“Yeah, no questions have even been asked yet,” someone said.

“Shh!” another person said in the back as the camera panned over Patricia Waters.

“We’ve selected some questions from the audience to ask you. Are you ready?” Patricia asked after smoothly moving from the commercial break.

They were in a similar set up as the first interview but were now in front of a live audience of roughly 500 people. Unlike some rowdy popular talk shows, the atmosphere was more relaxed and professional, although there was a child-like eagerness heavy in the air as well.

“I am,” Superman answered, at ease.

“Alright, the first question is from Darla Marel. Please wave for us, Darla,” Patricia said, looking out into the audience.

Bashfully, a middle-aged woman to the far left tentatively waved. Superman smiled at her.

“Darla’s question is: Superman, your Foundation explained what brought about Jesse Stipanovic temporarily obtaining your abilities, but could something like that be done on purpose?” Patricia asked, reading from the first card of a stack in her hand.

Superman hummed thoughtfully before responding.

“Perhaps, but I feel it would be extremely irresponsible to try because it would be exceedingly dangerous. After all, there are a lot of unknowns about how exactly Jesse was able to absorb a portion of my energy in the midst of a lightning strike with no harm to himself. I’d rather not

mess around with the amount of power that's in lightning, which is over 300 million volts of electricity. And while I am not harmed by lightning, I'll admit I don't enjoy getting struck. It's not comfortable," Superman explained, amazing everyone by his matter-of-fact tone.

"How many times have you been hit by lightning?" Patricia asked curiously.

Superman blinked, having to think about it.

"Two hundred and thirty-seven times, but most of those were while I was flying through storms," he said with a shrug.

"Do you do that often?" she asked, just as bewildered by Superman's reality as the audience.

"To get above the storm, all the time," he said.

"That's amazing," she said, before refocusing on the cards in her hands and flipping to the next. "Well, this topic was inquired about by several in our audience in a few different ways, but we will be using Lucy Kay's question." Patricia motioned in request for Lucy to wave.

A plump lady in the far back, blushing bright red, waved.

"Lucy's question: Superman, concerning your statement on the impossibility of parentage after the Stipanovics' arrival at the Foundation — please forgive my bluntness, but you do realize what you've opened yourself up to, right?" Patricia read before glancing up at him.

Superman looked both surprised and amused before clearing his throat with a cough that sounded suspiciously like he was trying not to laugh, even as an undeniable blush pinked his cheeks.

"If you're referring to what I believe you are," he said, ignoring the giggles now sparking throughout the audience, "I doubt I fully do, if I'm honest. I really don't understand why waiting to share one's . . . intimate self is viewed the way it is."

Patricia smiled gently at him, inwardly marveling at the godlike man's clear bewilderment and finding the delicate way he approached the topic endearing. "Then why don't you explain the way you see it and why?"

Superman shifted awkwardly in his chair but quickly settled as the redness in his face faded.

"There's a lot of reasons bundled up in it, but ultimately, the core reason why I haven't surrendered myself to anyone yet is because I want to be certain that, when I do take that step, it's with my soulmate. I want to give my wife the one thing I have never and will never give to anyone else."

Several in the audience swooned at his words and there were several 'aww's released.

"If you weren't already the world's most eligible and desired bachelor, you are now," Patricia said, grinning.

"And you know, I just realized I shouldn't be surprised that you're a romantic," Patricia mused aloud.

Superman laughed. "I've been called a sentimental softy before, so I'll admit I'm a romantic."

"Why is that? Why do you think you're a romantic, I mean?" she asked, quickly clarifying.

"Most likely, my human parents. I've lived a sizable chunk of my life in a home where true love is real. They're devoted to and trust each other unequivocally, and they still hold deep affection for each other after all these years. They're the reason why I am the way I am," Superman explained before smiling softly. "Years ago, I asked my mom why she thinks they're still in love, and she told me it's because they value and give proper attention to all aspects of love. Not just romantic love, but self-love, friendship, etcetera. Which means they apply this effort to all aspects of their lives, not just in their marriage. That answer, I think, has shaped me more than any other I have ever received."

"How so?" Patricia asked, very intrigued now.

"To have any kind of good relationship with anyone, friendship or otherwise, you first have to love yourself. Without getting preachy, if you don't really love yourself and act on it, it's easy to make bad decisions that can hurt you and those who love you, and it's really easy to fall into an abusive relationship. For example, if you don't view your body and soul as something special and unique, something worth taking care of and defending, why should you seriously think about decisions and consequences? And how can you stand up for yourself if you don't see yourself as valuable?" Superman asked.

"Wow. That is a good point," Patricia conceded.

"Just telling you what I learned from my parents."

"What about friendship?" she asked, deciding to continue down this vein.

"Well, friendship is a love that focuses on caring about another person enough to sacrifice for them. Whether that be giving them your time, energy, money, whatever. You can still love yourself and be giving, even selfless, after all," he explained with a shrug before shifting in his chair.

"Very true." She glanced down at the cards in her hands. "Well, this next question is very fitting right now. Asked by Jorge Mills," she said, motioning to the audience as a big, burly man in the center stood up and gave a quick holler in greeting before sitting back down. "Thank you. Jorge asks: Superman, do you see yourself ever getting married?"

Superman leaned back in his chair, not quite sighing but close.

"Yes, I think so. Someday," he finally answered. "But as hopeful as I am, I'm also a realist. Although I'm pretty much physically identical to a human male, I cannot deny

the fact that I am not human, but a Kryptonian. Asking someone to commit to me as I would like to commit to them is not a question to be asked or taken lightly - especially because I'm Superman. And even though the world does not know where I go when I relax, there will always be a level of danger and duty that comes with being me - and thus being with me."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"I have enemies and I have my limits. Nightfall is the perfect example. If the world needs me, I'll be there, even if the cost is my life," he answered plainly to the astonishment of those listening. "That's a lot to ask of someone, and while I don't believe it's *too much* to ask - as there are plenty of people whose spouses have dangerous but necessary jobs - it is something not everyone can deal with long term."

Patricia nodded understandingly before hesitantly asking a follow-up question. "And having children?"

"I hope it will be possible, but if not, perhaps adoption. Of course, such decisions will be made with my wife, but either way, I'll be open to whatever is available to us," Superman said.

Patricia smiled before turning to the next card. "Alright, one more question before we go to a commercial break. This one is from Helen Mays," she said. An elderly, black woman near the front waved cheerfully. "Helen asks: Superman, I'm curious. Do you speak Kryptonian? I assume that is your people's language?"

Superman straightened with a smile. "Yes, but not often. **Dahl rilshe himol tah?** How are you doing? **Lah El ragb tah.** I hope you are well," he said, translating as he went before looking contemplative. "I've actually played around with the idea of putting together a sort of Kryptonian information package, especially since I've started work on recreating some of my people's technology, but I haven't been sure if people would be interested."

The audience quickly vocalized their surprise and curiosity.

"I think people are interested," Patricia chuckled.

"Alright. I'll get started on that then," Superman said, clearly taken aback but pleased. He leaned back in his seat, and they went to a commercial break.

"When do you think you'll give another interview?" Lois asked as Clark sat down beside her on the couch.

They were in her apartment, and they had just finished dinner. Instead of delivery or take out, Clark had cooked, utilizing the pots and pans of her kitchen that had never truly been used before. Lois had watched in amazement as he made spinach lasagna and, for dessert, tiramisu. She could get used to this.

"Hopefully not for a long time," he said. "Especially since I have a few other things I'd like to focus on."

"Oh? Like what?" she asked teasingly.

Clark's eyes sparkled with a hint of joy. "You," he answered, before leaning forward and kissing her full on the lips.

Although hesitant at first, he soon allowed himself to deepen the kiss, testing her response. He wasn't disappointed and soon had to pull back before he knew he wouldn't be able to stop.

"Wow," she said, even more dazed than he felt.

"Yeah," he agreed.

She smiled softly, cuddling up against his side.

"I can get used to this," she said.

"Me too," he said, before glancing at the clock and sighing. He gave her a tiny squeeze. "Unfortunately, I need to go soon. I need to pick up a package from Burton and deliver it to Dr. Klein."

"A package?" she asked, curiously.

"Yeah, and actually I meant to tell you about it the other day, but I got distracted by the interview," he said, now a little nervous.

"Yeah . . .?" she prompted.

"Not long after I made my initial appearance as Superman, pieces of a meteorite were found near where I crash landed. Due to the circumstances, it's clear that it's connected to Krypton — likely pieces of it. Fortunately, because of his contacts, Burton heard about it and kept it under wraps before contacting me."

"Why was that fortunate?" she asked.

"I ended up going to him to talk about it. During the talk, he showed me a piece and we quickly learned it's . . . well, I can't be around it. We don't know why exactly, but it hurts me. I was only exposed for a few seconds, but that was the first time I had ever felt anything beyond minor discomfort, and it definitely weakened me."

"What?!" she gasped. "Now don't tell me this package is a sample of this stuff."

"It's radioactive and lead blocks it, so I'll be fine as long as it stays in the box."

"Why wasn't it destroyed?" Lois asked incredulously.

"We're pretty sure it's pieces of Krypton and that there are other bits out there. The month I arrived, there were several meteor showers around the world. So Burton and I decided it would be best to have some scientists study it in case any more is found in the future. Anyway, so far they've learned the radiation doesn't seem to hurt human DNA for some reason and might actually provide clean energy that can be harnessed. Which is why I'm taking a sample to Dr. Klein to look at. If we can figure out what it does to me exactly and determine if there's a way to counteract it or even if I can adapt to it over time, I won't

have to worry about ever getting blindsided by it.”

“Okay. So all of what’s been found is locked away?” she asked.

“Deep under Cheyenne Mountain. With the radiation, it was easy for Burton to convince them to take every precaution.”

“But now you’re taking a sample out,” Lois pointed out.

“Due to the crystal work Dr. Klein and I are doing, Burton suggested they provide us a sample to work on any technological advancements. Anything learned in that regard will be shared with them.”

“Who knows what it can do to you?”

“Just you, my parents, and Burton. No one else knows about its effect on me. No one even knows about its connection to Superman,” Clark explained.

“So, during those few seconds, what did it do to you?” she asked.

“I felt dizzy and weak, and now that I have more experience with pain, the pain was very . . . deep. I’m not sure what would have happened if he hadn’t closed that box as soon as he saw something was wrong, which was pretty much immediately,” he said with a shiver.

“So what do you think Dr. Klein is going to be able to do? You better not expose yourself to this obvious poison!” she declared.

“From my encounter with the sound weapon, my nose ended up bleeding and Dr. Klein was able to store some of my blood for later study,” he said. “I’m hoping he’ll be able to learn something with that.”

“But you’ll have to tell him it can hurt you,” Lois pointed out.

“Yes, I will,” he agreed.

“You trust him,” she stated.

“If I’m honest, with my life,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, appeased. “Just wanted to make sure.”

“Okay,” he said with a smile.

Kal landed on the roof of his Foundation and entered through the top entrance before heading to the lab.

“Evening, Kal,” Dr. Klein said, looking up from his work.

There was a row of crystals in line with a row of sensors and electronics just above them.

“Hey, Bernie,” he said, closing and locking the door behind him.

Klein blinked at him curiously before he spotted the box in Kal’s hand. “Something wrong?”

“I’ll be telling Julie and Mav about this later, but I’d like you to get started on this right away,” he said, going to the table a few steps away. Bernard quickly put his work

down and joined him.

“What is it?” Bernard asked as Kal set the metal container down between them before setting a key on top and an envelope beside it.

“This box cannot be opened while I’m in the room, and whenever you’re working on it, please lock the door and hang up a radiation warning sign,” Kal said.

Dr. Klein’s eyes widened as Kal continued.

“Long story short, inside are two samples of meteorite I believe are remnants of Krypton. The rest of it is secured in a military facility and currently being studied by scientists there,” he said, before explaining what had happened to him when he had been exposed to it and what the scientists had learned so far before continuing. “My guess is that I’m absorbing whatever it is giving off, just like I do with sunlight, but instead of it making me stronger, it hurts me somehow. I’d like for you to figure out how it hurts me and if there’s anything we can do to help protect me against it.”

“Do you think there’s more of it out there?” Klein asked.

“I suspect there’s more, although I’ve only encountered it the one time, thankfully. To be honest, I would rather another encounter with Stoker’s sound weapon than get exposed to kryptonite again. Kryptonite is what my friend and I named it, although only people who know about its effect on me call it that.”

“Who knows?” he asked.

“My family and two very good friends, so not many. And although the US government is guarding and studying it, they don’t know what it is or that it can hurt me,” he said.

“Since they don’t know that, I gather they would like us to take a look because of our progress on the memory crystals?”

Kal smiled, opening the envelope and handing it to him. “Yes, pretty much. Sorry I won’t be of much help though, but if you want me to run numbers or set up any equipment before the kryptonite is involved, just let me know.”

“Of course, of course!” Dr. Klein said, quickly growing excited at the prospect of another experiment as he skimmed the contents of the letter he had removed. “‘Crystalline 297’. So, it’s a crystal?”

Kal nodded. “The one I saw glowed green. Apparently the other one glows red.”

“Interesting. Well, I’ll outline some tests I’ll conduct for this General Newcomb and run them by you, along with the ones for you. I’ll need some more cell samples, of course, but I should be able to learn a fair amount with your blood we have stored.”

“Thanks. That was what I was hoping to hear. As for

the cell samples, just let me know when you need them.”

“Oh! That reminds me, come take a look at what I’ve found out from last night’s test,” Klein said, getting up and returning to the row of crystals. “I figured something out by accident - as most things often are - but anyway, I learned that if you start a signal pattern in one crystal and allow the signal to flow into another, when you stop the signal, the final crystal will actually echo the signal back into the first! There are some conditions required for that to happen, but this means there’s immense programming capabilities! And it’s easier than we previously thought!”

“That’s great! My people used crystals like computers, so I’m glad we’re closer to figuring out how,” Kal said, pleased. “Well, I’ll let you get to it while I update Mav and Julie, and possibly Howard. Since he’s head of security, he should probably know this is here and why,” Kal said as Klein began fiddling with the crystals.

“Okay, and thanks for trusting me with this. If there’s anything I can do to at least mitigate whatever threat there is to you, I’ll find it,” Dr. Klein promised.

“Thanks, doctor.”

Kal walked out, confident in his choice of friends.

[Chapter 6: Torn]

Lois pushed ‘send’, submitting her article covering a few more Intergang cases coming to a close.

The past two months had been wonderful and Lois could hardly wait to see how much closer she and Clark would get in the coming weeks.

Last weekend on a whim, he flew her to the Amalfi coast in Italy. There was so much to see and do. Standing on stone terraces, they caught sunsets as the fading light of day rippled over the dark blue waters. They marveled at beaches set among the rocks and walks where the vibrant flowers provide backdrops for sharing unforgettable moments together.

The evening meal was especially impressive. They went to the Re Mauri in Vietri sul Mare for a candle-lit dinner. The restaurant’s exposed kitchen was decorated with various colorful ceramic pots. The menu was chock full of seasonal ingredients, with meat and seafood dishes that reflected the flavors and traditions of the Amalfi Coast. Clark, as a wine enthusiast, was particularly interested in the cellar which contained a selection of over 950 wines from Italy and overseas. They talked about each other’s lives and laughed at various happy memories from early days in their chosen professions. In more ways than one, it was a fabulous meal. While lingering over freshly roasted coffee and a sinfully decadent chocolate dessert, Clark hinted about a shared future.

Those memories made her lips curl into a sweet, yet mischievous, smile. Never in her life had she been so

comfortable and cherished. Above all, Clark was trustworthy in the truest sense of the word and, considering what other men had done to her heart, that was high praise.

They were continuing the ‘steady progression’ route, and while there were moments where both of them struggled with that arrangement, they were both glad they were not jumping ahead — although she seriously doubted they would wait a year before getting married, let alone engaged.

The relationship they were forging was precious. She knew he was hers and she was his. So she was certain time spent getting to know each other better would only sweeten the moment when they decided to finally make it official. Still wasn’t easy though.

At the sound of Clark’s alter ego’s name being mentioned, she turned her attention to one of the monitors.

‘Superman continues to help with humanitarian aid after the torrential floods in Indonesia. For the past four days, he has been seen helping in the search for the missing, clearing debris, and delivering food and medical supplies to the region,’ the news anchor said.

Lois sighed softly as she glanced at the television in the bullpen.

The news showed a clip of Superman pushing aside mounds of debris that had been created by the horrendous mudslides before changing to another clip of sheets covering a row of bodies with rescuers helping the injured nearby.

‘Two hundred and thirty fatalities have been reported thus far, but thousands are still missing. Unfortunately, due to the mudslides and water that has yet to recede, most roads are blocked and communications to the hardest hit areas have yet to be reestablished,’ the man said as scenes continued to flash across the screen. ‘Late last night, the UN requested Superman to take a break, as it was brought to their attention that he had been working non-stop for over seventy-two hours. Superman acknowledged the request and agreed a few hours of sleep would be beneficial to him. He left late last night and returned early this morning to continue providing assistance to the region. The President of Indonesia, Jusuf Sukarto, has already expressed his gratitude to Superman and all the aid workers and plans on visiting the hospital in the hardest hit district later today.’

Since the flooding started in Indonesia, she hadn’t gotten a chance to really talk to Clark, but he had briefly stopped by her place after taking a nap. Although he seemed well rested to her, he didn’t seem to be his usual self. Granted, she couldn’t imagine how she would be feeling in his place. Spending hours upon hours surrounded by destruction while retrieving those beyond saving was hard for her to even contemplate.

How did he cope with it all?

There had been a few instances where she had wondered how he dealt with rescues that didn't end well, but those had been fleeting and hadn't been coupled with the cold reality of a line of covered bodies being displayed on international news.

Did the years he had spent overseeing search and rescue missions provide him with the skills to handle and accept the inevitable loss of human life in natural as well as unnatural disasters? It was clear his time as a military officer had given him knowledge of how best to conduct himself amongst emergency personnel and how to better help in rescues, but how far did that experience go?

Did he talk with his parents? To General Newcomb? To people at the Foundation? It was clear he had someone looking out for him because someone contacted the UN and pointed out how long he had been working, non-stop. That was a little reassuring at least. But how much help did he truly have? How much did he need?

Well, whenever this tragedy no longer needed his attention, she would definitely be asking him a few questions.

"Everyone, I have an announcement to make!" Perry declared, getting the entire bullpen's attention. "Finalists in this year's Pulitzer Prize for Journalism have been selected and one of our own has been requested to attend the award ceremony." He waved his arm and motioned for Lois to stand up. "For the series of articles now collectively known as 'The Fall of Luthor'. Good job, Lois," he praised.

Everyone around broke into cheers and applause. She beamed.

She couldn't wait to tell Clark.

Kal looked across the muddied landscape and was relieved his part was done. The rest of the cleanup and recovery operation would be conducted by the local government, aided by Indonesia's federal government and the UN.

As for him, he was mentally and emotionally spent, and while the brief nap and sun soak he had had the previous day had helped, he was looking forward to calling it a night and sleeping the weekend away.

He took a deep breath as he flew high up into the atmosphere. He wanted to get as much sun as possible before heading to Metropolis, which meant he would be going the long way around the world, chasing the sun.

This disaster had been one of the rougher ones he had helped with. In all his years of conducting search and rescue, few had involved as many fatalities. But this one was worse because he had been forced to make a choice.

The amount of rain had made the mountainsides

unstable. Whole swathes of land were under threat of mudslides and when he heard the rumbling he knew he had no time.

Two mountainsides gave way at once, and he only had time to make it to one. He chose the one overlooking a village mostly spared by the worst of the floodwaters. A few buildings were already being converted into triage centers and the school there was taking in those who had lost their homes.

He blew on the layer of drenched earth and rock, freezing it instantly before shoving it aside as one massive chunk of frosty creation — trees, roots, mud and stone. Unfortunately, by the time he was able to ensure it could do no harm, the other landslide had completely wiped away a road. And three hundred human beings who were guiding their livestock to higher ground.

He knew it wasn't his fault and that he had done the best he could. Heck, he knew that he had even made the best decision. The village had over a thousand people taking refuge there at the time of the collapse, but that knowledge didn't stop the agony he felt when removing the dead from muddy graves.

Even with all of his powers, he couldn't save everyone.

He flew over Russia and allowed himself to dip back under cloud altitude as he opened his ears to radio chatter.

It was soothing to hear normal, everyday life communications, whether or not it was in English. It provided a nice grounding, proof that the world was still spinning even when he felt it wasn't.

Making his way across Europe, he continued to leisurely fly far above the cities and fields, farms and roads. He was as close to dozing while flying as he could be when his ears suddenly picked up a jarring declaration.

'¡Mantengan a todos atrás! ¡Podría disparar la bomba!' ('Keep everyone back! He might trigger the bomb!')

He immediately changed course, opening up his senses and zeroing in on the location of the alarming call.

Puerto del Esperanza, Spain. A small town in northern Spain within the province of Navarre.

The sounds of a violent commotion made it to him as he approached the town. A split second later, the sounds of several people desperately clamoring out of a building followed, instilling a new sense of urgency within him.

Something important had just happened.

His super senses went into overdrive as his speed allowed him to enter the town and cut across roads and around buildings in just a few blinks, but once again, all his power amounted to nothing when he heard the blast.

Everything around him seemed to be moving in slow motion, but he still felt he wasn't moving fast enough.

He was above a street entering a courtyard, and a building ahead and to the left was in the midst of enduring

an explosion from within. The immediate area was clear of people and driven vehicles, except for a group of seven individuals who had just recently made it out of the doomed structure.

Several paces apart from one another, four men, two women and one teenager were running full tilt toward police who were on the other side of the plaza, which was off to the side behind him.

He knew it was too late to smother the bomb and he couldn't blow the blast away. The people he was trying to save were partially between him and the explosion, and even if they weren't, he didn't know how stable the building was itself. The last thing he wanted to do was make a bad situation worse. So there was only one thing he could attempt: reach the fleeing people and get them out of harm's way directly.

The shattered glass and shards of wood and metal from the building continued through the air as the blast wave picked up chairs and overturned the patio tables nearby. The concussive force alone was potentially fatal, but coupled with the coming debris . . . he needed to get to them!

He made it to the woman leading the group as he was faced with the gut-wrenching truth that he would not be able to save the people right in front of him. Even though they were running in his general direction, he wouldn't be able to shield them before the blast reached them and he would likely witness their last moments alive.

He was so close, still moving toward them while holding the woman to his side, but he wouldn't make it to them in time. He had literally been a second too slow.

He reached out, wishing what was coming were not so, even as he saw the ripple of the shockwave approaching — its edge less than an inch from the last two in the group.

He felt anguish clench his soul as time all but froze.

The men were in mid-stride, one helping a woman keep her footing while another was pulling the teenaged boy on, expressions of horror on their faces.

And then something tore at his core.

His vision flashed white as agony ripped through his chest unrelentingly and with no warning. He stopped moving forward, his other arm still around the woman he had managed to reach as a pull at what he could only assume was his center abruptly yanked like a cable attached to one of his father's tractors.

His whole being snapped painfully taut as he felt the blast wave pass over them all and saw the debris pelt those he had been desperately trying to save.

The world returned to its normal speed before the blast was fully spent. But he was barely aware of the world because there was something completely and terribly *wrong*. Wrong with *him*.

[Puerto del Esperanza, Spain - 6:14pm (1:14 pm in Metropolis)]

Barging in with a big box and shouting out nonsense, a clearly disturbed man threatened to blow them all up if anyone moved. Carlohita wasn't sure why the crazed man had targeted her business, but at this point she didn't care, and neither did her best friend, Jose. After failing to talk the man down and after the negotiator's efforts failed, Jose threw caution to the wind and jumped him, knocking what had to be the trigger out of his hand! Jose urged everyone to run as a fight ensued.

She wasn't sure what was happening behind her, but she led her family and customers out and urged them to get behind the square's water fountain for cover.

She wasn't sure if they'd make it, but they had to try. It was twenty meters away and she could see police gathered just on the other side. Barricades had been haphazardly placed in a rushed attempt to keep people away, but it seemed like word had spread well enough and done most of the work as she realized they were the only people near the building.

Maybe they would make it out of this. Maybe Jose was tying that lunatic up right now and all would be well. Huffing and puffing, as she ignored the dull ache in her knee, she prayed they would be laughing about this nightmare by next weekend. That's how things like this went if it ended well, right?

But then all her thoughts of hope vanished as she heard the bomb go off.

She felt heat behind her, but oddly it was the view in front of her that had somehow taken her attention.

A red and blue blur was suddenly upon her just before vertigo encompassed her whole frame. She was whipped around, feeling what could only be an arm around her as a sensation she would never fully be able to describe surged across her skin as all movement stopped so suddenly it was almost painful.

But that was the least jarring part.

The blast wave rushed over them, and she could only stare in bewilderment at what her eyes were witnessing.

Glass and shards of wood, mixed with bits of metal, were flying through the air. She couldn't make out the pieces individually during their flight but the moment they struck the people in front of her . . .

The shards of glass shattered against their skin, falling away from undamaged faces, shoulders and arms. Wood pelted off their backs as if thrown against metal and the metal bounced off as if it was rubber.

What?

Her eyes fell on Jose who was the furthest from her and had been closest to the blast. He stumbled forward a few

steps before stopping, looking just as astonished as she felt.

He turned around to look at the ruined shop, exposing his bare back to her and the others. The blast had torn and burned away most of his clothes but his skin was unmarked, just as they all were, despite it being impossible!

She blinked, too stunned to even gasp, but before she could attempt to comprehend what had just happened, she was pulled down to her knees by a weight draped around her back.

She looked down, suddenly remembering that someone had grabbed her before the wave had hit them, but like most of her day, nothing could have prepared her for what, or rather who, she found.

“Superman!?” she shouted. “¡Madre de Dios!”

This god among men had collapsed onto his side and was laying right beside her! His arm that had been around her was now off, but his hand was grasping the bottom hem of her blouse. She didn’t think this was a conscious choice, as he seemed to be gasping for breath while in unquestionable pain, but he did let go as soon as she touched his shoulder.

She was glad she was already on her knees as her hands ran over Superman’s body, instinctively trying to find where he was hurt. Heavens above, what was she doing?! But she had to do something! The man, alien, Krypto-whatever, had just saved their lives — **somehow!** She had to try to help him!

“<Superman, what’s wrong? What do we do?>“ she asked, putting her hand back on his blue covered shoulder.

He briefly opened his eyes but quickly closed them tightly again.

“<My aura — >“ he bit out, surprising her with his fluency. He sounded like a native speaker! “< — I think I . . . — please, get Klein.>“

He trembled and appeared to be trying not to move for some reason. What was wrong with him?! This was definitely not normal! She had never seen him less than super on television, even after Nightfall!

“<Carlohita!>“ Jose was suddenly right across from her and on Superman’s other side as she looked up. “<What happened?! What’s wrong with him?!>“ he asked.

“<I don’t know!>“ she cried.

“<Is he why — why we didn’t — are you — ?>“ Jose rambled, shaking from adrenaline.

“<He said ‘my aura’ and asked us to get ‘Klein’. Do you know who that is?>“ she asked as Superman continued to remain motionless between them, though his breathing was strained.

“<Stay back, stay back!>“

There was a commotion somewhere on the other side

of the water fountain, but her attention remained on the now wheezing Kryptonian. He was actually wheezing!

“<I think that’s his doctor at his Foundation,>“ Jose said before standing up. “<Hey! Ricardo! Get your truck over here!>“ He looked back down at her. “<We’ll take him to the hospital,>“ he declared as a police officer ran up to them.

Carlohita looked back down at Superman, trusting Jose to handle whatever he needed to do to make it happen. She took Superman’s hand encouragingly and placed her other hand on his forehead.

It was a brisk Fall evening and she idly wondered if Superman could get cold while noting the warmth of his hand and forehead.

“<Hold on, Superman. We’re going to take you to the hospital, and we’ll call your doctor from there,>“ she promised.

He gently squeezed her hand in thanks as the remaining sunlight became blocked by the buildings to their right and the orange and pink glow of the sunset peaked over the rooftops.

“<Place the blanket there,>“ a voice said. “<We’ll lift him with that.>“

Superman moaned as people she didn’t know crowded near. The square was now swarming with activity and she could hear Jose and other men shouting out orders.

“<Clear the way! Clear it! The truck is backing up!>“

“<Police will escort! We’re not waiting for an ambulance!>“

“<Carlohita, can he turn onto the blanket? We want to lift him onto the bed of the truck,>“ Jose said.

Fortunately, Superman must have heard because he slowly eased onto his back and onto the awaiting blanket. Someone near his feet boldly helped move his legs before a dozen hands appeared, some hesitantly, grasping the edges of the makeshift stretcher as Jose helped Carlohita to her feet.

Superman squinted up at them and Carlohita wondered what he must be thinking, laying there as total strangers gathered around him. But then, she supposed at the moment he was beyond such thoughts. His right hand was pressed against the center of his ‘S’ covered chest, while the other was twisting up the edge of his cape, as if trying to distract himself so he wouldn’t cry out in pain.

“<On three. One-two-three!>“

The group successfully got him into the back of the truck with two police officers joining him. She couldn’t see Ricardo but was certain he was in the driver’s seat as her family rushed over to her and Jose, thankful to see that she was okay while bewildered and awed by Superman’s presence.

“<Alright, go, go, go!>“ an officer shouted after Jose

had closed the tailgate.

She prayed Superman would be okay, suddenly wondering if she could have done more.

[Puerto del Esperanza, Spain - 6:21pm (1:21 pm in Metropolis)]

“<Alright, go, go, go!>“

He felt hands keep him stable as the truck left the plaza and picked up speed. He could faintly hear the sound of a police siren up ahead, but he was far too distracted to spare it any thought.

He just tried not to move and focused on breathing. This couldn't last much longer, could it?

The hurt was so deep and penetrating he wasn't even sure what part of him was what anymore. It felt similar to when he had been hurt by the sound weapon, but this was multiplied by a thousand at least. He felt as if he was on an ocean, barely keeping his head above water as the waves tossed him about, but the water was more than something that battered him, it was fire and acid.

Something shifted as a tide of nausea swept over him. He groaned, closing his eyes until it passed. Thankfully, it took a thread of agony away with it.

“<Superman, what do you need? Do you know what's wrong?>“ one of them asked, leaning in close.

Kal risked turning his head, finding a young police officer right over him, a starry night sky beyond him.

“<My doctor,>“ he said, the pain easing slightly as they made it to an outstretch of road that was quieter. “<Dr. Klein. I think . . . I think I hurt my aura. I think I . . . felt it . . . tear.>“

How could he explain what had happened when he didn't know it himself? He just wanted the pain to stop.

“<Your aura?>“ the young man asked, bewildered but interested as much as he was concerned.

“<It is normally close . . . close to my skin. Anything in it is . . .>“ His eyes widened.

That couldn't be possible, could it?

But how else could those people have avoided harm?

He had shielded those people.

Somehow, he had extended his aura out and covered them.

. . . And injured himself in the process.

“<Superman?>“

“<I covered them. Somehow,>“ he said as they turned onto another road, this one noisier.

He closed his eyes, feeling a churning of sensation that threatened overstimulation, but it was both nowhere and everywhere, neither painful nor pleasant, just raw and intense. He didn't know what it was.

“<Covered them?>“ the officer inquired.

“<The people, from the blast,>“ he explained, trying to

push aside everything and focus on the man before him.

“<And doing so hurt your aura?>“ he asked.

Kal gave a hum in agreement, though it morphed into a moan in the end.

“<Can we do anything?>“ the officer asked.

Kal couldn't answer as a wave of shearing pain wrenched through him with little warning, tugging hard at his right for a long moment until easing to the throb it had been before. He sagged, panting. He felt as if he had flown around the world, nonstop, for an entire day.

“<Superman! What happened?!>“

“<How far are we from the hospital?! He needs help now!>“

“<We're almost there, just up the road!>“

“<They know we're coming, right?>“

“<The unit leading called ahead.>“

“<Superman, move your hand if you can hear us,>“ the officer beside him said.

He did so but didn't want to. Moving anything at all just took too much focus.

“<We're here! We're here! Superman, just hold on!>“ a man near his feet said as they came to a hurried stop.

The men clamored around him as near and far shouting with hurried movement whirled around him. He felt them lift and move him, setting him onto a soft surface that then began to move.

He felt like a sinking boat in the middle of a flaming cyclone.

There had to be a way to stop this!

He had had to focus on his body to master all of his abilities; maybe doing so again here would help? Just laying in agony was driving him mad, and the pain was only getting worse.

He was dimly aware of moving down a hall and he forced himself to open his eyes.

“<The Admin is calling his Foundation,>“ someone said. “<We've done our best to move the other patients, so the second bay is clear for him.>“

“<Very good. Get Dr. Ramirez,>“ a woman right beside him said, helping to guide the gurney he was on. “<Superman, I'm Dr. Alcon. I understand you believe you injured your aura? Has anything like this ever happened before?>“

“<Yes, last year or so. From a, uh, sound weapon, but it wasn't this bad,>“ he said, straining to keep his attention on her.

She was middle-aged and fairly 'quaint', but the detail that most people took note of was an odd blemish by her neck that was partially obscured by the collar of her medical uniform.

Kal was too distracted to notice. He was laying flat on his back, and they turned into an area off the hall with a lot

of equipment around. Someone pulled at the curtains and another person began removing his boots.

"<We need to remove your uniform, okay?>" a nurse gently informed him.

"<Here,>" he said, moving but struggling to turn fully. "<Zipper. Scissors won't work,>" he stated.

He was resigned to the reality of what was happening, but wanted to keep as much control as possible, however minimal.

He couldn't afford to waste energy resisting or allowing his fears to surface.

Another nurse helped the first to begin removing his suit, and, as he tried his best to assist, that odd churning sensation rose up again.

And then he felt as if he was capsizing in slow motion.

"<Do you know what caused it this time?>" Dr. Alcon asked, staying on track as she indicated something to the nurse beside her. The top of his uniform was now off and someone was placing something on his finger.

"<Me, I think,>" he gasped, before Dr. Alcon smoothly placed an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth as someone else placed stickers on his bare chest.

"<Sum'pin's happen'in.>"

"<Just breathe as normally as you can,>" she directed, glancing at the monitor that was now showing his heart rate and oxygen level.

He suddenly knew what was coming. He felt thin, stretched like a band about to break. He gripped the metal railings on either side of himself as an excruciating force, even more unrelenting than the one he had experienced in the truck, overtook all of his awareness.

He felt torn asunder.

[Chapter 7: Aura]

[Puerto del Esperanza, Spain - 6:29 pm (1:29 pm in Metropolis)]

Dr. Margaretta Alcon became a doctor decades after surviving a traumatic accident as a child. Being a curious child, she had ventured into the kitchen one evening and bumped a pan of hot oil, causing it to fall off the stove and onto her. The resulting burns had covered over half of her torso and most of her right arm and part of her hand. It had been unquestionably the most painful experience of her life and the months that followed had exposed her to the world of medicine. But more importantly it had instilled a hope to become like those who had helped save her life. A hope she made a reality twenty years later.

And now she was in a position to potentially help the one many considered to be the world's most powerful beacon of hope.

"<Do you know what caused it this time?>" she asked Superman.

He was breathing heavily as she mentally went over everything she knew about him. Like most of the world, she had been enamored by the proof of alien life and had eagerly absorbed any and all facts that came out about 'Lord Kal-El', as well as theories. Nightfall only compounded her curiosity and so she knew what his heart rate and temperature should be thanks to that.

"<Me, I think,>" he gasped as she and the other doctors and nurses worked.

She did not like what she was seeing and motioned to Nurse Francis to hook up the oxygen. She didn't bother to ask for permission as she placed the oxygen mask on his face a blink later. He needed it.

Heavens, he actually needed it.

"<Sum'pin's happen'in,>" he mumbled.

"<Just breathe as normally as you can,>" she directed, glancing at the monitor that was now showing his vitals. Or rather, they were supposed to.

His heart rate and blood pressure were so high the readings were pegged to the machine's maximum read outs. She had never seen or heard of anyone maxing out a machine. If he were human, he would soon be dead two times over.

His hands suddenly moved, grasping the guard rails before she could even think.

And then it was chaos.

The bars bent and instantly smashed in his hands as if they were made of buttered sand instead of stainless steel. The metallic crunching sound echoed in her ears before an odd buzzing sensation pulsed in the air as Superman arched his back on the gurney with a cry.

And then a tingling energy surged through her, lingering on her scars and areas of her skin where she hadn't felt anything pleasant since she was a child. Superman fell quiet, falling limp and dropping the chunks of crumpled steel in his hands onto the floor. She looked down at her hand and could only stare as she witnessed the white, wrinkled scars smooth out and flush pink before fading to her natural olive complexion.

"<Doctor!>"

She looked up at Nurse Francis who was breathing deeply in awe.

"<I can breathe!>" she whispered, astonished.

Francis was in the second stage of COPD, and, although she rarely commented on it, Margaretta knew it was something she had to contend with every day.

"<And you! Your scars!>" Francis gasped, pointing.

She looked around at their colleagues who all appeared to be in some variation of shock and astonishment.

Margaretta snapped herself out of her stupor, quickly shifting her attention back to her patient, even as a million questions swirled in her mind.

His blood pressure had plummeted. 64/42 mmHg.

It was no wonder he had lost consciousness, but the blue of his lips was what really startled her.

She touched his wrists, wanting to check his circulation, and instantly found the probable reason for his discolored lips. He was ice cold!

Dr. Alcon lowered her face over Superman's and felt a puff of breath. "<Superman, if you can hear us, I think whatever happened has caused some of your power to extend out from you. If you can, just focus on keeping your breathing level.>"

He didn't respond and she was doubtful he even heard her, but she felt it was good practice to always communicate with her patients.

"<Francis, take his temperature. Alfonso, don't let anyone else not already here come in this area. Tell security, and move whatever perimeter there already is further out. If my guess is right, this aura of his healed us and it drained energy from him to do so. I doubt he can afford to do so again. Also, someone, check on the room above us and move any patients there away. Considering what we felt in here, I wouldn't be surprised if it went beyond the walls and floor. Please check,>" she stated swiftly as Alfonso and another darted out of the room.

"<I think he's gone into shock,>" Margaretta continued. "<Elevate his legs,>" she directed.

"<Cardiogenic shock?>" Nurse Francis asked as the other nurses placed a few pillows under his feet, elevating them about 10 inches.

"<No. He had good color initially, otherwise I'd think that. No, this is closer to Neurogenic. Granted, I can only assume that, but I'd wager his aura is more in link with his nervous system than anything else,>" Margaretta said, placing her hands on either side of his ribcage to feel his breathing. "<Someone, try to start an IV,>" she added.

Someone quickly retrieved a needle and began prepping his arm.

"<33.9 degrees Celsius,>" Francis said, astonished as she pulled the thermometer from his ear. "<His normal is just shy of 38, right?>"

"<Yes,>" Alcon said, frowning as she quickly went over their options.

"<I can't start an IV,>" another nurse said, lifting up the bent needle.

Margaretta sighed. "<Is everyone alright? Other than Francis and myself, is anyone . . . ?> She didn't know how to word what had happened.

"<I think my bad knee is better,>" Francis' best friend said.

"<My head. It feels lighter somehow,>" another person said.

"<My scars are gone,>" said another, before several

others commented on similar improvements.

"<Someone, start cataloging everyone's changes,>" Margaretta said. "<Mary, get heat pads and begin applying them to him. I'm going to — >"

She cut herself off when the phone on the wall rang and Alfonso hurried in.

"<Doctor, that call is for you,>" he said, out of breath.

[Metropolis - 1:38 pm (6:38 in Puerto del Esperanza, Spain)]

Dr. Klein looked up from his work when Julie Heinz entered the lab with barely a knock, which was not normal at all.

"Bernie, Mav is on the line with the US Embassy. They just learned Kal collapsed in Spain. They're getting us connected to the hospital he was taken to. The doctors there are going to want to talk to you," Julie said without preamble.

Klein immediately shut down the test he was conducting on the crystals. Fortunately, there was nothing critical that needed his attention and the kryptonite sample he had been looking at the day before was secure.

"What happened?!" he asked worriedly as he put away the critical equipment.

"I don't know. I came to get you while Mav remained on the phone. Soon after Kal collapsed, he told them his aura was damaged and to call you. That's all I know," she said before he followed her out.

Klein was struck by how calm she sounded, but he knew by her posture that she was just as concerned as he was.

They entered Mav's office and Mav quickly waved him over.

"They're getting the attending physician," Mav stated, covering the phone's receiver.

"What happened?" Klein asked.

"A disturbed individual detonated a bomb in a small shop and Kal arrived just as it went off. People were running away from the building when the blast happened, and, after it was over, Kal was on the ground. From what they're getting from witnesses, the people escaped without injury, even though they were beyond Kal's reach. Authorities are certain now that the 'aura' Kal mentioned is why," Mav roughly summarized.

"Did they say anything else?" Klein asked.

"He's in obvious pain. They hav — " Mav began, only to shift his attention to the person who was now speaking on the other end of the phone. "Yes — yes, I have him here. Thank you," Mav said before holding the phone out to Dr. Klein.

"This is Dr. Klein," he said, quickly taking the phone and ignoring his pounding heart as he hurried to Mav's

desk and grabbed a pad and a pen.

“Dr. Klein, I’m Dr. Margareta Alcon, the doctor on call,” she introduced in heavily accented English.

“Superman was alert but had labored breathing when he arrived. A few minutes ago he had what looked like a seizure. Afterwards, he developed severe hypotension and bradycardia. I believe he’s gone into neurogenic shock.”

“Lord in heaven,” Klein breathed.

“We tried to treat him for it, but his skin is still invulnerable and we can’t get an IV running. He’s in shock, so he needs treatment right now. If he was human, I’d give him large amounts of fluids and noradrenaline, but I don’t know if that would help him.”

“Do you have any full spectrum lamps? If not, getting him under powerful examination lights should help. He absorbs yellow light,” Klein proposed.

“We don’t have full spectrum lamps, but we could move him to the operating room. Those lamps are the strongest we have,” she said. “Is there anything else that we can do?”

“Could we administer fluids orally?” Klein asked.

“He’s unconscious, but we could use a nasal tube.”

“That should help,” Klein said.

“Alright, we’ll get fluids started.”

He heard her turn away from the phone and swiftly speak to her team before getting back on the line with him.

“We’re inserting a nasogastric tube. Should we stick with basic fluids and nutrition or do you think medication will help?”

“His metabolism is very high so I don’t know how much medication you would need to give to have it be effective — and that’s assuming it would work the same way as in a human. What else can we do to counter the shock?” he asked.

“We could try to trigger his own body’s stress hormones. I’m not sure how we can do that considering he’s Superman though.”

“Well, I hate to propose it, but I can only think of two options. Use a defibrillator on him or lithotripsy,” Klein suggested.

“Extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy? Hm, we might be able to target his adrenal gland, assuming you know where it is,” she said. “I’ll admit I would prefer trying that before the defibrillator.”

“I believe his organs are placed very similarly to where ours are,” Klein said confidently.

“Okay, we’re about ready to move him,” she said after a moment.

“What are his vitals? Can you tell me more of what happened before and after the seizure?” Klein asked.

“He was transferred to us about twenty minutes ago after collapsing about fifteen minutes prior. Before the

seizure, all he could tell us was that his condition was linked to his aura and that his aura felt torn. He told me it had been injured before in the past but not to this degree. When I first saw him, his blood pressure and heart rate were beyond what the machines could read. About ten minutes after my initial assessment, he became agitated and experienced what I’m calling a seizure. His body released a wave of energy during the . . . seizure, and it healed old injuries of myself and my team. He fell unconscious right after and his heart rate and blood pressure plummeted to 38 beats per minute and 64 over 42, which is about where they’re still at. His temperature is 33.9 degrees Celsius and we have begun placing heat pads and a warm air blanket on him. We had started him on oxygen soon after he arrived because he was dyspnoeic, so he’s still on that. Do you need me to repeat anything before I go on?” she asked.

“No, I got it,” Klein said, jotting down Kal’s vitals while hearing movement on her end. “Please continue.”

“We elevated his legs because his symptoms are reminiscent of neurogenic shock. Would it be a fair guess that his ‘aura’ is tightly linked to his nervous system?”

“Yes, I believe it is. When his aura had been damaged before, it affected his balance, mental focus, and invulnerability. You see, normally his invulnerability extends out to anything within a few millimeters of his skin. It’s why his uniform isn’t ruined from bullets or fires,” Klein explained. “When he had damaged his aura before, one side of him didn’t have it extending from his skin at all, while the other side had it to about 2 inches.”

“Well, we haven’t exactly tested it, but considering what we were told about what had happened at the scene of his collapse, and then what happened here, I think it’s fair to say his aura is extending severely beyond where it should. I had asked him if he knew what had hurt his aura and he answered: ‘Me, I think.’”

“I see,” Klein breathed, trying to determine what else they could do.

“He’s unresponsive to outside stimuli. Granted, should we expect him to respond?” she asked.

“His sense of touch is just like all of his other senses, he just can’t be easily hurt, so technically he should be more responsive,” Klein answered. “Could you tell me more about the energy he released?” Klein asked.

“He felt something was happening to him and tried to warn us. Then he arched his back and released the energy. It was invisible, but we all felt it. It went through and into me. I felt it shift to my scars and I felt my skin tingle from it. And then I watched my old burn-scars brighten to pink and then fade to unmarked skin. It all happened in just a few seconds,” she explained.

“And it happened to all of you in the room?” he asked,

marveled by this unexpected reaction.

“Yes. One of my nurses, who has COPD, immediately stated she could breathe better. I also just recently learned a patient who was in the room directly above us healed from their open heart surgery in seconds. They don’t even have a scar. Suffice it to say, we have barred any new individuals from coming anywhere near him,” she said.

“I completely agree with that decision,” Klein stated.

Klein heard her speak to someone on her end again.

“Okay, I’ll be back with you in a moment. We’re moving him to the O.R. now.”

“Very good. Thank you, doctor,” Klein said.

He heard the line beep before someone else picked up.

“Hello, this is Dr. Ramirez, Head Cardiologist. Could you tell me Superman’s normal vitals and anything else about his heart and aura, Dr. Klein?” the voice asked. “I’ll be assisting Dr. Alcon.”

“Of course,” Klein said, before telling him everything he felt might help.

He wished he knew more.

After studying Kal-El’s physiology for over two years, Klein knew he would need another decade to really be an expert of Kryptonian biology. There was just so much they didn’t know. Even with the knowledge Kal’s family had left with him, they didn’t have any real understanding of how his body actually worked, let alone how they could address specific injuries other than sunlight and rest.

So after hanging up the phone, Klein did something he hadn’t done since he was a child. He prayed.

[Metropolis - 2:44 pm (7:44 pm in Spain)]

Lois smirked as Lucy tried not to choke on her drink.

“Y-you’re serious?!” Lucy asked, coughing. “You’re really serious?”

Lois nodded. They were in the local pub, catching up during a late lunch.

“And you’ve been dating for months?! Why haven’t you told me?” Lucy asked, appalled.

“I wanted to tell you in person, and you’ve been busy,” Lois said simply, still amused.

“Not that busy! Lois, you have never been this serious about a guy before! I’ve never been as serious as you clearly are about someone! And he seems to be serious back! So, do you think he’ll ask you soon? When do you think he’ll ask you?” she asked, already shifting gears.

“We’ve agreed to take things slow, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he asks by the new year,” Lois admitted with not a little glee.

Lucy all but squealed. “I can’t wait for you to tell mother!”

Lois cringed. “I can,” she stated flatly, suddenly realizing she’d need to tell their father as well at some

point. That, fortunately, wouldn’t be as agonizing as telling mother though.

“Oh, come on, can you imagine the look on her face?! I don’t think she ever imagined you even contemplating marriage; she might faint!” Lucy said, laughing.

Lois was torn with agreeing that that aspect would be enjoyable, but she knew she wouldn’t enjoy what would surely follow.

She moved to respond, but suddenly the television screen to their left caught their attention. In fact, it had captured the attention of every individual in the bar, as well as people on the street outside.

“We interrupt your regularly scheduled program to bring you this breaking news,” the television said, flashing a bar of colors before shifting to a newsroom with a lone news anchor.

“MNN, Al Bradley, reporting. Less than an hour ago, Superman collapsed in Puerto del Esperanza, Spain - a small town in northern Spain within the province of Navarre. Reports say that just after an explosion took place in a shop, Superman appeared in the town square before abruptly falling to the ground. We have received a clip from the local news agency showing this. We will play it for you now,” the man said grimly before the scene went black for a moment.

Lois didn’t breathe as a view of a courtyard filled the screen. There was a water fountain to the right, but her eyes were on seven people currently running away from a building as quickly as they could.

And then the building exploded!

However, as shocking as that was, her brain seized up when the tragedy she expected to see did not happen.

The people who should have been blown off their feet from the blast were still standing! They didn’t even appear to be hurt at all! Which was very odd because their clothing, especially those of the men closest to the blast, were now in shambles.

She was relieved for them but couldn’t understand what had just happened, and then a jolt of something she would later liken to a lightning bolt snatched her astonishment away and blasted it into fear. She noticed a red caped form standing beside the woman at the edge of view who had been leading the charge out of the now obliterated structure.

Kal.

And then, just as the news anchor had said, Superman suddenly collapsed, tipping forward and pulling the woman down to her knees beside him.

“Kal-El!”

Fortunately, Lois was not the only one who had shouted out, and her voice was swallowed up by dozens of gasps of disbelief and cries of concern and fear.

The scene continued, with people at the scene snapping out of their shock. Soon after, Superman's form was out of sight, beyond a mass of people. There was yelling and waving, and then an old truck backed into the area with police dotting the swarm.

"¡Despejar el camino! ¡Limpiar lo! ¡El camión está retrocediendo!"

"¡La policía lo escoltará! ¡No podemos esperar por una ambulancia!"

There were more yelled orders, urgency clear in their tone. A group of men surged forward, under the direction of a man whose shirt was in tatters. It took Lois a moment to realize he was the man who had been closest to the blast. The camera was jostled as the man urged everyone back. Fortunately, people obeyed, giving the group of men space to gather around the fallen hero as the woman was helped up.

The cameraman would likely be highly praised for providing the coverage they were seeing, as it was clear he was holding the camera above his head to capture the scene.

"¡A las tres! ¡Uno dos tres!"

Lois covered her mouth as the ragtag group of men hoisted Superman up and gently maneuvered him into the back of the truck, using what she could only assume was a blanket. His bright uniform was a stark contrast to the light blues and browns worn by most of the people around him, but her eyes were on his face.

Superman was squinting up into the darkening sky in blatant pain. He was breathing heavily, as if he couldn't catch his breath, and sweat was dotting his brow. Four people remained in the back of the truck with him while the rest piled out, carefully moving around Superman's trembling form.

"¡Muy bien, ve, ve, ve!" someone shouted as the truck's tailgate was slammed closed.

The truck sped away.

What had happened? What could hurt Superman? Was it from helping for so long in Indonesia? But if that's the case, how were the people spared from the explosion?

The news station replayed the scene one more time, and Lois took notice of the fact that many of the people who fled from the building had actually been struck with notable debris. She saw fragments bounce off of their forms, but they hadn't been hurt!

What?

The scene shifted back to Al Bradley.

"At this time, we don't have any further information, only that Superman has been taken to San Juan De Dios Hospital, the nearest hospital."

Lois grabbed her purse before dropping some cash on the center of the table.

"Lucy, I'm sorry. I've got to go!" she said before dashing out of the restaurant.

Her sister watched in astonishment and shook her head. "I wonder, how Clark is going to live with her always running off to cover a story?"

[Chapter 8: Essence]

[Metropolis - 4:56 pm (9:56 pm in Spain)]

Lois wrung her hands.

She had just gotten off the phone with Mav and was already dialing the Kents' phone number.

"Hello?" Martha answered.

"Hi, it's Lois," she greeted.

"Oh!" Martha said, and Lois could tell she immediately turned her head as she yelled the next words. "Jonathan! Jonathan! Lois is on the phone!"

She didn't have to wait long for them both to be on the line.

She glanced at the clock. Dr. Klein should be arriving in Spain soon because, according to Mav, the supersonic jet had taken off just after 2 pm and they suspected a three and a half hour flight time due to weather conditions.

"Lois?" Jonathan asked.

"I got through to the Foundation and spoke with Mav. Dr. Klein should be in Spain in about half an hour or so. A helicopter will take him directly from the airport to Kal. The hospital has a helicopter pad," Lois shared immediately. "Kal seems stable now, since they got in some sunlamps from Germany around 3 our time, but he's still unconscious."

"Sunlamps?" Martha asked.

The Foundation had given a statement soon after the news report of Superman's collapse, briefly disclosing that a 'medical team dispatched by the Foundation' was on their way to Europe, but they hadn't said much about Superman's condition. They promised they would update the world when they had more information and thanked Spain, San Juan De Dios Hospital, the United Nations, the US Embassy, and the US Airforce for all of their efforts to help Superman.

Their statement was quickly followed by statements from the United Nations and the United States, along with many other countries, including Spain, wishing Superman a speedy recovery.

"The hospital spoke with Dr. Klein over the phone and he told them the lamps would help him. As for what happened, like the recent reports are saying, it involves his aura. Mav said they believe Kal tore it in his effort to protect those people fleeing the blast. I'm sorry I don't know more but I wanted to let you know I had gotten through to the Foundation," Lois said.

"Thank you, Lois. I'm glad he's under lamps now.

That will certainly help,” Martha said, her voice becoming a little more calm.

“Will you be heading there?” Jonathan asked.

Lois grit her teeth, immensely frustrated. “No. I’ve been tasked by Perry to cover things at the Foundation directly. The Planet’s European division is already outside of the hospital in Spain. Also, it would take me at least eight hours to get over there because it’s unlikely I would get a seat on a Concorde, and we don’t know what they’ll do. I know some people are already wondering if they’re going to move him back to Metropolis. I know that’s what Mav would prefer, so as much as I want to get over to Spain, I’d hate to miss him if they decide to bring him here.”

“Good point. Thank you for updating us. We’ve been . . . worried,” Jonathan said gruffly.

“I just wish we could do more. Mav said he’ll call me if anything changes. I think he suspects I know how to contact, well, you,” she admitted.

“Mav’s pretty smart, otherwise he wouldn’t have been chosen,” Martha said, trying to sound lighter than she felt.

“True,” Lois agreed. “I’ll call you if I learn anything new,” she promised.

“Thank you, honey,” Martha said.

[Puerto del Esperanza, Spain - 10:16 pm (5:16 pm in Metropolis)]

Nurse Francis glanced through the windows at the guards standing out in the hall. She was watching over Superman because they wanted someone present if anything happened. He still hadn’t woken up, and although he had improved enough to avoid the more unorthodox treatment ideas discussed before, Francis knew she wasn’t the only one who was worried.

She shifted in her seat behind the three full-spectrum lamps that were on the right side of the bed. They were all directed at Superman’s form. He had a sheet across his waist and upper thighs, but all the rest of him was fully exposed to the lights that made the room slightly warmer than the rest of the hospital. Germany had sent the special lamps posthaste upon learning they could help Superman recover. There were a few other machines against the wall, displaying his vitals, and an IV pole with some fluids and medications hanging from it that Dr. Alcon and Dr. Klein felt would be beneficial to him. However, he didn’t have an intravenous line in, as his skin remained invulnerable, but a nasogastric tube in his nose. He also had an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth.

She could hardly believe the sight, but there he was, more or less like any other critical patient.

His heart rate and blood pressure had risen, but they were still low. Fortunately, his temperature had notably

improved, up from 33.9 and bobbing between 35 to 36 degrees Celsius (or 95-96.8 degrees Fahrenheit). He was now borderline hypothermic, instead of the definite moderate hypothermic he had been before. His lips were pink again, which was far better than the vibrant blue a few hours earlier.

Francis went still for a moment, feeling a brush of what they had concluded was part of his aura extending from his body like a stray ribbon rippling in the breeze.

There was definite power there, she had no doubt about that, but what she was most gripped by was the very **presence** that it seemed to exude. If she didn’t already believe in the existence of souls, she would now be convinced.

The strip of essence fell away, and she imagined a thin banner of cloth shifting across the room. But this was invisible and without substance, and yet it was as real as the floor beneath her feet.

The readings on the monitors hardly changed, but she glanced at them constantly.

What would the world do if he didn’t get better?

The heart monitor caught her eye, his pulse suddenly changing.

Was he waking up?

The ribbon was back, draping across her form like a blanket, but this time, it was different.

Instead of merely containing power and presence, there was *emotion*.

She gasped and felt the emotion solidify into something she could recognize.

Fear.

She stood up and felt the ribbon tremble, as if startled.

“<Superman?>“ she asked, hoping he could hear her. Hoping he was awake.

Fear receded just enough for her to sense . . . uncertainty?

“<Superman, you’re in San Juan De Dios Hospital. We have you in a private room under full spectrum lamps. Your doctor, Dr. Klein, should be here soon,>“ she explained.

Relief surged through the invisible strip in the air and against her shoulder as she went around and approached the foot of his bed, ignoring the glare from the lamps.

She looked down at him and he looked the same as he had ten minutes before.

“<Are you awake?>“ she asked.

There was silence for a long moment, and she wondered if she had somehow imagined the last minute, but then he answered.

/<I think I am, but I can’t move.>/

The voice made her jump, for the words hadn’t been spoken, at least not verbally.

She quickly pushed the call button.

"<Dr. Alcon is on her way; I'll be back soon.>"

[Puerto del Esperanza, Spain - 10:27 pm (5:27 pm in Metropolis)]

Kal-El heard the nurse leave the room as he desperately tried to open his eyes, but they remained stubbornly shut.

He could feel the heat of sunlamps nearby and could see their glow from behind his eyelids, which he supposed was better than seeing nothing. However, he was much more concerned about why he couldn't move, how long he had been out, and the insistent prickling sensation all over his skin that felt like thousands of fire ants marching to-and-fro.

Of course, he knew nothing was actually crawling on his skin because he felt it just as strongly on his back and such, but it was still very disconcerting. Granted, this was far better than the agonizing pain he had been in before. However, there were also other bizarre sensations. There was a distant pressure he couldn't quite locate that was more like the mental nudge he got when he was forgetting something, but he somehow knew this was very different. The other odd feeling was much more tangible, however. What on earth was on his face and . . . up his nose?!

Suddenly, his hearing mercifully distracted him.

"<What do you mean he 'thought' to you?>" Dr. Alcon asked.

"<Just what I said. He spoke in my head after I asked him if he was awake. He said he thought so but couldn't move. After that, I pushed the call button and came out here to wait for you,>" Francis said.

Dr. Alcon quickly translated what was said into English.

"That happened once before, when his aura had been warped by the sound weapon," a male voice said. Kal instantly identified the voice as Dr. Klein's. "After his aura recovered, he couldn't repeat what had happened."

"I see. Alright. Ready?" she asked.

"Yes, but I'll enter slowly and see if his aura responds at all," he said.

"I think that's a good idea. For myself and Francis, he hasn't reacted again, but considering we were there originally, maybe that'll affect things," she said.

With that, they opened the door and quietly entered.

"Superman, it's Dr. Alcon. Nurse Francis and Dr. Klein are with me. I understand you can't move, but if you can communicate the way you had with Francis, please do so," she said, speaking English for Klein's sake as they approached the foot of his bed.

Kal would have complied if he didn't experience a sudden wave of what could only be described as discombobulation.

He felt the pull he quickly identified as his aura shifting, but it was less abrupt and less urgent - more testing than insistent. His heart rate elevated as he tried to comprehend what he was feeling exactly, but all he could really do was bask in the evolving tactile mesh and try not to be overloaded by it. He felt as if he had discovered another sense, and maybe he had.

He collected himself to attempt thought.

/Hey, Bernie, / he managed, causing Dr. Klein to jump.

"Kal-El?" Dr. Klein asked, beside himself with excited curiosity. "Amazing! Telepathy! Dr. Alcon, Francis, did you hear him too?"

Dr. Alcon nodded, her eyes wide.

"Kal, how do you feel?" Klein asked. "Can you tell me how your aura is doing?"

Kal wished he could understand what he was feeling. Identify what the sensations meant, but it was all so jumbled and constantly moving. He was beginning to suspect his aura had been torn into several sections that were behaving like wide, weightless strips floating out from him. He had felt his aura moving since he had woken, but this was so much more noticeable that he couldn't not focus on it now. Almost like a tone in the background that one can ignore with ease before something changes about it that makes it an incessant noise that demands attention.

/Torn. Like a flag ripped in several places./

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

/It's much better than it was./

"If you were to rate the pain?" Klein pressed.

/A four. It had been a two before you all walked in, but it had been a ten last night. /

"<I'll leave, maybe less people in the room will help,>" Francis offered, understanding enough English to come to that conclusion.

Dr. Alcon nodded appreciatively at her. "<Please update the Administrator. He'll be happy to hear Superman's awake, well . . . aware.>"

Francis left and they waited for Kal's response.

/That helped some. Pain's a three now. /

"That's good. Can you describe more on what you're feeling?" Alcon asked.

How can colors be described to one who has never seen? Music to one who has never heard?

Kal mentally frowned as he tried to still the ever wavering ribbons extending from his form, slow the rippling strips of sense curving through the air and brushing against the two bodies near his bed. He couldn't see them, but instinctively knew they were feeling varying degrees of concern, nervousness and amazement.

And then the pressure shifted and he could feel . . . defects - imperfections in the field he was contacting. These weren't emotions, but physical borders and

conditions.

Maybe it was a good thing he couldn't move and open his eyes. Having to deal with sight on top of this new sense would be too much. And actually, it already was.

"Kal-El?" Dr. Klein asked, concern clear in his voice.

Kal felt the mesh conform around Dr. Klein, and before he could attempt to stop it, he once again experienced the pull at his center.

His body stiffened as he endured what he could only call an onslaught for a split second before he felt Dr. Klein's hand abruptly take hold of his forearm. Warmth bled back into him, and while the surge was still intense, he wasn't wishing for the release of unconsciousness before it ended.

"Was that like the seizure your team had witnessed before?" Dr. Klein asked, breathing heavily as he slid his hand to Kal's wrist to feel his pulse.

"Similar, but this one wasn't as severe. Maybe the sunlamps helped, though I think since his aura only extended into you this time instead of eight or so people.... But he did ease back down after you made contact with him during it. Why did you think to do that?" Dr. Alcon asked.

"I think the further the distance his aura has to travel during a . . . pulse, the more it takes out of him," Klein theorized while struggling with what terms to use. "Also, I'm hoping by touching him some of the essence he put in me went back to him," Klein said as Kal stirred. "Kal?"

/I think you're right,/ he thought out before opening his eyes and taking a few deep breaths. "It wasn't as bad as before," he whispered, his body slowly obeying him once again.

"Can you move?" Dr. Klein asked.

Kal tentatively raised his arm and closed and opened his hand before frowning.

"Everything is tingling a lot more, and...." He closed his eyes, looking a little nauseous. "It almost feels like I'm moving, even though I know I'm not."

"Can you sense what your aura is doing right now?" Klein asked.

"I think part of it is touching those walls," he said, weakly pointing to the far-left side of the room. "And I know part of it is touching you, but it's . . . I don't know, a lot to process." He closed his eyes with a grimace.

"I wonder if you're experiencing a sensory overload. It certainly sounds like you could be," Klein suggested.

"Do you think you can control it at all?" Dr. Alcon asked.

Exhaling slowly, he tried to pull it back toward himself, but it was hard because he didn't really know **how** to pull.

His aura seemed to spasm slightly before he stopped

with a moan.

"Don't force it," Dr. Klein interjected quickly.

"Unless I imagined it, I think I did feel it move," Dr. Alcon commented, thinking.

"I think I'll have to learn . . . just like with my other abilities," he said, forcing himself to calm his breathing.

"Were your other abilities difficult to learn to control?" Alcon asked curiously.

"Some were, others were instinctive. Hearing was the hardest."

"Unfortunately, my guess is that this won't be like training your other abilities. Those were innate and natural to your biology. This is not. It's a result of an injury, so please go about it carefully," she said. "There's also the fact that your body is used to having this aura close against you, and now it's not."

"She's right. Your body is also constantly providing energy to extend it out, so be mindful of that. The last thing you need is for you to injure yourself further as you try to draw it back together," Klein advised.

"I need to leave then. It's too distracting here," Kal admitted, slowly shifting himself and sitting up, even as Klein and Alcon moved forward in preparation to help. "Even now there's . . . too much."

He closed his eyes. /I need to go home. Mom and Dad will know what to do. /

He grimaced and looked up at them, immediately concluding he had broadcast that thought by accident.

"Whoa, I think it would be best to wait until the sun rises at least before doing anything," Dr. Klein said, cajolingly. "I'm glad to see you seem to already be improving soon after expelling some energy into me, but let's not be hasty."

"I agree. You had been in shock less than six hours ago and you've only just recently woken up. Superman or not, I'd prefer we take things slowly," Dr. Alcon proposed.

Superman grudgingly nodded. "Okay. I'll admit staying under the lights until the sun comes up doesn't sound like a bad idea."

"Good. In the meantime, let me check you over properly," Dr. Klein said, adjusting his stethoscope.

Kal obliged and breathed deeply when prompted as Klein listened to his heart and lungs.

"I assume the Foundation is handling everything?" Kal asked.

"Yes, Mav and Julie have everything under control, although I should call them soon to give them an update. Unless you wish to call instead?" Klein asked, lowering the stethoscope.

"Either way is fine," he said.

"Alright. I think you should rest. I'll call," Klein decided.

Kal eased himself back on the bed's incline and smiled softly. "Very well."

[Chapter 9: Mend]

[Metropolis - 9:15 pm (2:15 am in Puerto del Esperanza, Spain)]

Lois jumped when the phone rang and answered it mid-second ring.

"Hello?" she asked from her bedroom as she quickly muted the television.

'Good evening. It's Mav. He's awake and they're expecting he'll leave on his own at sunrise, which will be in about five hours. They feel it'll be best for him to go to a more secluded place, so he'll be headed home, wherever that is, to recover. His aura is still extremely reactive but is doing better than earlier today.'

"Thank goodness," Lois breathed.

'I'll make a statement tomorrow after he's left and after Dr. Klein is on his way back,' he continued.

"So, he is getting better? I mean, his aura is healing?" Lois asked.

'He is improving, but we don't know how long it'll take for his aura to heal, or if it'll completely recover eventually. Dr. Klein hopes it will, but he said the best thing to do now is to let him rest and to limit the amount of people near him as his body repairs his aura,' Mav said.

"Okay, thanks for keeping me posted," Lois said. "I can't really thank you enough."

'It's no problem, Ms. Lane. You're on Kal's contact list, and that list is pretty short,' he said with a soft chuckle.

Lois allowed herself to relax on her bed, her worry abating as they wrapped up the conversation.

"Good-bye," she said, before hanging up and taking a deep breath.

She looked around her room, trying to decide what to do. Her suitcase was already mostly packed in front of her, so she picked up the phone again as she mentally checked off what else she might need.

"Hi, it's Lois," she said, instantly recognizing Jonathan's voice. "He should be heading to you in about five hours, Mav just called me," she said abruptly before giving a summation of what Mav had told her.

"I'm packing right now and will be heading to Smallville as soon as I'm done," Lois said after answering a few questions. "Hopefully I'll be there before noon tomorrow."

'We'll have a bed ready for you,' Martha assured.

Lois hesitated, but then realized the last thing she wanted was to have to travel from a hotel to the farm every day while Clark was there.

"Thank you, Martha. I'll call you as soon as I get the

rental and begin driving from Wichita," she said, before the Kents thanked her again and they bid each other good night.

After calling Perry and telling him she was going to be using some of her use-or-lose vacation time, Lois set out to the airport that hour. Fortunately Perry didn't push back too hard, likely because she had promised to call if she heard from Kal-El, but with the Foundation promising a statement in the morning, the Planet could do without her for a week or so.

[7:33 am in Puerto del Esperanza, Spain (2:33 am in Metropolis)]

"Are you confident about leaving and getting home on your own?" Klein asked as Kal stood up after getting his boots on.

"Once I'm in the atmosphere, I don't think I'll have much trouble. My aura, essence, whatever, seems more reactive to living beings than to anything else," Kal said. "And the tingling is much more bearable now than last night."

"The path to the roof is clear now," Dr. Alcon said. "Ready?"

"Yes. Thank you," Kal said as they exited the room and began making their way down the hall. "Please thank everyone who helped me yesterday."

"Of course," she said with a smile. "And, again, thank you so much. Francis and I are especially grateful." She couldn't really express it fully in words. The loss of her burn scars and Francis' COPD meant so much. At the very least it provided a new lease on life.

Superman nodded his understanding before turning to Dr. Klein. "Bernie, I'll contact the Foundation once I've settled. Shouldn't be more than an hour from now," he said.

"Why so long?" Klein asked, having expected it to be within fifteen minutes. After all, he could easily circle the globe in less than five minutes.

"My mom will insist I eat something before doing anything else," he said with a helpless but amused shrug as they entered the elevator.

"I like your mom," Klein stated as Dr. Alcon looked on curiously.

The world knew Superman had a human family somewhere who had raised him, but hearing evidence of it directly was certainly a treat.

Kal chuckled. "Maybe one day you'll meet her," he said before the elevator announced its arrival to the top floor with a ding.

They went down a final hall and stepped out onto the roof and into the sun. Kal stopped a yard beyond the double doors less than a hundred feet from the helicopter

pad.

Lifting his face toward the sun, he closed his eyes and basked in its rays.

“Much better than the sunlamps, I take it?” Klein asked.

“Yes and no,” he said, relaxing after a grimace. “It feels nice but it sort of hurts at the same time,” he said.

“What hurts?” Klein asked.

“It’s hard to describe. The tingling is more pronounced, and there’s a . . . scratchy feeling? But it’s going on and off all over.”

“Sounds sort of like a healing scab,” Alcon pointed out.

Klein nodded. “Call me if it gets worse, but, like Dr. Alcon, I suspect it’s part of the healing process.”

“Alright,” Kal said before walking forward again.

“Thanks again.”

With that, he launched himself into the sky and disappeared in a blur, a sonic boom trailing after him.

[1:42 am in Smallville (7:42 am in Puerto del Esperanza, Spain)]

Martha heard the sonic boom and hurried out the back door with Jonathon close behind.

She slowed down as she saw him land, uncertain about the condition of his aura, but he was already walking toward her with his arms wide open and his red cape flapping behind him.

She needed no further invitation and made it off the porch, and that’s when she felt it.

It was like passing through a thin veil, and beyond it lay warmth and power. She kept moving forward, undeterred as she finally embraced her son under the early morning stars. She felt Jonathan embrace him along with her, one of his arms around her shoulders as his other wrapped around Clark.

“I didn’t expect you two to be awake,” Clark said, seemingly oblivious to the foreign sensations currently brushing against and through her.

It was smoother than silk and pleasantly warm, but oddly not quite in terms of temperature. It both encompassed her and went within her, like heat and water, and yet more tangible and intangible than either.

She could feel his happiness and relief, but through this newfound aspect of himself she could also feel his discomfort and worry.

“Lois has been keeping us updated. She told us when to expect you,” she said, trying not to get too emotional as her own relief mixed with his ebbing from his form.

“But are you okay? I can feel . . . This is your aura, I take it?” Jonathan asked, still not yet pulling back, which was just as well.

“Yes. Just—” Clark grimaced, “—It’s about to pulse.

Don’t get scared; I’ll be okay.”

Martha frowned at his warning but couldn’t ask him what he meant as a surge of energy suddenly coursed through her, leaving her both breathless and revitalized.

“Clark?!” she cried, feeling him go completely limp in her arms as his head dropped gently against her shoulder.

“Hold him, Martha!” Jonathan shouted.

She did as he said, despite the slippery material of his uniform. Fortunately, they managed to keep him upright together as the energy pulled back into him by their contact a few seconds later.

“Clark?” Jonathan asked.

“Sorry,” Clark whispered after a moment, still relying heavily on them for balance but now no longer in danger of collapsing. “Just give me a moment.”

They didn’t move, patiently waiting for him to regain stability.

“Okay. I’m okay now,” he said, straightening.

“How often is that happening?” Jonathan asked.

“It only happens when I’m around people my aura hasn’t touched before. Bernie is working on understanding what it does exactly but . . . you both should be feeling pretty good right now,” he said, smiling sheepishly at them.

“Clark, what is it doing to you?” Martha asked pointedly.

“Martha, let’s get him inside before we question him,” Jonathan suggested, earning a chuckle from Clark.

They got him into the house without trouble and after he sped into some more comfortable clothing, they were seated around the kitchen table.

“You’re sure you don’t want to sleep?” Martha asked.

“I woke up roughly an hour ago, Mom,” he said, amused.

“Oh. Right. Well then, what’s happening with your aura? Lois told us some, but it didn’t sound like Mav knew much,” Martha said.

“The only way I can describe it is that it’s been torn and stretched out. I don’t know how much you can feel, but parts of it are like wide ribbons because of how it’s torn,” Clark said.

“I can feel it,” Martha assured as Jonathan nodded.

Clark continued. “I think I need to learn how to control it to help it heal. Right now, it’s too . . . spread out. There’s also the issue of what it does when it detects . . . well, injuries in people I’m near. Bernie theorized that because it’s extending from my body, it essentially thinks anything it contacts is me and if it senses an injury, old or new, it’ll release some energy to heal it. That’s what happened a few times after I collapsed in the square,” Clark explained. “And what happened a few minutes ago off the back porch.”

“When you extended your aura out to save those people from the bomb, it tore pretty badly, didn’t it?” Jonathan asked, though it was barely a question.

“Yes. I just . . . I didn’t want to see anyone else die. The flooding in Indonesia. . . . When I saw the blast and realized I was about to be too late again . . . I don’t know. I just *pushed*.”

“Oh, Clark,” Martha said, squeezing his hand.

“How do you two feel?” he asked, wanting to shift the conversation away from himself.

“Good. Like I’m twenty years younger, if I’m honest. Why are you looking nervous?” Jonathan asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Check your scars,” Clark muttered.

Jonathan frowned but looked his hands over, his eyes quickly scanning for the old familiar scar on the side of his thumb he had gotten from a saw and the little faded burn scar on his forefinger.

“They’re gone!” he gasped.

“I’m pretty sure your bad knee will be fine now too,” Clark said. “And likely your cholesterol will be better as well. Best of all, Dad, your heart will be stronger.”

Jonathan stopped. Realizing he was not as winded as he would normally be after running to his son. A soft smile of gratitude came to his face.

“Is this permanent?!” Martha breathed.

“Bernie thinks so. Any injuries healed will stay healed. The doctor treating me in Spain had old burn scars on over a quarter of her body. They’re all gone now,” Clark admitted.

“Is it hurting you?” Martha asked, her eyes narrowing.

Clark sighed, knowing there was no avoiding this interrogation.

“Kind of. That’s why I had to leave the hospital. As soon as the sun was up, they cleared a path for me to the roof. You two are the only people I’ve encountered since I left. With that said, it is getting better. It wasn’t as bad here as it was in the hospital. And contact is definitely important. It’s nowhere near as draining. I also think I’m learning how to . . . guide it, I suppose?”

“So this aura is another ability,” Jonathan concluded, latching on to that fact because it was something they were familiar with. They had helped him figure out how to control all of his other abilities. This would be no different.

“That’s how I’m going to look at it. There’s also something else,” Clark said, looking at his dad as he closed his mouth. /I can do this with it. /

Martha and Jonathan both startled, hearing their son’s voice in their minds.

“You figured it out?! Telepathy?” Martha gasped, excited. He had been trying to figure out how to do it since he had accidentally thought to Mayson.

Clark smiled. “Yeah. It surprised the nurse pretty bad, but. . . .” He shrugged.

“Well, I’m glad you seem to already be getting a hold of this,” Martha said before standing up. “But before we go on, you need to eat something. I doubt the hospital food was all that great.”

Clark chuckled. “I knew you’d feed me, which reminds me, I need to call the Foundation and let them know I’m set.”

“Okay, while you do that, I’ll get started on a hearty breakfast for you. How does buttermilk pancakes, scrambled eggs, and fresh orange juice and coffee sound?” Martha asked, hurrying to the stove as Jonathan retrieved the cordless phone for Clark.

“Heavenly,” Clark replied.

Lois pulled up in the rental, grateful to finally be at the Kents.

Getting out of the car, Jonathan stepped out of the house and made his way to her as she got her suitcase and backpack from the trunk.

“So good to see you again, Lois,” he greeted. “How was the trip?”

“Not too bad, considering I booked the flight at the last minute. I was lucky and got a helpful lady at the front desk,” she said before glancing at the house. “How is he?”

“Improving. He’s waiting for you in the living room,” he said.

“Oh good,” she said as Jonathan offered to carry her things. She gratefully handed over her backpack.

“Thanks.”

“Just put the suitcase down when you first get in. As soon as you enter the house, you need to go to Clark,” he said.

“He’s that anxious to see me?” she asked, happy and curious.

Jonathan smiled but shook his head. “He’s certainly glad you’re here, but that’s not the reason. His aura will likely react to you and it’s better for him if you’re close when it happens.”

She stilled. “Oh. Did it happen with you and Martha?”

“Yes, but it was over quickly and touching him definitely helped,” he explained before telling her what had happened when he had first arrived.

“Wow,” she said, following him up to the porch.

“Yeah, it was something. Oh, before I forget, Martha will be back in a bit. She went into town to pick up a few things,” he said, opening the door for her.

She entered before setting the suitcase down and hurrying to the living room as instructed.

“Clark!” she said happily.

He was sitting on the couch, waiting for her. And then

she felt it. Like a thin cloth, it brushed against her face before encircling her whole frame as she continued forward. Understanding this sensation was his aura galvanized her movement and she all but rushed to his side.

They quickly embraced and the airy substance around her hummed in delight and love.

"I was so worried. Perry wouldn't let me go," she said.

"I know, but it was good you didn't. They wouldn't have let you see me anyway," Clark said, his cheek against hers, his stubble tickling her skin.

She sighed, knowing he was right. "So how are you feeling?" she asked, about to pull away.

"Wait," he whispered, pulling her closer to himself. She didn't resist.

He sagged against her and she gasped at the spike of pressure in the air. She held him until it passed, the dense energy soaking in and out of her like the surge of an ocean surf.

"Clark?" she asked. She of course knew what that had been, but it was still a little scary.

"I'm okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "It's getting easier."

"Your aura?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, easing back on the couch.

Lois quickly cuddled against his side, tired from traveling and worrying.

"I've decided I'll begin experimenting with it tomorrow, if you want to help," he said after a moment. "I've already begun to get the hang of one aspect of it."

"You have?" Lois asked, meeting his eyes.

/Yeah. What do you think?/ he thought to her.

She gasped, earning a chuckle from him. "Telepathy?"

"Yeah. It's not completely dependent on the aura, but it's connected."

"That time you thought to Mayson," Lois realized.

"Your aura had been damaged then."

"That's right."

"Can you hear my thoughts?" she asked.

"If I can, I haven't heard them yet," he said.

"Hm. That's probably a good thing," she muttered.

He smirked. "You're probably right."

"Hey!" she complained, before they broke into laughter.

The earth continued to turn as the days went by, although many around the world eagerly awaited updates from the Foundation about Superman's recovery.

Lois was grateful Mav had that handled. Clark, or Kal-El rather, called Dr. Klein every other day to give him an update and Mav would then update the world.

Continuing with Kal's policy of being as upfront and

honest as possible, for good or ill, Mav disclosed the condition of Kal's aura to the public. He also clarified what had already been revealed by the press in the early reports of Superman's collapse and later rumors from the hospital. Admittedly, trying to hide his condition now would be impossible and very counterproductive. The world had already seen what had happened and knew he was in a bad way. However, even with the Foundation's honesty, speculation was still happening.

Lois flipped the channel and stopped on an interview being conducted by MNN (Metropolis News Network).

"So Superman's powers rely on his aura?" the host asked. Lois recognized him as a former LNN news anchor. Kyle, she believed, was his name.

"I think it goes beyond just his abilities," the guest speaker said. He appeared to be a doctor of some sort, but Lois could only guess as to his true credentials. With these sorts of things, it was often hit and miss. But in either case, it was clear the news station believed it made for good television.

"Beyond his abilities?" Kyle asked.

"Yes. I think his life depends on his aura," the host stated very seriously.

"Are you saying he could have died from what had happened?" Kyle asked, surprised.

"I cannot know, of course, but I strongly suspect that is the case. By now I'm sure we've all seen the video from Spain, and we've all heard the updates from the Foundation. They were very quick in getting him isolated, and the reports from the hospital make it clear why. It took energy to heal those people on his way to and in the hospital, just like it took energy to protect those people from the blast. I think it stands to reason he was in trouble, which is why Germany provided those sunlamps so quickly," the doctor theorized. "Everyone has their limits, even Superman. He said so himself."

Lois turned the television off.

While she was glad the general public expressed concern and made it clear they fully supported Superman taking whatever time he needed to recover, it still made her uncomfortable to hear their blunt talk.

It was utterly bizarre to hear people discuss her boyfriend's medical condition so openly and in-depth. She was just glad that the telepathy development was being kept under wraps, though knowing Clark, if he felt the world was better off knowing, he'd tell them. She really did wonder how he had such faith in the human race, but then, perhaps setting high expectations encouraged people to do better than they might have otherwise.

She sighed.

She could only imagine how Martha and Jonathan felt with everything, especially when people speculated where

Superman was recovering and how his human family might be helping.

If only they knew!

Every morning, Jonathan and Clark would go out into the field with her and practice extending and retracting his aura. At first, consciously shifting his aura was very hard, but now that it was well on its way to being fully healed, things were getting easier. It helped that as time went on his aura was naturally pulling in instead of randomly fluttering out, so they were hopeful that eventually he wouldn't need to consciously reign in his aura anymore. Which meant, until he no longer needed to worry about accidentally 'reaching out' with his aura, his life as Clark was pretty much confined to his parents' farm. Fortunately, he didn't have a normal 9 to 5 job and no active cases he was working on. He also had already called those who would wonder where he was, specifically Inspector Henderson.

Henderson was pleased to learn Clark was traveling with his girlfriend. He had said Clark deserved a vacation, especially if it was with Lois.

Lois smiled. Bill may be difficult, and a little cranky at times, but she suspected that beneath all that grumpy exterior beat the heart of a true romantic.

She was about to get up and see if Martha needed her to pick anything up from the store for dinner when she felt what was now becoming familiar to her.

"Making progress?" she asked as she felt Clark's aura wrap around her like a hug as he entered the room.

"I think so," he said with a quiet smile before closing his eyes.

His essence shifted around her like a blanket of silk.

"You're getting better at controlling it," she said as she approached and hugged him for real.

He hummed. "I can feel it coming back together, knitting itself."

She grinned as his power pulsed, releasing a soothing thrum of energy that echoed from his frame, into hers, and then back into him.

"I can feel your confidence," she said, looking up at him.

"Anything else?" he asked, grinning back.

"Your relief and . . ." she grew shy, "your love."

"You're right," he said, kissing her softly on the forehead before bowing his head and bringing his lips down to hers. This touching of bodies with the aura increasing their bliss gave Lois a little frisson of sensuous pleasure as they deepened the kiss, exploring the growing desire they shared.

Only when Clark knew she needed air did he pull back, though both of them were breathing heavily.

"Wow," Lois breathed. "That aura of yours is

something else."

"Yeah," Clark agreed, before turning and gently guiding her to the back door.

"Where are we going?" she asked curiously as she put on a heavy barn jacket and scarf.

"Outside," he said mischievously.

Lois and Clark cut across the back field of the Kent Farm, although Lois was a little confused about where they were going and why, at least at first. They came to a stop before the big Sycamore tree. The late Fall air was brisk but fresh and clean, and chimes from the back porch could be heard.

"Lois," he said, taking her hands in his. "I don't think I can wait another day to do this. I love you more than I ever thought I would anyone," he said, before retrieving a box from his pocket. "With everything that's happened, I hope you can forgive me for doing this sooner rather than later."

Lois gasped as he went down to one knee.

"Lois, will you marry me?" he asked. He presented her with a beautiful diamond ring, its many facets twinkling in the starlight.

"Yes! Definitely yes!" she cried, trying to keep her hand steady as he carefully placed her engagement ring on.

As soon as it was on, she all but attacked him, kissing him profusely and trailing her hands over him. Once they had both calmed, he placed his forehead against hers, chuckling.

"Wow, if I had known you would react like that I would have asked you sooner," Clark said.

"I think your timing was perfect," she said.

"I had planned on proposing after the Pulitzer Award Ceremony, but then changed my mind," Clark said.

"After what's happened, I'm glad you didn't decide to wait any longer, especially that long," Lois admitted. "Although now this means we'll have to tell my parents."

"Do they not already know about me?" he asked, surprised.

"I just told my sister last week. I've been holding out for as long as possible. When you meet them, you'll know why. I just hope you don't back out afterwards," she said, both teasing and not.

"Well, would it be better to invite them for Christmas and just rip it all off like a band aid?" Clark asked.

"Only if you want to ruin Christmas," she said with a groan. "They often make every occasion into a fight."

"That bad?" Clark asked, eyes wide.

"Was when I was little, but then, I didn't have you," she said honestly.

Clark smiled sadly at her as she sighed. And then she shook her head firmly, as if suddenly deciding something.

"You know what, let's do that. Let's invite them both,

and your parents too,” she said.

“For Christmas dinner?” he asked, hoping he was following.

“Yeah, though I’ll buy the food, you’ll prepare,” she decided.

Clark laughed.

“Okay. Let’s do that,” he agreed, grinning. “But first, let’s give my parents the good news.”

[Chapter 10: Family]

Darlene was a volunteer at Superman’s Foundation and had been for a little over a year. She helped organize the letters and gifts people from all over the world sent in. She loved working at the Foundation and of course enjoyed the moments she saw Superman, or, as he insisted, Kal.

Today, there were nineteen volunteers working alongside her, ranging in age from 17 to 68, and they included a wide range of ethnicities and backgrounds — a true melting pot of experiences and talents.

She was 48, recently retired, or at least retired from the general workforce. She and her husband had worked hard and smart, and had been blessed with opportunities they had taken with both hands.

And now she was volunteering her time helping Superman. She was so grateful and still had trouble wrapping her head around her blessed situation.

She turned back to the bag and retrieved another stack of letters.

The room was the largest on the second floor of the Foundation, stretching from the front of the building to the back and having a fat ‘L’ shape that also encompassed the entire back wall. The blinds were closed at the front of the building and thin columns were strategically placed throughout the room. Tables and floor mats lined the side wall, allowing for groups of volunteers to comfortably rifle through and organize mail, packages of varying sizes, and piles of supplies.

Darlene was glad she didn’t have to keep track of everything. The sheer number of programs they helped support was mind boggling.

Everyone was quiet as they worked, no doubt hoping Superman would return soon and be well.

The scene of him collapsing and being hoisted up onto the bed of an old dusty truck was engrained in everyone’s memory. They had never imagined Superman needing such help, and then the news of his aura — as bizarre as that was — instilled them with even more concern and fear.

Mav gave reports to them and the public each day, and it did sound that, wherever he was, Superman was getting better, but would it be good enough?

Was he still going to be Superman?

The door from the stairs suddenly opened and Darlene glanced over. She immediately stilled as Mav and Dr. Klein stepped out, followed by Superman!

The rest of her fellow workers gasped as soon as they spotted him and stopped what they were doing.

They all quickly took in his attire. He wasn’t wearing his uniform; instead, he was wearing what he had worn during his recovery after Nightfall. Blue jeans, tennis shoes, and a blue t-shirt bearing his family crest. So he wasn’t completely well just yet.

Mav grinned as Dr. Klein stepped beside him. Superman remained just in front of the doorway, clearly hanging back.

“Morning everyone,” Mav said upon seeing he had all of their attention. “As you all can see, Kal is back, but we would like to verify something before we give a public statement. Kal, do you — ?” Mav turned in question to Superman.

“Of course,” Kal said, straightening up but still relaxed as he spoke to them all. “To put it simply, I need to make sure my aura will not randomly extend or act outside my control. As strange as this sounds, would any of you be willing to let me test my aura around you?”

They all quickly nodded, eager to help him any way they could.

“Okay, could half of you come and stand here while the rest of you go to the far side of the room, please?” Klein asked, pointing about ten feet in front of him.

Darlene found herself in the group of ten in front of Dr. Klein. She could barely keep still, both nervous and excited.

“Okay, this should go pretty fast,” Klein explained. “None of you need to do anything, just stand here. We just want to verify it’s safe for Kal to be around more than just a few people again.”

Tentatively, Superman approached them until he was closer to them than Dr. Klein.

“Still okay?” Dr. Klein asked.

Kal nodded, slowly relaxing. “I’m still keeping my aura close, but there’s no pull or anything.”

Klein smiled in relief.

“And if you completely relax?” Mav asked.

Superman slowly exhaled.

Darlene couldn’t help but startle as Superman’s aura expanded out into the room, stretching out ten, fifteen feet. By the stunned expressions around her, she knew she wasn’t the only one astonished.

The power within his aura was both light and dense, warm and cool. But it went beyond just physical sensation. She could feel his hesitancy quickly followed by heavy relief.

Slowly, he walked closer to them and abruptly stopped.

He closed his eyes with a slight grimace before the pain appeared to ebb away.

“Okay?” Klein asked, concerned.

Superman nodded and continued forward until the second group entered his aura’s range. The outer fringes of it were much thinner than the area immediately around him, and they all could feel it shifting about. It was very surreal to know this had cured several people and that it had led to his hospitalization nearly three weeks before.

With a slow breath, the Kryptonian pulled back what Darlene would describe as his essence and he smiled softly, though he did seem a little winded.

“Kal?” Klein asked, stepping into his view.

“I’ll need to apologize to the people downstairs for startling them. I should have accounted for my aura going through the floor,” he said.

Mav went to the wall phone and called down to the front desk below them and stepped away.

“How are you feeling?” Klein persisted.

“Tired, but okay. I can’t extend my aura out with too many people around for too long though. It’s too . . . overwhelming,” he admitted. “But I’m not in danger of hurting myself anymore. Controlling it wasn’t hard.” He turned his focus to the volunteers. “Thank you for helping me, everyone,” Superman said.

Mav returned a moment later.

“Julie is handling things downstairs. We will need to schedule a press conference soon though,” Mav said.

“I was expecting we would, so that’s fine,” Superman said, briefly turning to Mav before smiling back at the volunteers. “Thanks again.”

Darlene and the rest watched him return to the stairwell, likely to go back to his rooms until the press conference was called.

Two hours later, the Foundation shared the good news with the world. Superman was back.

Ellen wasn’t sure what to feel or what to think. Her oldest was engaged! She hadn’t even known she had been dating!

Of course, it wasn’t like she spoke with Lois often. It had been months if she was honest - not that she blamed Lois. She hadn’t exactly been the best mother.

She paid the taxi driver before looking up at Lois’ apartment.

It was freezing out, but that was to be expected for Christmas. Colorful lights were hanging throughout the city, coupled with cheery decorations and holiday decorum. Thanks to the cloudy sky, the Christmas lights were easily seen, though she had to question why they were on before the evening.

She entered the building after stomping the snow from

her boots and went up in the elevator. Before too long, she was outside her daughter’s front door. She really hoped Sam hadn’t already arrived. Taking a quick breath, she knocked.

Lois opened the door a few seconds later.

“Hi, Mother,” she greeted.

They exchanged somewhat awkward hugs, but she supposed that might have been because she had just spotted who could only be Lois’ fiancé and his parents in the living room.

“How was the flight? Not too long, I hope?” Lois asked as Ellen handed her her wrapped Christmas gift.

The gift wasn’t grand, but Ellen felt Lois would appreciate it. Lois accepted it with a smile.

“It was fine, better than I had expected. Granted, it helps to not go with the cheapest airline who nickel and dime you on everything,” Ellen complained before turning her eyes back to the man behind Lois.

She hadn’t heard a great deal about him yet, but, from what Lucy had revealed, she was neutral toward him - though she was a little leery about his occupation. A private investigator? What sort of things did he investigate? What kind of people hired him? How much time did he devote to his work? How devoted would he be to Lois? She supposed things could be worse. He could be a doctor.

“It does,” Lois agreed, oblivious to Ellen’s thoughts before stepping back. “Well, this is Clark Kent and his parents: Martha and Jonathan. Clark, Martha, Jonathan, this is my mom, Ellen,” she introduced.

“Glad to meet you, Ma’am,” Clark greeted, holding out his hand.

He was definitely good looking and well kept. Point to him for that.

“Please, just Ellen. No need to be so formal,” she gently corrected, shaking his hand before moving on to greet Martha and Jonathan.

They seemed to be very simple folk and quickly agreed to call her Ellen as long as first names went all around.

“Well, Daddy should be here soon,” Lois said, happy things were continuing smoothly as she put Ellen’s gift up to open after dinner.

“Then I best check on the turkey. Jonathan, could you give me a hand?” Martha asked, going to the kitchen.

“Of course,” he said.

Jonathan followed behind his wife and Ellen got the feeling they were giving her an opportunity to be alone with Lois and their son.

Clark went behind Lois and put his hands on her shoulders. Lois gently took hold of one of his arms and relaxed against him.

Ellen’s eyes were drawn to the ring on Lois’ left hand.

The diamond wasn't massive but the ring as a whole was quite intricate. The sparkling round diamond was met by waves of white gold at the center. A sweep of sparkling round diamonds crosses with a curve of yellow gold along the band.

She had never seen such a complicated ring design. Lois noticed where her gaze was and beamed as she held it out for her to take a better look.

"It's gorgeous," Ellen complimented, frankly impressed.

Her opinion of Clark instantly went up a smidge, if only because she believed his choice of ring matched Lois' personality remarkably well.

She looked back at Lois and was struck by how, well, different she looked. Not that her appearance had changed all that much, she just seemed . . . happier.

That was the only way she could describe it.

Unfortunately, before they could really begin talking, the doorbell rang.

Lois quickly answered it, opening the door wide for Sam.

"Hi, Daddy," she greeted.

"Hi, princess!" he returned.

Ellen immediately wanted to throw up. Lois was almost 30 and they're still doing that exchange?

"Ellen," Sam greeted neutrally when he looked at his former spouse.

"Sam," she said blandly.

Awkwardly, Lois got Sam's attention and introduced him to Clark.

Sam instantly perked up. "You wouldn't be, by chance, P.I. Kent, would you?"

Clark nodded as they shook hands. "I am. Why do you ask?"

"One of my patients told me about how you found her son and saved his life. Very impressive," he praised.

"Thanks," Clark said.

"How many missing persons cases have you solved?" Sam asked curiously as they moved into Lois' living room and sat down.

Lois and Clark took the couch while Ellen and Sam sat in the chairs furthest from one another.

"Three hundred and eight," he answered.

Ellen and Sam both blinked.

"You keep track that closely?" Sam asked.

"Yes. Wouldn't you?" Clark asked, legitimately confused.

"Hm, I suppose I might," Sam said thoughtfully before looking at Lois. "And from your articles I understand you've been as busy as always, Lois."

Lois smiled shyly. "Yeah."

Clark gave Lois' shoulder a squeeze. "She's been

nominated for a Pulitzer for covering Luthor's downfall."

"A Pulitzer?" Ellen asked. She remembered hearing that term before but couldn't recall specifics. "That's an important award, right?"

Clark blinked, and Ellen had a feeling she had baffled him for some reason. Lois looked down and Ellen instantly knew she had said something wrong.

"It's the most prestigious journalism award a journalist can receive," Sam answered. "Only the best can earn them."

Ellen caught Lois' eyes widen with surprise before she straightened in pride at her father's words. Ellen inwardly grumbled. Of course Sam would do everything possible to butter Lois up and try to impress her fiancé. Two could play at that game.

"Well, then I'm sure Lois will win the award," she assured. "She is the best, after all."

Lois smiled softly, and Ellen wished she had given her daughter more compliments when she was a child. Maybe things would be a little better now.

"Of course she is," Sam heartedly agreed. "She was the first to interview Superman and had actually figured out he wasn't some supernatural being. Just Super."

Lois grinned at that, and Ellen stewed as she ignored Sam's chuckle.

"Lois, I'm curious. You're one of Superman's friends, right?" Sam continued.

Ellen's curiosity was the only reason she didn't ignore his inquiry.

"Well, yeah. We're friends," she said, her eyes avoiding Clark. Ellen wondered what that was about. Jealousy from Clark?

"I know the Foundation has said he's fully recovered, and I understand the medical community is hesitantly optimistic about what his aura might bring about too, but could you tell me how he feels about it?" Sam asked.

Ellen suddenly wished she had read up more on the Man of Steel. Hopefully being a nurse would be enough to follow the conversation.

Lois glanced at Clark before looking back at them.

"Well, I haven't really point blank asked him, but I think he's happy about developing it. If the need arises, and he's close enough, he can protect people from harm," she said.

"And heal them if they are injured," Sam put in.

"Though I've heard that is only to be done in severe circumstances?"

"That's right, and he hasn't healed anyone since fully recovering. Healing takes a lot out of him, and while he hasn't outright said so, I know it's painful to him," Lois said. "There's also the concern some doctors have on whether or not there may be long term side effects for

people he heals. His aura can completely heal someone who just had open heart surgery. That's no small change to the body," Lois said, referring to one article Ellen had managed to read – only because she was very curious about the medical implications due to being a former nurse.

"Indeed," Sam agreed. "The benefits have to be worth the risks."

"So, what's he like?" Ellen asked. "I mean, is he really like how he is on TV?"

Lois smirked, for some reason extremely amused. "A lot of people ask me that. Yes, he is really that upfront and honest, as well as down to Earth. He's one of the most laid back people I've ever met. He can still get pretty serious though."

"Oh yeah. I remember what he had said if anyone threatens his adopted family," Sam commented.

"No doubt a devoted family man. I wish more men were like him," Ellen said, not bothering to hide her not-so-subtle dig at Sam.

Sam ignored her as Clark's parents returned.

"Dinner is ready!" Martha announced, coming in with Jonathan before Clark smoothly introduced them to Sam.

Soon after, they gathered around the dinner table, nearly all set up for them.

Lois and Clark helped Martha with the last-second utensils and side dishes and then they were all seated.

Ellen was impressed and once again wondered at how much Lois had, well, not exactly changed, but grown.

She was so much more at ease and confident — not the forced bravado Ellen often saw from her eldest. This was legitimate.

And her apartment actually looked lived in and enjoyed. She could not remember ever seeing a Christmas tree up in her daughter's apartment. Granted, she didn't often visit her during Christmas like this.

She looked at Clark and glanced at his parents as the meal started.

Lois could do worse.

Conversation resumed and the topics ranged from Lois' work to the Kent farm in Smallville. Clark, the poor man, even had to endure his mother retelling a story from his childhood.

"You made a gazebo for the praying mantis?" Sam asked Jonathan, nearly in tears from laughing.

"Well, yeah. It was an impressive bug," Jonathan commented, which only made them laugh harder.

Ellen had to admit, it was hilarious.

"You know, that reminds me of when Lois and her sister, Lucy, were younger," Sam said. "I got them a Lego castle set and they must have worked on it all night – a school night, I might add," he said with a chuckle. "Lois

nearly fell asleep in her cereal, and Lucy I think did."

"A Lego set? It was made of random Legos, popsicle sticks, and pompoms," Ellen corrected, pretty sure she knew what Sam was trying to recall, but, as usual, he was colluding it with his own spin. "And it was a city for their dolls."

"City for their dolls? Are you sure? They were a bit old for that then, no?" he asked.

"I suppose since you were hardly around you wouldn't remember how long they played with dolls," Ellen stated.

"I was working. I'm sorry I had long hours, but—"

"Working? Is that what they call it?" Ellen asked sarcastically.

"Oh, like you would know! It's not like you ever looked up from the bottle long enough to care or even notice!" Sam declared, his voice rising a smidge.

"Well, if I was drinking too much, it was because you were getting on with floozy—"

"Enough."

The word was so solid it might as well have hit her upside the head.

She and Sam turned toward the voice.

Clark, the quiet man who they all had just been poking fun at about having a pet bug as a child, was standing up, and Ellen suddenly recalled Lucy telling her that he had been some sort of important military officer.

It was also then that Ellen realized she was on her feet and that Sam was too. And then there was the table. A few of the glasses had toppled over and their contents were all over the tablecloth and dripping onto the floor. She honestly couldn't say who had rocked, maybe even shoved, the table, but she knew it had either been her or Sam.

She glanced at Lois, who was still seated and had her face in her hands. Jonathan and Martha were sitting straight in their seats, looking appalled.

"You know, I've seen a lot during my travels, but it's rare for me to be astonished," Clark said, his voice so crisp she had no doubt he had years of experience in practicing genuine and well-deserved authority. "I can tell you are both good people underneath it all, but this long-standing hurt that you have inflicted on one another has clearly poisoned you to such an extent you are oblivious to what it does to those around you, particularly those you should care about above all others," he said, briefly glancing at Lois who had yet to look up. "So, as much as it pains me to say, in light of . . . all this—" he motioned to the table and general atmosphere, "—I think it would be best for you both to head out. We will make other arrangements to visit you separately once you've calmed down and properly apologized to Lois. As for our wedding, Lois and I will talk and let you know what we decide. I hope you both

address the wounds you have.”

He stepped away from the table and waited for them to follow him.

Ellen silently slid around her chair, never having felt so ashamed or embarrassed in her life. With a muffled apology, she grabbed her things, her gift from Lois, and left in front of Sam. She took the stairs while he wordlessly took the elevator.

[Chapter 11: Extend]

Clark poured the coffee the next morning, filling Lois’ mug. His parents had already departed at dawn, and he had immediately gone to Lois’ after briefly helping with a pile up on the highway.

“They were both wrong, you know,” Lois said, taking the offered mug.

She had been so mortified about what had happened the night before that she had asked for them not to talk about it, so none of them did. His parents were as understanding as always and they had concluded the night with hot cocoa and a simple Christmas movie.

Not how they had intended to end the holidays, but considering everything it was a good recovery.

“Oh?” he asked.

“It was Lucy’s social studies project in sixth grade. Our parents, as usual, had failed to take her to the store to get craft supplies, even after promising several times to do so that week. I found her after dinner, crying that she would fail her class,” she said.

Clark took a seat beside her.

“So, I helped her. We had to pilfer the house for items for her to use, including pieces of our toys, and we barely got it done in time,” Lois stated, her voice flat and defeated. “The only thing that Dad got right was us staying up all night.”

“I’m sorry for insisting we invite them both,” he said.

“It’s not your fault. I had hoped they would be able to pull it off once, especially with your parents there. I had even begun to believe we might have one good Christmas as dinner went on, but then.... Anyway, thanks for handling it the way you did. The other times . . . well, it only stopped when one of them stormed out. You saw how they had both ignored your parents’ attempts to interrupt them. They get so worked up they’re no longer aware of anything except each other.”

“Yeah,” he said, wrapping his arm around her.

“You sure you still want to marry me?” she asked, as serious as she was not serious.

“Without question,” he assured.

She relaxed against him.

“So, any updates on whatever you and Klein have been working on?” she asked, not so subtly changing the

subject.

“Well, we’re pretty sure that we’ve figured out why green kryptonite hurts me. As you know, my cells absorb energy released by the sun, specifically cosmic radiation and the energy within the yellow and blue wavelengths in the visible spectrum. Unfortunately, my cells try to do the same thing with the radiation from kryptonite, but my cells can’t process kryptonite’s energy.

“Bernie compared it to a machine trying to run off a power source that has too high of an amperage,” he explained.

“So your cells, what, fry?” Lois asked, horrified.

“I guess that’s a fair description. Makes me even more grateful to Burton for closing that box and relocating all of the kryptonite the way he had. I do not want to ever encounter that stuff again,” he said.

“Me too,” she said. “What about the red?”

“We’re not sure on that yet. From my blood samples we have, it definitely does something, but it doesn’t damage the cells like the green. Instead, it almost makes them . . . hyper.”

“Would that affect your powers? It sounds like it would,” Lois commented.

“Bernie thinks so, which is why we’re going to avoid ever exposing me to it. Chances are it would affect my aura too, and that’s the last thing I need,” he said.

“Yikes, definitely,” Lois wholeheartedly agreed.

“Well, I—” Clark began, only to tilt his head. “Sorry. Slick roads. Trapped driver in a bad way. I’ll be back later.”

She nodded her understanding as he blurred and disappeared with a sonic boom.

Lois shuffled through the stack of documents, a trend beginning to appear and indicating to her that her gut was right once again.

Representative Fred Leanings was corrupt and dangerous.

She didn’t have concrete evidence, but there were flags and more than a few breadcrumbs that connected him to the notorious bomber, Joe Arlo, aka ‘Joe the Blow’.

Just thinking the horrible nickname made her cringe.

She refocused on Leanings. It appeared the representative (who clearly wasn’t good at actually representing) had hired Arlo to remove or intimidate his political rivals.

That was her current guess, anyway.

She heard the window open and close and knew Clark had returned.

“Not as bad as I expected,” he said, referring to the accident. “Everyone was wearing their seatbelts. That always makes a difference.”

“That’s good,” she said as he sat beside her.

“New story?” he asked, glancing at the papers.

“I think so. Leanings is shady,” she said before putting the paper in her hands aside. “Anyway, I think we both would prefer to talk about something not related to work.”

“I think you’re right,” he said with a smile, glancing at her ring.

“I’m thinking May. Not too hot and we miss all the rain,” she said, fiddling playfully with her ring.

Clark smiled. “That sounds perfect. May 1st?” he asked.

“Four months away. That should give people enough time,” Lois agreed. “And give us enough time to plan, but not too much time.”

“Not too much time?” he asked, confused.

“Trust me. If we wait too long, my mother will commandeer it. Oh gosh! My mom,” she groaned.

Clark looked at her sympathetically. “That’s something else we should probably discuss.”

She sighed. “Why can’t they be like your parents? Your parents are great.”

“We can always elope?” Clark asked tentatively.

“Don’t tempt me,” Lois argued, smiling before taking a breath. “What should we do? I mean, I don’t want to risk them making a scene at the wedding, but to not invite them....”

“Maybe we could make an ultimatum?” he proposed after a moment of thought. “Ask them to get counseling. They don’t need to get it together of course, but they clearly need to address their . . . self-control issues. If they don’t agree and begin to start something at the wedding . . . well....”

Lois slowly nodded. “I think that’s fair. Considering everything, they should be happy with that option. I know many people would not be as accommodating,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “So, who else should we invite?”

“Hmm. I would prefer to not invite the whole world,” she contemplated.

“Just close family and friends, then? I’d be okay with that,” he admitted.

“I think . . . I think that would be best. We can start the list after we get back from lunch,” she decided happily, getting up.

Clark intercepted her with his aura, draping it across her form like a tarp before physically wrapping his arms around her as he kissed her soundly.

She giggled. “You know, most people in love can’t keep their hands off each other, but it’s clear we have a bigger problem.”

“It’s a good thing we’re getting married in four months then,” he said, grinning, before the grin slipped into a somewhat mock grimace. “Ugh, four months.... You sure

you don’t want to elope?”

Lois laughed.

Clark paused in front of the modest house on the outskirts of a suburb.

He supposed one could consider that crazy, maybe even sad, but all he could think about was how happy he was that his life had settled enough to allow him to finally place some roots and build more personal, normal, friendships.

Since moving to Metropolis over two years before, he had of course gone out to eat with the crew from the police department a few times for lunch (as Clark), but because of his schedule and their own busy lives, finding a moment to actually do something beyond that just never happened.

Well, until Bill Henderson’s wife insisted on meeting Clark herself: the man who had saved her husband’s life not long after he started working on missing persons cases in Metropolis.

He had been invited by Henderson to watch that weekend’s game, the Metropolis Tigers against the Cincinnati Owls. Clark was excited, almost giddy. He couldn’t remember the last time he had watched any game with a friend, let alone at their house with their family.

Admittedly, it was strange to finally do so two years after the event, but Clark couldn’t help but wonder if it had taken Bill that long to finally tell his wife how seriously close he had come to taking a few bullets to the head.

He walked up the porch and knocked on the door.

He immediately heard two kids calling for their parents, letting them know someone was at the door. A moment later, the door opened.

“Hey, Clark, just in time. The wife is setting out snacks now,” Bill said, stepping aside.

Clark smiled as he entered. “Sorry Lois couldn’t make it. She’s on assignment.”

“I understand and suspected that would be the case due to the short notice. Maybe next time. I know Melissa especially would like to meet her,” Bill said.

Melissa was his fourteen-year-old daughter, and she adored Lois. Not only had Lois helped her dad bring down Lex Luthor, she had named Superman!

Suddenly, a six year old boy dashed from the hall and stopped at the threshold of the entryway. He had bright blue glasses and was Bill’s youngest. He turned and stared at Clark’s chest.

“Hi,” Clark said cheerfully.

“You gonna say hi, buddy?” Bill prompted his son. “This is Clark. He helps me catch bad guys. Remember I said he’d be here to watch the game with us?”

The boy blinked before dashing off again.

Bill sighed, resigned. “Sorry. Paul’s . . . he’s....”

“Shy?” Clark provided, not quite sure what this was about but sensing Bill’s unease.

“I wish that was all it was,” Bill said softly. “I don’t tell many people, but he has some kind of developmental issue. They call it Autism. We’re still getting a grasp on it. He was just diagnosed.”

Clark tilted his head. “I’ve heard a little bit about it. I understand there’s a broad range of possible symptoms. How severe?”

“He was non-verbal until last year. He can speak short sentences now. Donna and Melissa have worked very hard with him. My wife has done a lot of research,” Bill admitted.

Clark heard Bill’s heart rate calm upon learning he was already somewhat familiar with the disorder. Clark could easily imagine how people typically responded and he ached for his friend.

“There’s a lot doctors don’t know about it. I think Donna might know more about the condition than most ‘specialists’ now,” Bill added with a hollow laugh.

“A mother’s drive. I’m not surprised. If I come across anything that might help, I’ll let you know,” Clark said.

“Thanks. I, uh, not many people at the station know. It’s not something that’s easy to discuss.”

“I understand,” Clark said, the unspoken promise clear in his voice.

“Well, the game starts soon,” Bill said, forcing himself to shift topics as well as his tone. “Any drink preferences?”

“Root beer?” Clark asked.

“You’re in luck, we have that,” Bill said, much more at ease as he motioned him to follow.

They entered the kitchen where Donna and Melissa were. Melissa was sorting the snacks while Donna finished stabbing the meat and cheese cubes with toothpicks.

“Donna, Melissa, this is Clark Kent. Clark, my girls,” Bill introduced.

Donna quickly put down her work and went around the island to Clark.

“It’s so good to finally meet you. I can’t thank you enough for what you did for Bill,” she said, clasping Clark’s offered hand in both of hers.

“Happy I was able to help,” he said, having long since learned playing down saving someone’s life was somewhat crass.

“What happened?” Melissa asked curiously.

“Mr. Kent saved your dad’s life. It was a few years ago,” Donna answered.

“What?!” she asked, appalled at learning her dad had apparently almost died with no one telling her.

“There was no point in worrying you, especially when it had all worked out,” Bill said apologetically.

“Is the guy still in jail?” she asked, her ability to make

conclusions as sound as her father’s.

“Yes, and he won’t ever be coming out,” Bill assured.

“So what exactly happened?” Melissa pressed.

Donna gave Bill a ‘I told you’ look but remained silent.

Resigned, Bill answered. “He helped me serve a warrant to a suspect and the suspect pulled out a gun. Mr. Kent stepped between me and the gun, took the shots point blank. Fortunately, Kent was wearing a bulletproof vest, but still.”

Melissa gaped at Clark.

Clark tried not to look too self-conscious.

“Whoa,” she breathed. “Makes sense that he’s your friend then.”

“Melissa,” her mom said, both exasperated and amused.

Melissa shrugged. “What? It was a compliment. I’d want a friend like that.” She suddenly blushed and hurriedly returned to her task.

Bill shook his head, doing his best to prevent himself from chuckling as he grabbed their drinks and led Clark to the living room.

Clark stayed for the entire afternoon, cheering on the Tigers right along with Bill and his family. While it was clear they were not as devoted to the sport as Bill, they all enjoyed the game, including Paul. However, Paul had to wear a pair of earmuffs during it. Clark made no comment and shared the bowl of chips with the boy. A few times Clark sensed Bill get nervous about how Paul might behave or perhaps by how Clark would react to Paul, but Clark felt things went well, even though Paul didn’t say a word the entire time. The only slightly tense moment was when Paul tried to take Clark’s chip from his hand. Before he could touch the chip, Clark gently but directly stated it would be better for Paul to either ask or get his own chip from the bowl, while offering said bowl.

Bill slowly exhaled as Paul deftly sat beside Clark and shared the bowl with him.

It was a very close game with the final score of 32-29, Tigers. A few times, Clark had to consciously control his reactions or he would have had some explaining to do. That, and he didn’t want to have to replace his friend’s couch.

“We will definitely need to do this again,” Bill said as they stepped out onto the porch later. “And hopefully your fiancé will be able to come.”

Clark smiled. “We’d like that.”

“I have to say, Clark, I was a little . . . nervous about how today would go, but Donna insisted,” Bill said after a moment.

“Because of Paul?” Clark asked.

“Most people don’t know what to do around Paul, so they either ignore him or make things even more . . .

awkward. Granted, it's usually Donna's friends so it might just be that dynamic, but . . . I doubt it."

"That must be frustrating. I imagine getting him into situations to really teach him is harder because of that," Clark said.

Bill nodded. "We'd love for him to learn how to behave in a restaurant, but that's not possible right now. I doubt he would be able to even tolerate the noise, and trying to stack teaching manners on top of that?" Bill took a deep breath. "Sometimes it's like trying to teach a brick wall, but there are other moments where I know he hears me. He certainly heard you today."

"I'll do some digging into the condition, if that's okay with you. I have some contacts and there might be other things you and your wife can try."

"Sure, have at it. If anyone can find something helpful, it's you."

"I'll keep you posted," Clark promised, before heading out.

The following morning brought snow, but the sky wasn't pristine. Instead, smoke was stretching far into the horizon.

Over half of the paper factory was already engulfed and the fire was unfortunately doing an excellent job of following the building's perimeter walls. If there was anyone still in the structure, their escape was likely cut off.

Kal landed beside the fire chief.

"What's the situation?" he asked as a team worked on guiding a hose to the nearest wall with windows as another team raised the ladder from a truck to spray from above.

"Over seventy people are estimated to still be inside according to their HR department, Superman. We're hoping they've moved to the center of the building since every exit has been blocked as far as we're aware," the chief explained. "The manager told us he believes the fire started in the paper mill near the factory's intercom system, which prevented them from notifying their employees of the danger as well as they would have normally. And, while the fire alarms still worked, they have been having issues with false alarms lately, so people didn't respond as they would have otherwise," he said, sighing heavily. "The evacuation was disorderly to say the least, hence it being incomplete."

Superman frowned grimly. The factory was very large, probably employing over five hundred people. He scanned the building, immediately finding much of the structure already on the verge of collapse. He levitated up, seeking the trapped souls, and soon found them.

They were huddled in a large conference room and had sealed the vents and bottom of the doors with their jackets and vests to reduce the rate of smoke coming in. Inhalation

was the largest threat facing them at the moment, but fire was already overhead, licking down the insulation and along support beams.

He quickly landed again, snow crunching under his tread.

"The people are in a conference room nearest the west side. I'm going to try to get them. They don't have much time," he said, before shooting off.

He entered through a broken window and blew out sections of fire where he felt the internal supports could take the sudden load from his breath at speed. Unfortunately, there were not many areas where that was possible, but it was better than nothing. Careful of where he broke through walls, as he didn't want to make things worse, he sped toward the conference room.

A plan – a crazy plan – formed in his mind as he took in the state of the building and quickly surmised the likelihood of everyone surviving if he flew people out two by two. The crazy plan won.

He opened the door and quickly closed it behind him so fast barely any smoke entered with him.

"Superman!" several people gasped.

It was dark, but a few had flashlights and the S-emblem was easily recognizable.

Over sixty people were seated on the floor, doing what they could to limit their smoke inhalation. Most had shirts or scarves over their faces as well.

"There's no time. We must get out as a group. Can everyone walk?" he asked. They all nodded. "Everyone, take the hand of the person beside you, stand up and form a chain," Kal ordered, taking the hand of an elderly woman nearest the door.

Everyone immediately did as they were told, as desperate as they were hopeful – albeit confused.

"Don't let go. This might feel . . . odd," he warned as soon as the last person had taken hold and completed the chain.

He closed his eyes and allowed his aura to extend and flow over their forms, saturating their skin. He exhaled as many gasped at the sensation of his power wrapping around them.

The strain was there, but it was manageable. It helped that he wasn't healing, just protecting.

"Follow me and don't go any faster than the person in front of you. Keep hold of one another. You all will get out," he promised.

He turned back to the door, still holding the hand of the woman who had to be older than his mom but almost as spry.

He opened the door and immediately blew out a rush of fire and smoke.

Part of the ceiling had fallen.

He led them down the wide hall and through crumbled, smoldering walls. He blew away smoke as he went, providing a pocket of breathable air and a frosty path for those behind him. The roar of fire all around them urged them on, but the groan of overstressed steel overhead was what concerned Superman.

He stopped and raised his hand just in time. Flaming debris peppered half of the group as he caught the massive support beam and thrust it away, forcing the collapsing wall away from them all.

The group screamed but the feeling of his strength pulsing across their forms was more than enough to convince them to keep hold of one another's hands, even as embers rolled off of their sides and backs, charring and burning their clothing. But they felt no searing heat.

"This way!" Superman shouted over the din.

Fire licked at the hems of their clothing and in some instances even more as they marched on.

Superman glanced back and blew a cold pulse of air, extinguishing the flaming tendrils reaching out from the blazing walls revolting against his prior ice breath.

"We're almost there!" he encouraged.

And then he shoved down an exterior wall. Sunlight and cold air cut through the smoke and ash as he stepped aside and transitioned his hand from the old woman's to the shoulder of the person behind her so he could maintain contact with the chain as they hurried out to the awaiting firemen.

Only when the last person in the line was out did he move away from the building and break all contact. The drain from his center was instantly severed and he staggered to the back of the firetruck as someone came alongside him.

The crash of the exterior wall startled them all, but the sight of filthy people streaming over and out from the fallen wall was a welcome sight.

An elderly woman stepped out first, and a form who they all instantly recognized as Superman helped guide out the rest of the factory workers one-by-one (interestingly always being sure to contact the next person before letting go of the individual in front of them). All of them were holding hands.

Chief Mitchel quickly motioned for his men to help guide the group away and assess any injuries as he hurried to Superman.

Superman stepped away from the group he had just escorted from the doomed factory and Mitchel suddenly hesitated as he watched Superman all but stumble and catch himself against the back of the fire engine.

"Superman? Are you okay?" he asked, approaching the Kryptonian.

Superman nodded even as he took a deep, shaky breath and closed his eyes. He then tilted his head back and turned directly toward the sun and stepped completely out of the shadow of the ruined building to their right.

The glow of the sun bathed his whole form and within seconds the fatigue that had been plain on his form evaporated. He opened his eyes.

"I'm okay," he said, his breathing now calm.

Not exactly sure what had just happened, Mitchel took him at his word and returned to business with a relieved nod.

"Thanks, Superman. We're still working on determining who else is still missing. Do you know how many were in that group?" he asked, although he knew his men would provide him with a count soon enough.

"Sixty-seven," Superman answered.

"Okay, there are five people still trapped in there then," Mitchel answered gravely.

"I'll take a look and work on extinguishing the fire as I can," he said.

"Alright. We're working from the south and west to hopefully prevent this from spreading to the other buildings," he said, understanding why Superman could not simply blow out the fire with reckless abandon.

Superman could kill survivors by blowing down walls or unintentionally stirring up chemicals stored throughout the factory, which could expand the fire and further endanger those nearby, including Mitchel's teams, through the fumes and not just from the flames.

His ice breath was a wonder, but it required focused attention and, Superman himself admitted, that was difficult to do safely when moving quickly – which he normally did when rescuing survivors.

Superman disappeared, causing the snow around him to swirl up.

Less than two minutes later, Superman returned with two survivors suffering from severe smoke inhalation and minor burns. Once they were safely on their way to the hospital, Superman turned to Mitchel as the remains of the building beside them had little more than embers left to extinguish thanks to their combined efforts.

"I found the last three. They didn't make it," Superman told him grimly.

Mitchel sighed. He had expected that. Actually, before Superman had broken through the exterior wall, he had expected there to be over fifty fatalities before it was over.

"Where?" he asked.

"Northern walkway over the main mill chamber. I suspect it fell while they were heading to the north-eastern exit," he explained. "It's not much consolation, but it must have been fast."

"That's all we can hope for in instances like these,"

Mitchel agreed. “We can take it from here, Superman. Thank you. You no doubt prevented things from becoming much, much worse.”

Superman gave a departing nod and shot up, a sonic boom in his wake.

[Chapter 12: Mind]

“Do my eyes deceive me?!” Perry boomed across the press pool. “Lois, do you have something to announce?”

Lois laughed before holding up her left ring finger for all to see.

“Yes. Believe it or not, everyone, I’m engaged!” she declared.

Lois enjoyed the resulting chaos and flashed her ring to anyone expressing curiosity or disbelief. Which was everyone.

“Who?!” someone asked.

“That P.I. fellow, right?” Jimmy inquired.

“That’s right,” Lois said proudly.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough now. Back to work!” Perry ordered after the long moment of upheaval.

Lois smirked, certain Perry had enjoyed the brief disturbance, even as she got back to work herself.

Other than answering questions about her upcoming wedding and ‘the lucky man’, the rest of the day was fairly typical, although it did pick up when news of the factory fire came.

“Superman appeared to recover quickly in the sun after leading a group out of the building before helping the fire crews to finish extinguishing the blaze,” the news reporter said. “It is believed the cause of the fire was from a malfunction in the mill’s machinery. An investigation is underway.”

The reporter approached some people standing to the side, looking shaken but relieved.

“Behind me are some of the people Superman helped out of the building,” he said before turning to the man at the head of the group. “Sir, could you share what happened?”

“Yes. Superman found us and walked us all out,” he explained. He appeared to be an office supervisor.

“Walked you all out? At the same time? How many were with you?”

“Over sixty,” he said. “Superman had us make a human chain and he took the hand of the first person in the line. Soon after, I guess he did something with his aura because I felt a strange sensation surge over my skin and I felt . . . strong. He then led us through, blowing away fire and smoke as we went. It was scary at first, but after some debris fell on us without harming us, we knew everything would be okay.”

“Debris landed on you?” the reporter asked.

“Yeah, the fire was in the ceiling and all around us. The building was burning down fast. It’s why he had to take us all out together. It would take too much time for him to fly us out one at a time or even two-by-two,” the man said.

“But by extending his aura you all come out unharmed?” he asked.

“Yeah. Some of my clothes got burned,” he said, holding out his sleeve and showing the charred fabric and bare arm. “But it just felt like warm dust on my skin.”

“Amazing.”

“It was,” the man agreed. “He covered us, shielded us with his power. I can never fully describe it.”

Lois smiled softly as those around her watched the newscast with interest.

“I wonder how many people he can protect,” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m certain the answer will always involve ‘all he can’,” she said, turning back to her work as the news went onto something else.

Jimmy nodded. “Well, is there anything I can do for you, Lois?”

“Yeah, actually, could you look into these people? I’m curious about financial backing and if any new donors have appeared or if any suddenly dropped,” she said, handing him a list of people with ties to Representative Fred Leanings.

“Sure, no problem,” he said, before dashing off.

Hopefully he’d return with some leads for her. With any luck, she’d have another major story wrapped up before the Pulitzer Award Ceremony at the end of the month.

Lois smiled as Clark entered her apartment that evening.

“So the Planet now knows I’m engaged,” she said, pleased.

“And I imagine the reaction was entertaining?” he asked knowingly.

“Yes. I should have asked Jimmy to be ready with his camera,” she lamented.

He laughed. “Fortunately, I can imagine it pretty well, so no big loss. Anyway, have you already eaten?” he asked.

“No, would you like for me to order out?” she asked.

They ended up ordering out and settling down for the evening in the living room. Nothing was really on television, and they would much rather talk anyway.

“I saw the news today. Have you spoken to Dr. Klein?” she asked.

“I stopped by the Foundation soon after. We had already agreed that I would check in with him if I ever

ended up using my aura in public like that,” he said.

Lois looked at him curiously, silently insisting he continue.

He smirked at her expression and resumed. “He was quite excited, and insisted on testing out a new contraption he had created to ‘see’ my aura.”

“See it?” she asked.

“It’s an overlay on a screen produced by a special camera he made. Bernie said it’s just a prototype, so really primitive, but it still impressed me,” Clark explained. “Anyway, everything was normal. Well, my normal anyway. But we did learn my aura saturates living tissue more easily than organic material and much more than inorganic. We don’t know exact amounts yet, but Bernie’s current estimates put living tissue seven times easier to cover than organic material and at least twenty times easier than inorganic.”

“Wow. That explains why those people in Spain were unharmed while their clothing was ruined,” Lois said. “How many people do you think you could protect?”

“I don’t know. It’d really depend on the situation I think. I can protect more children than adults, just because of their smaller size, but it’d also depend on how close they were to me and each other, and if they’re touching or not. Covering the people today was a little difficult, but I think I could have covered a few more without much trouble. Granted, I was fully charged, so to speak, before the rescue today. Bernie thinks part of the reason why my aura tore before was because I had exhausted myself before even reaching Spain.”

“That makes sense,” she agreed. “So any other progress, research wise?”

“Work on the crystals has been put on the back burner with everything, but Bernie said he has some ideas on testing my telepathy,” he said.

“I’m really glad Dr. Alcon and that nurse have kept quiet about it,” Lois said.

“Me too. I went back to visit and to thank them, and they assured me they wouldn’t tell anyone unless I told them it was okay,” Clark said, just as relieved. “Anyway, how is your investigation on that politician going?”

“I found a few more things, though I’m waiting for Jimmy to get back with me on something else before I submit it all to police. Fred Leanings is definitely going down. He’s scum.”

“Sounds like it. If he’s using a professional arsonist slash bomber, calling him scum is being extremely polite,” Clark agreed.

Lois laughed. “True. But enough about work. I talked to my sister last night about what had happened over Christmas with . . . well, long story short, she completely agrees with our plan. I hope to call my parents this

weekend.”

“I suppose it would be silly to offer to talk to them with you?” he asked, not sure how best to help but wanting to.

“I’d appreciate you being with me when I talk to them,” Lois said. “But beyond that, maybe a flight after?”

Clark smiled. “I can do that. And actually, would you like a flight now?”

“Things will have to be pretty busy for me to ever say no to a flight with you,” she said as they stood up.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked after spinning into his suit.

“You know, you’re going to spoil me,” she pointed out as she happily went to the window.

“That is sort of the idea,” he said, smirking before taking her hand. “Besides, it’s the least I can do for a Pulitzer winner.”

“I haven’t won it yet,” she countered.

“If you don’t get a Pulitzer tomorrow night for ‘The Fall of Luthor’, you’ll need to investigate the board, or whoever organizes all that, because they’d have to be corrupt or brain dead not to choose you,” he said.

She laughed as she took his hand and reveled in the reality that was her life.

Soon after, he took her over the Atlantic and they watched the sunrise over distant mountains beyond the expansion of blue.

Agent Karl Rawlins hoped this would be an easy, straightforward day. Of course, he knew that was a ridiculous wish. Nothing ever went according to plan, and the moment it appeared things were settled, that’s when things always blew up.

He was at the Metropolis Convention Center, acting as a point of contact for the MPD. He was an NIA agent and was hoping to get some information about the whereabouts of a professional bomber, Joe Arlo, aka: Joe the Blow, through the arrest of Representative Fred Leanings. Granted, he wouldn’t be a representative for much longer.

Rawlings looked around, detesting the political flare around him. Leanings was holding a rally for the upcoming election, vying for re-election.

Well, he was in for a surprise.

The crowd was large and happy, waving patriotic flags and posters with catchy slogans. Although indoors, the place was so big, he had no doubt that it had as many seats as some football stadiums. It was certainly just as rowdy.

Suddenly, one of Metropolis’ police officers appeared at his side and spoke softly by his ear.

“Sir, we have an issue. Code 10,” he said as someone official looking went onto the stage as quickly as they could while trying to appear as if they were not hurrying.

“Where?” he asked.

Code 10 was code for 'bomb on site'.

"Northwest corner. The janitor found and reported it. We haven't confirmed it, but it seems legit," the officer said as the man on stage began directing people to calmly go to the exits.

"Out of an abundance of caution, we're going to evacuate the building over chemicals found within the building," the smartly dressed man said. "So please, everyone, calmly exit the building using the south and eastern exits. Sorry for the inconvenience."

Representative Leanings then chimed in.

"Everything is alright, folks, just please cooperate and evacuate. If need be, we'll hold the rally across the street," he said, keeping himself upbeat.

At least he was being helpful, but now they would have to make his arrest sometime after this new crisis had passed.

The type of crisis was not missed by Rawlings, and he suspected this was part of an elaborate plan to bring Leanings some more attention and sympathy from the masses. If his rally was interrupted by a bomb (or what was perceived to be a bomb), he might get more votes.

Rawlins inwardly rolled his eyes as he began helping police direct people out by waving them along with his NIA badge in his hand. He exited the building and began guiding people to go through the parking lot and across the street.

"Agent Rawlins."

He turned and found a man he immediately suspected was heading up the team responding to the bomb threat. He pulled away from the moving crowd as another officer took over for him.

"I'm Mark Tye. Bomb squad is on the way. I understand you might know who is responsible for this?" he asked, leading him to a makeshift control center that was just beginning to be set up.

"Yeah, Joe Arlo. Professional," he said. "I can't go into things further due to the active investigation, but I will say I have reason to believe this is genuine. I'm glad we're evacuating," he said as people continued to stream out of the convention several yards away.

Mark was about to respond when they heard a sonic boom quickly followed by a whoosh and materialization of a colorful human form.

"Superman," Mark greeted, astonishing Rawlings by his calm demeanor.

"Mark, how can I help?" Superman returned, just as straightforward.

"We haven't been able to examine the suspected bomb or check for perimeter traps yet. Priority is clearing the building," Mark said.

"When was it found?" Superman asked.

"The janitor found it less than ten minutes ago," Mark answered. "It's in one of the power control closets in the northwest corner of the building."

"I'll take a look," he said, facing the building.

The Man of Steel disappeared, shooting off to the opposite end of the large building. Rawlings turned back to Mark and asked if they should move. Mark began answering but then the ground shook and the building groaned under a gong of massive power.

Superman flew over the building and paused as he began to peer through the structure in search of the explosive. Not immediately finding it, he glided closer to the corner and scanned again before his eyes immediately zeroed onto the shape that didn't belong.

However, before he could investigate further, he felt a very odd . . . pulse. He likened it to a pressure wave but this had a much tighter feel.

Ultrasonic?

'This is the pre-recorded voice of your friendly neighborhood bomber...coming at a frequency only you can hear to let you know that your singularly dense molecular structure has triggered my auto-sensors.'

'Thank you for triggering them, as I doubt the bomb squad would have been happy if my scanners had detected their equipment instead.'

'In either case, I doubt everyone will be leaving here unscathed, even with you helping.'

He saw a gear shift in the contraption as electronics began to hum. He moved.

'Toodles.'

He was through the closet door and on top of the bomb just as it blew.

He dampened much of the blast that went up and out, but the building still violently shook and groaned.

He felt the reverberation extend throughout the structure and heard the crack of dozens of bolts overhead break away from one of the building's main support beams.

Screams soon followed as the portion of roof over the immediate blast zone began to collapse. He shot up, flying up and through the small power room's ceiling directly overhead to the grand ceiling that overlooked much of the convention center.

His shoulders braced against the beam and its weight settled upon him as smaller chunks of the ceiling fell. He shot a few beams of heat vision where he hoped some spot welds would help prevent it from unraveling completely.

The masses that had been evacuating in an orderly fashion were now in a complete panic. They pressed against each other to get to the exits, but that was only one aspect of the turmoil. From above, he scanned through the

floors and the walls, hearing cries that were not just of fear, but pain as well.

In another area of the convention center, separate from the main meeting hall, other people were now trapped under debris that had fallen during the artificially made quake.

And he couldn't get to them.

If he did, the roof would collapse on everyone.

But then something else abruptly seized his attention.

A second bomb. Bigger than the first.

He mentally pulled at his vision, zooming in on the horrid contraption. It was on a timer.

647, 646, 645, 644 seconds....

He floated up an inch, causing the beam to shift against his back as the implications settled on his mind.

This second bomb was meant to kill anyone coming in to help. It would also prevent the people still in the building from ever leaving under their own power, especially in the current, frantic chaos.

But he couldn't move.

He frowned, his options instantly narrowing to one as he turned his head to the southern wall and found the closest individual who could help.

"More units are on the way," someone stated.

"We'll set up triage in the parking lot," another said.

"Tye's left to the north side to direct first responders there."

"Where's Superman?" the first officer asked, voicing the same question on all their minds.

"No one has seen him return. Maybe he's helping people inside?" another proposed before grabbing their radio and answering someone on the other end.

Rawlins stepped away from the response team as more sirens approached. He was trying to decide if he should seek out Mark Tye when a voice interrupted his thoughts.

/Agent Rawlins/

He stopped, bewildered. No one was around him. The voice was not shouted or even loud. No one had called him from a distance. It had been close. Had he imagined it?

/Rawlins, I don't have time to explain. Please just listen, / the voice said. /There's a second bomb and it's bigger than the first. It's located in the sound booth behind the stage in the main hall. It has less than ten minutes left on its timer but I can't stop it. I'm holding up the roof and there's people trapped from the first explosion./

"Superman?!" he asked out loud.

/Yes. Please hurry. And if you need to ask or tell me something, just talk out loud. I'll hear you. Even though I can send you my thoughts, it doesn't work the other way around./

Rawlins immediately rushed to the officer directing

other emergency personnel. He would digest everything later.

"Look, we have less than ten minutes to clear the area. I just learned there's a second bomb. Where's the bomb squad?" Rawlins asked.

"What?! They're seven minutes out. How do you know there's another?" he asked, alarmed.

"I'm an NIA agent, I have contacts," he explained simply, showing his badge to confirm.

Things were happening quickly, he wasn't sure who knew who he was and who didn't.

/There's a man having a heart attack near the western most exit. Brown hair, red jacket,/ Superman thought to him suddenly.

Rawlins put his hand against his ear, as if holding an earpiece.

"Get some paramedics to the west exit. Look for a man with a red jacket. He's having a heart attack," Rawlins said.

"Sir, if you're right about there being a second bomb, we can't send more people in there," the officer said.

/He's being helped out, but no one knows what's wrong. They think he's just out of breath after being elbowed,/ Superman added, apparently listening in.

"He's being helped out. Just tell the team over there on the radio to be on the lookout for him. Brown hair, red jacket," Rawlins reiterated while heading off before the officer could argue.

"I'm wasting time seeking help. Can you see inside of the bomb?" Rawlins asked Superman, hoping he didn't look too odd talking to himself even though he was trying to make it look like he had a small wire radio.

/Yes. It's fairly basic, fortunately. You have to disconnect wires and cross a pair. If it was only disconnect, I'd just laser cut them, but they're not,/ Superman lamented.

"Do you know where I should go in?" he asked, reminded that Superman could see through things.

/The door up ahead. That's the clearest path,/ Superman promptly answered.

Rawlins tried not to think about how bizarre this whole situation was as he hurried to the closest entrance while trying to avoid bumping into fleeing people.

"Let me pass, let me pass, I must get inside!" he shouted, displaying his badge.

"Agent Rawlins?!" a voice shouted.

Rawlins huffed in annoyance as he turned, but then he was relieved.

"Tye, I need to get inside," he said.

"I know, someone told me there's a second?" Tye asked, mindful of his words though all non-first responders nearby seemed more concerned about getting to the

parking lot.

“Yeah, in the sound booth behind the stage,” he said, navigating around the people still exiting.

There were fewer now. While before the exodus had been a flood, now it was an urgent trickle with a few injured.

Tye followed behind him with a brief update to dispatch as the rest of his team continued to help navigate the remaining people out.

Now past the people, the two of them dashed forward as quickly as they could down the entrance hall. Rawlins was grateful the man wasn’t hounding him with questions or trying to stop him.

“He talking to you too?” Tye asked once they were alone.

Rawlins nodded, not bothering to hide his relief to have proof that he wasn’t actually losing his mind. “No idea how, but I’m not going to complain.”

Leaving the entrance hall, they entered the empty main area and immediately saw the damage from the blast.

Cracks were visible on the far north wall, and some speakers and fans previously suspended from above had fallen onto the stands around the stage. However, their eyes were immediately drawn to the man hovering against a long support beam and holding up the now rickety ceiling.

/We have four minutes. The wires are behind the second panel of the bomb. You should be able to pry it up. Then cut the black, red and yellow wires and cross the yellow with the black,/ Superman thought to them quickly.

Hurrying behind the stage to the sound booth, they quickly found and disarmed the bomb with 207 seconds to spare.

“I have men going to those you told me are trapped, though I’m sure you already know,” Tye said, looking up.

/Thanks. /

“We need to figure out what to do about the roof,” Rawlins said, somewhat unnecessarily.

Superman laughed, though they heard it as a faint echo because of how high up he was.

/Yes. Although I could do this all day, I would rather not,/ he admitted.

“I’ll get on that,” Tye promised, smiling for the first time that day before quickly giving an update to his team outside and asking for them to call in some help for the beam.

With that taken care of, Rawlins refocused.

“I need to see where the PD is at on an arrest warrant,” Rawlins said apologetically.

/Before you go, you should know Joe Arlo spoke to me through a recording just before the bomb detonated. He had a sensor that can detect high-density objects, so it

detected me,/ Superman explained. /Although he found a way to differentiate between me and something like metal, he suggested that if first responders with dense equipment had come in the area instead of me, the bomb would have been triggered just the same. Please share that with those who need to know./

Rawlins and Tye froze at that knowledge. If Arlo could do that, that made it even more dangerous for anyone seeking to arrest him.

“How do you know who Arlo is? Did he actually identify himself on the recording?” Rawlins asked.

/Ms. Lane shared some information about her investigation with me. I know Mr. Arlo has been working with Mr. Leanings so feel it’s a safe assumption that this bomber is the same man./

“And this, uh, telepathy?” Rawlins asked, waving his hand near his head.

If he was a drinking man he would enjoy a stiff drink after all of this. Even now he still might. He also wished he was having this conversation with all participants on the ground.

/Long story short, it’s a new ability that’s somewhat linked to my aura. This is the first time I’ve actually used it outside of practice or when my aura had been damaged,/ he explained.

Rawlins was surprised by how open Superman was being, although he knew he shouldn’t be because this wasn’t the first time he had seen Superman be astonishingly blunt and honest. It was still hard to believe though.

“And it only goes one way?” Tye asked.

Rawlins was glad he wasn’t the only one leery on that possible aspect.

/As far as I know. And that’s after a number of my friends and family tried ‘thinking at me’./

“I see,” Rawlins said, deciding this had to be the most bizarre conversation he’d ever had.

/Thank you for handling all this the way you are. I imagine it’s strange and likely . . . disconcerting,/ Superman said.

“No problem. We’re happy we were here to help you,” Tye said, before the radio chirped.

A construction crew was on their way.

An hour later, Representative Leanings had been arrested, a construction crew had sired up the support beam and Superman had flown away.

Rawlins suspected there would be a statement from the Foundation soon.

[Chapter 13: Reveal]

Tom Sparks was a journalist for the Metropolis Star. He was new to Metropolis and had never personally seen

Superman before. He eagerly waited with the rest of the press in front of the Foundation.

The Foundation had announced they would be making a statement at 3pm, a few hours after the bombing of the Metropolis Convention Center.

Speculation was now running rampant, and as more and more details of what had happened began to trickle out, it was clear why.

A second bomb had been found and stopped, only no one had initially known about it. So then how did two first responders know to head in to diffuse it? How did they know right where to go and how to diffuse it before it could go off?

What was equally intriguing was how specific rescue instructions had been dished out at remarkable speed and accuracy, even before emergency response teams were fully organized on site. For example, a man who had been in the middle of a heart attack had received emergency help immediately upon exiting the building before he even knew he needed that level of assistance.

And then there were several instances involving first responders being directed right to people trapped under debris. One woman was even adamant about a voice ordering her not to move and to wait until help arrived. She later learned that if she had moved, she would have shifted the debris in such a way that she likely would have been crushed to death before she would have been saved.

And that whole time, Superman had been occupied with holding up the roof.

Was he somehow involved in all of this? But if he was, how? And what did it mean?

The Foundation Director, Mr. Maverick Ervin, stepped out, followed by Superman.

Tom Sparks could only stare. It was really him. After moving to Metropolis and getting a job at The Star, he had known it would only be a matter of time before he saw him, but to finally see him after all the years of watching him on TV and hearing people talk about him, it felt unreal.

His bright red cape waved in the brisk breeze, and the sapphire blue of his uniform stood out almost as starkly as the bold red and yellow S on his chest. How he didn't appear ridiculous, Sparks didn't know, but all he did know was that Superman was awesome.

"Thank you for coming. Now, we'll get straight to it because I imagine many of you already suspect what this is about," Mr. Ervin said.

"Today, just before noon, a bomb was found at the Metropolis Convention Center, but it went off while the building was being evacuated and before Superman could disarm it. Soon after, a second bomb was discovered and fortunately disarmed, while a number of individuals were

rescued in record time while Superman held up the severely damaged roof," Ervin said.

Many in the crowd nodded expectantly, already knowing most if not all of what Ervin had summarized.

"What many of you have not yet been told, although might suspect, is that Superman communicated with first responders to facilitate those timely responses," he continued.

Sparks nodded. That made a lot of sense. Superman had been in a position to see where help was needed, but when did he begin carrying a radio?

"We had planned on making a statement on this in the coming week, before he used his newly developed ability in public, but obviously the plans have changed," he said.

Like everyone there, Sparks was stunned.

A new ability?!

Questions from dozens of people were asked at once, members of the press barely restraining themselves from clamoring forward as Mr. Ervin stepped away.

Superman quickly came up to the podium and raised a hand for silence.

He got it.

"Thank you. Before I begin, I'd like to remind everyone that I value honesty and have strived to be as upfront and forthright as possible about myself. Some things I cannot share, like the identities of those who adopted me when I came to Earth, or where I go when I am not serving the world as Superman. But everything I can share, I have and I will.

"Now, to my new ability. It is connected with my aura and, to put it as simply as I can, is one-way telepathy," he said, continuing before anyone could think about trying to ask a question. "It came about after my aura was injured, and for a time I couldn't control it – just as I couldn't control my aura. After my aura healed, my thoughts were no longer randomly escaping, for lack of a better description, but I realized I could, with enough effort, send them on purpose. I have practiced with my friends and family since returning from Spain, and only just recently became confident enough to try 'thinking to' willing volunteers at the Foundation.

"Today was the first time I have ever used this new power on purpose in an emergency. I'll take a few questions now."

Hands shot up like they had touched fire, but everyone was amazingly professional – likely hoping good behavior would get them selected by Superman.

"Mr. Pierce," Superman called, pointing to a man from CBI News.

Many people, including Pierce, looked startled by the fact Superman knew his name, but then they recalled Superman had an eidetic memory.

“Thank you,” Pierce said, collecting himself remarkably well. “Superman, what do you know about this new ability so far? How certain are you that it’s only one-way?”

“I can only think to people I can see and it seems to be harder the further away I am from them,” he said. “As for it being one-way, so far, I haven’t been able to read anyone’s thoughts, despite my friends and family trying to send me theirs,” he said, sounding baffled by his loved ones.

It was actually amusing.

“Anyway, even if I could receive people’s thoughts, I would only actively seek them if it would help in an emergency, much like how I use my x-ray vision,” he explained before pointing to another reporter.

“Katherine Gonel, BBN,” a short woman introduced. “So while you were still recovering from the injury to your aura, you were also having to contend with accidentally sending out your thoughts?”

“Yes, which is part of the reason why I was isolated for so long,” he explained.

“Was it strange to you? Or are you used to these sorts of things?” she asked.

“Every new power is strange to me at first,” Superman stated, to all of their surprise. “When I first came here, I didn’t know how different I was, and it was only later when I realized why. Although I know I’m not human, I look human and, admittedly, I’d like to think - outside of my abilities - I feel human. Especially when I’m not in the public eye.”

He then began to lift his hand, as if to point to the next reporter, but then he stilled and tilted his head.

“I’m sorry, there’s an emergency,” he said, before promptly vanishing with a sonic boom.

Tom Sparks decided that what he had seen on television of Superman was nowhere near as impressive as seeing him in real life.

Lois stepped beside Clark with the Pulitzer Award in her free hand as Jimmy took yet another picture of them.

“I’m so proud I can’t see straight,” Perry said as they exited into the cold, January air.

Lois grinned, even though her face was literally hurting from all the happy exercise. She just couldn’t help it.

“Well, I’ve got to get home. Wife is waiting,” Perry said suggestively before dashing off to the cab that had pulled up with Mrs. White.

“Are there any more pictures you want taken?” Jimmy asked.

“No, I think you took enough pictures of tonight to make a movie. Thanks, though, Jimmy,” Lois said, amused.

She was pretty sure part of the reason he had been so click happy was because he wanted to ensure to capture pictures of the happy couple.

“You’ll send me copies of a few of those, right, Jimmy?” Clark asked.

“Sure thing, C.K.” he answered happily.

Lois had never doubted that Clark would get along with Perry and Jimmy, but it was still great to see how well he interacted with them, especially with Jimmy.

Getting down to it, the young man needed an older brother figure, whether he would ever admit that or not. It also wouldn’t be bad for Clark to have some male bonding time as well. She knew he had enjoyed the game day at Henderson’s place but unfortunately lining up schedules was often difficult.

Fortunately, thanks to Perry, Clark would now be attending the monthly poker night, so they would both now have an opportunity to obtain a brotherly friendship.

“Ready, Lois?” Clark asked.

She blinked and realized she had missed part of the conversation.

“Uh, yup, ready,” she said.

Clark eyes sparkled in amusement, no doubt knowing she had no idea what they had just said, as Jimmy nodded and wished them good night.

“So, shall we call it a night or . . . ?” Clark asked once Jimmy had headed home. It was dark, but it was barely 9 o’clock and it was a Friday night.

“The night is young, Clark,” she teased before growing hopeful. “I think we could sneak in a movie, maybe?”

He grinned.

“Sure, we can do that. Would you prefer a cab or . . . ?” he asked with a subtle swooping hand motion.

“I think you know,” she said.

“Alright, let’s go,” he said.

They walked down the street a ways and, after Clark glanced around, went down an alley and ducked behind another building. Soon after, they were flying to her apartment, Kal’s cape flapping in the wind.

Lois slid her hands across the tight blue fabric along his side and back and smirked as she felt his aura shiver from his frame and against her skin.

“You better be careful. You might make me fly us into a building,” he said, though he was smiling.

“It’s a good thing we’re almost to my apartment then,” she said, before bringing her lips to the side of his neck and kissing a trail to his ear, grateful for the dark night. No one could see them.

He shifted her closer to himself as his aura wrapped around her fully. Her heart quickened as she identified the emotions ebbing from him.

He made it to her window and expertly opened it,

despite her efforts to distract him. Granted, she suspected he had plenty of motivation to get into her apartment so he could ‘retaliate’.

The window had barely closed behind them when his mouth met hers and his aura pulsed densely against her skin. His hands glided gently up her arms as she tried to tug him closer to her.

The living room light turned on.

“**Lois?!**”

Kal and Lois both whipped around, stunned.

“Lucy!” Lois cried. “What are you doing here?!”

“What am I doing here?! What are *you* doing?! I can’t believe this! I came here to surprise you for winning that Pulitzer, but didn’t expect—”

“Lucy, it’s not what it looks like,” Lois tried, but her words only spurred Lucy on.

“Not what it looks like?! You were all over each other! *Superman!*? Seriously!? What about Clark!?” she exclaimed, outright screaming the last question before facing Superman. “And you! I thought you were a romantic! Saving yourself for your true love but instead you’re here with the fiancé of another man! What a croc, you’re just like every other male!”

Lucy fumed as Lois looked at Kal, completely unsure of what to do. Kal took a deep breath and stepped forward.

“Lucy, Lois *is* my fiancé,” he stated.

“What?” Lucy asked, utter confusion strangling the tirade that had been about to continue.

“I’m marrying Lois in May. I asked her in December on my parent’s farm in Smallville, after my aura had been damaged in Spain,” he explained.

“What?” she asked again, trying to process what he was saying. “You mean—you mean you’re—” She looked back and forth between Lois and Superman, dazed. “You’re Clark, the P.I.?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, suddenly looking out of place in the red and blue, which was really strange as he had acted more like Superman right after being caught kissing her sister than he did right then.

“Oh. Uh, okay...” Lucy looked dizzy.

“Are you okay?” Lois asked.

“Yeah. Just give me a moment to wrap my head around my sister being engaged to the same person who stopped Nightfall, and the fact I just yelled at someone who could squish me like a bug if they wanted to,” she said while maneuvering herself onto the couch behind her. She took a deep breath.

“I’ll, uh, let you two talk,” Kal said somewhat uncertainly while looking at Lois for input.

Lois nodded, knowing that if she wanted a productive conversation with her sister Kal couldn’t really be present. To put it simply, he would be too much of a distraction.

“See you tomorrow,” he promised Lois before he turned to the window.

Lucy stared as he vanished the next second.

“I can’t believe it,” she managed after a moment of uneasy silence. “You’re . . . he’s. . . Are you sure with it all? What am I saying? Of course you are.”

Lois went to the couch and sat beside her.

“I’m not sure what to say right now,” Lois admitted, “Only that I’m sorry you found out this way.”

“Not as sorry as I am. Gah! I walked in on *Superman kissing* my sister!” Lucy combed her hand through her hair fretfully before she gave a somewhat hysterical chuckle. “But hey, at least I know this Kent guy is a good man and will be able to keep up with you.”

“You’re not wrong,” Lois admitted, relaxing a little.

“You’re not going to tell Mom and Dad, right? I mean, I think Dad would be okay with it, but Mom . . .” Lucy suddenly questioned, concerned.

“I haven’t really talked to Kal about that, but no, I hadn’t planned on it – at least not any time soon,” Lois agreed.

“Good. That’s good. Just imagining what Mom would say is bad enough—”

“Yeah. I agree,” Lois said, smiling softly as her sister proved herself to be more sensible than their mother yet again.

“Just promise me that if or when you tell Mother that you give me a heads up so I can disappear for a week or so to avoid the fallout,” Lucy said, sending her a smirk before blinking. “Wait, did you just call him Kal? That is so weird. I mean, I know his name is Kal-El, everyone knows that, but it’s so weird to hear you say it so casually.”

“I knew him as Kal before Clark, although he’s answered to Clark for far longer than anything else, and he views himself as Clark first I think,” she rambled, clasping her hands together. “So, uh, anyway, are you okay with this? And, I know I don’t really need to ask, but—?” Lois asked.

“Lois, I don’t want Mom to know, so I definitely won’t tell anyone out of fear of her ever finding out. I think we both don’t want to have to deal with that. As for me being okay . . . I think so. I’m definitely better than I was when I thought you were cheating on your fiancé with Superman!” she declared.

They stared at each other for a long moment before breaking into laughter.

“Man, you should have seen your faces when I turned on the light! Especially his! I can’t believe I surprised him! I thought he had super hearing or whatever,” Lucy said, laughing.

“He does, but he was pretty distracted,” Lois said, just as tickled.

"I'll say!" she agreed. "Man, only *my* sister could distract the Man of Steel!"

Lois blushed.

"So is he really a 'sentimental softy'? Come on, I want all the juicy details," Lucy insisted.

Lois grinned, suddenly glad Lucy had found out. It would be nice to talk without having to hold back certain details due to who Clark was. She could brag on him without restraint.

And that's what she did.

"I'm glad your sister took it so well," Clark said, clearly relieved as they dug into lunch the next day.

"Me too, though I'm not that surprised. She already liked Clark and, like much of the world, was already a Superman fan. It makes sense that she would warm up to the truth before too long," Lois said, pleased before growing serious. "And actually, she was more concerned with how mother would react if she ever learned than the fact you're you."

Clark grew still.

"I guess that's something we've never really discussed. Do you want to tell your parents?" he asked.

"No. I—I mean, sure, it might make some things easier, but overall, I really don't think they need to know. As awful as this sounds, they're really not part of my life enough for it to be worth it. For the risks to be . . . I mean, what would the benefits really be? It would only make things more complicated. Hopefully I'm making sense. I just . . . do you want them to know?" she asked, growing uncertain.

"Considering everything . . . no. And yes, you're making sense. It's a dangerous secret," he said softly.

Lois nodded, resolute. "Only people who have to know, have to know."

"Yes," Clark agreed.

"Are you okay with Lucy knowing? She understands the importance of the secret, but she doesn't exactly have a need to know," Lois said.

"She saw Superman and Lois in a pretty heated . . . make-out session. She needed to know," he said, his cheeks suddenly dark pink. "Besides, I have my parents and Burton to talk to, you need someone too. I know there might be times when you need to openly talk to someone who's not me or directly tied to me," he said.

Lois smiled lovingly at him.

"I'll admit, it was very nice to actually be able to fully brag about you," she said with a grin.

"Oh?"

"How you spoil me, how we sometimes watch a sunset and then a sunrise in the same evening. How you always make sure I'm warm enough, and when I'm not, you warm

me with your heat vision," she said.

"You like that?" he asked, pleased with himself.

"Uh, huh. And I like it when you let me wrap myself with your cape," she said.

"I'll have to remember that," he said, smiling back.

"It's more because of the view I get than anything else," she added with a suggestive smirk.

"You're incorrigible," he said, before kissing her soundly.

Clark glanced through the police file, unsurprised by the criminal profile of the suspected kidnapper.

It started off as a domestic dispute two states over, but then spiraled into a kidnapping and then a missing person. Going against court orders, a girl's mother had taken her from her father before fleeing and crossing multiple state lines. As bad as that was, the police had caught a break and knew where she was headed. Unfortunately, what no one had expected, the five year old girl, Ally, managed to escape from her mother before the police could catch up. However, instead of trying to find her daughter or surrender and seek help, the mother had decided to cut her losses and run even harder – revealing even more about her character than the initial kidnapping had.

The police found the mother just beyond Kansas City and, after interrogating her, learned Ally had snuck out of the hotel twelve hours before, just outside of Metropolis sometime the previous night. No one knew where she was now. There was a highway near the hotel, as well as a national park and a major trucking bay.

"And it's been about 48 hours since she ran away from her mother?" Clark asked.

"42 hours," Henderson said.

"There's something more to this, isn't there?" Clark asked, feeling something amiss.

"Ally Holtz is a granddaughter to the German Ambassador to the US," Henderson explained.

"Ah. Okay. What has been done so far?" Clark asked.

"Search teams have been organized and are combing through the national park as we speak. And surveillance videos are being reviewed from the trucking bay, but there unfortunately weren't any cameras at the hotel," Henderson summarized.

"And the highway?" Clark asked.

"A few cruisers have patrolled, but they haven't reported anything," he said. "Right now, most of the search is in the park because the thought is that a child would more likely go there due to the clear path from the hotel. Also, those manning the weigh stations for the trucks have been interviewed and they don't recall seeing any children. Granted, it was night when she ran away, so it's possible she was there and they just didn't see her."

Clark hummed in thought.

“Any scent dogs?”

“The mother didn’t have anything they could use to track her, and the hotel room had been cleaned by the time officers got there. The father is sending some clothing of hers, but they won’t arrive for the dogs until tomorrow,” he explained.

“Alright,” Clark said, putting the folder down and standing up. “I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

“Sounds good. Thanks,” Henderson said.

Clark nodded before heading out, a destination already in mind.

He had a theory, a theory that had quickly been proven when he did a quick fly over of the highway and spotted the child hunkered just within a dry storm drain.

Less than twenty minutes later, Clark was jogging along the side of the highway in the grass, scanning the ditches and brush that covered much of the area beyond the road as he kept his ears locked onto the girl’s heartbeat. He knew she hadn’t moved from the storm drain. Cars passed by, oblivious to his purpose as he continued away from the exit leading to the hotel. He came upon the storm drain and leapt down from the minor ridge running parallel to the road. He landed in the dry brook and slowly approached the large, concrete pipe.

The girl immediately stood up as he came into her view. She was dirty, but didn’t look too bad considering she had been outside and on her own for almost two days.

He held up his hands.

“Ally, I work with the police,” he said, before slowly retrieving his wallet and showing her his private investigator identification. “My name is Clark Kent.”

“I want my dad,” she stated, sounding as scared as she looked.

“Alright, come on, kiddo. I’ll take you to the police and then they will take you to him,” he promised, holding out his hand.

She took it without much hesitation and he pulled out a package of crackers from his inner vest pocket.

“Here, I’m sure you’re hungry,” he said.

She ate it promptly as they walked, slowly working their way back up to the visible side of the road.

“I take it you were trying to get back to your dad?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said tiredly.

“Here, would you like a piggyback ride?” he asked.

He knelt down and helped her on to his back before walking them the rest of the way to town. Entering the closest building, which was a gas station, he called Henderson and the state wide search was ended.

Perry was thrilled by the article of the missing child

being found, and the fact the girl was a granddaughter to an Ambassador was an added bonus.

“That fiancé of yours is something else,” Perry said, chuckling.

“He is,” Lois agreed.

Lois hadn’t identified Clark specifically as the one who found Ally, instead saying one of the search volunteers had found her. However, she had told Perry the whole story.

“Well, good work, Lois, even though you technically had an inside track on this,” he said, amused.

She waved him off and shifted gears.

“I’ve finished the preliminary write-up on the history of the Prometheus space program like you asked, so it’s ready for whenever they christen the space station today,” she said.

“Good, good. Which, that should be very soon,” he said, standing up and hurrying to the threshold of his office. “Hey! Turn those things up!” he said, pointing to the televisions.

Someone quickly grabbed the remote and they all soon heard the reporter on screen.

“And in just five minutes, at nine o’clock Eastern Standard Time, we’ll take you live to the opening ceremonies of the United Nations’ Space Station. Home to over one hundred orbiting scientists and astronauts—” he began, before pressing his hand against his ear. “— Just a moment . . . I’m . . . Apparently, um, there has been some kind of . . . technical difficulty,” he said anxiously. “The space station’s rockets have misfired and are driving the space station towards the Earth’s atmosphere, where the space station will . . . burn up if reentry cannot be prevented. Mission Control is in contact with the space station, but so far they are unable to ascertain the reason for the station’s thrusters firing.”

The newsroom quickly fell into a frenzy, Lois turning to her computer and writing.

“For those of you just tuning in, the United Nations’ Space Station’s thrusters have inexplicably ignited and are driving the station toward the Earth’s atmosphere.” He took a deep breath. “So far, the crew has not been able to shut down the engines. Mission Control now estimates that the friction from the Earth’s atmosphere will cause disintegration of the station to commence in . . . wait, wait . . . we’ve just received an unconfirmed report that Superman has arrived at the Space Station!”

Lois gave a silent prayer, knowing this was the largest thing Kal had ever attempted to directly maneuver. The Space Station was over ten times heavier than the space shuttle, Messenger, had been.

[Chapter 14: Feats]

The alarms were screaming, having detected the

sudden loss of standard orbit a dozen seconds before.

Levi King braced himself against the bulkhead as the station jolted hard to the right, the gyros unsurprisingly failing to counter the craft's abrupt rotation as another set of thrusters fired.

"Commander, we can't turn off the thrusters. Something is preventing our override attempts!" Maurice, the head scientist of Prometheus, cried as the blue orb of Earth on the other side of the window began to grow closer.

"Could we open one of the entry doors and vent a section out to counter the thrusters?!" he asked, willing to try anything at this point. He knew they had little time.

"The vector isn't right; we would still enter the atmosphere. The slight change in angle wouldn't make any difference to us," Maurice said dejectedly.

It would only change the debris field location on Earth.

"Would it allow us to use the escape pods?" he asked.

But he already knew the answer.

Their descent was too rapid. The escape pods could only be used to evacuate in the case of a station fire or strike from orbital debris or micrometeoroid, not if the station was falling from its standard orbit.

"Superman!" someone shouted, pointing to the window.

They all immediately turned their attention to the red and blue figure outside who was completely exposed to the vacuum of space. He didn't even have oxygen!

He approached the main support column nearest the core of the station, no doubt having correctly concluded it was the backbone of the entire structure.

Levi and those with him stared.

Was Superman actually going to try preventing the entire space station from falling out of orbit by pushing it? Sure, he had lifted Messenger into orbit, but the space station was more than fifteen times larger and also had a massive amount of inertia because it was currently going over twenty-two times the speed of sound around the world. There were also the eight thrusters propelling them beyond the point of no return.

Which meant . . . if Superman pressed on that single point, all of the loads would be concentrated there. Levi stilled as realization settled upon him. Even if Superman was strong enough to physically push them back into orbit, they would likely break apart in the process!

But what else could be done? There was no time.

They watched in frozen fear and hope, torn between knowing his efforts would likely be in vain and the belief that if anyone could save them, it was Superman.

Superman's hands made contact with the column and he quickly braced himself against it. Heat collected, a red and hazy halo appearing around Superman and the

structure's surface as they entered the edge of the atmosphere. Superman strained, his efforts evident in every outline of muscle beneath the thin blue fabric. Metallic groans echoed ominously throughout the structure as their descent visibly slowed and then . . . the radiant glow of heat ebbed away, Superman still pressing against the station and astonishingly moving them back into orbit.

The thrusters turned off and Superman pulled away, visibly fatigued as he hovered just beyond the large, reinforced window they had been watching him through.

His gaze passed over them all, pausing briefly over each of their name and title badges. He then made eye contact with Levi, the highest ranking individual there.

Tapping the side of his head, Superman drifted closer and stopped less than a foot from the glass.

/Apologies if I startle you, Commander, but are you in standard orbit? How is your speed and vector?/ a voice in his mind asked.

Levi jumped, but then remembered Superman could send out thoughts.

"Uh, one moment," he said, feeling a little odd talking to him through the glass but they had just escaped death so experiencing anything was a blessing. "Are you okay?"

/I'll need to get some air in a few minutes but I'm fine/ Superman answered.

Levi hurried to the control panel and readout screen as he turned to Maurice. "Check our rotation, make sure our gyros are working as they should."

"Is he . . . thinking to you?" Maurice asked as he began looking at another screen.

"Yes, can you not hear him?"

"No," Maurice said before typing on the keyboard.

"Okay, rotation is good. A little slow, but still within our safety parameters."

"Superman, I can open the docking bay and you can come aboard, if you'd like, as we check our systems," he said, turning back to the window halfway through talking.

/If you were talking to me, I can't hear you right now. I can read lips if I can see your face though/ Superman thought to him.

"Oh! Right. Sorry," Levi said before he repeated his suggestion and took the opportunity to really look at Superman just floating in the confines of space with Earth as a backdrop. His cape was listlessly shifting behind him, suspended in weightlessness, while his hair was barely disheveled.

/Alright. Thank you/ Superman said, looking both intrigued and (Levi thought) possibly relieved.

"I'm opening the starboard docking bay now," he said, while deciding this whole hour would definitely be something to tell his grandkids about one day.

Superman nodded, looking in the direction of the bay

doors.

The colonists were ecstatic when Superman came aboard, but especially Amy Platt and her mother, who had both been on Messenger, destined for Prometheus, when he had saved it three years prior.

Prometheus was now part of the UN's Space Station and was where most of the medical experiments would be continued.

"Superman!"

Amy Platt, as weightless as the rest of them, floated forward in awe.

"You saved us again!" Amy exclaimed, excited as many others also expressed their gratitude.

Superman smiled and graciously accepted their thanks.

"Would you like a tour?" Mrs. Platt asked.

"I would like that," Superman agreed.

While Levi and his team worked on verifying their orbit was stable, the colonists gleefully showed Superman around. From experiments to the discoveries and progress made, they outlined everything as they went through the station.

"My legs are beginning to work," Amy said, wiggling her feet as they floated along. "In a few months, I'll return to Earth and get used to real gravity again."

"We can imitate gravity here, by going into the rotating section, but it's obviously limited," one of the scientists explained. "Strength wise, her legs are around 30%. So with continued physical therapy back on Earth after her regimen is complete, she'll eventually be able to build that to 100% by the time she's twenty-two."

"Will this treatment be available on Earth soon?" Superman asked.

"It's best received in space, due to the difference of cell growth here, but an Earth trial has been started, it is just much more aggressive so has different risks."

Superman nodded his understanding.

Not too long later, Levi's team and Ground Control confirmed all of the Space Station's systems were sound and its orbit was perfect.

Superman left after a number of happy photos were taken.

The christening of the space station had certainly been memorable.

Lois grinned, falling into the familiar groove of investigating.

Unsurprisingly, Perry wanted to know why a 64 billion dollar space station tried to turn itself into a charcoal briquette so had given her the task to figure out what the heck had happened.

After asking Jimmy to dig into some people involved with the program to cover her bases, she called STARLabs

and hoped one of her new contacts would be able to help. Thankfully, they could, and thirty minutes later she was at STARLabs.

"Thank you for seeing me so quickly, Dr. Morrison," Lois said as the scientist led her into one of the laboratories.

"Oh, it's no problem at all, Ms. Lane. I'm actually very excited to help you. I love your articles," Dr. Morrison said.

Dr. Carolyn Morrison had become a researcher at STARLabs two months before and had connected with Lois through the janitor—one of Lois' many contacts. Carolyn was a particle physicist from MIT and, while young, had already helped with a number of advanced projects. Lois was hopeful that would allow Carolyn to help her with her investigation.

"Thanks," Lois said, following her to the computer.

"So, seconds before the main thrusters ignited, the station received a very brief, tight beam microwave transmission. It sent in a computer code that overrode the automatic controls and fired the thrusters," Carolyn said, typing away.

"Do we know where the transmission came from?" Lois asked.

"No, but fortunately we have ways to possibly find out," she said with a smirk. "Ah ha! It worked. Although brief, the microwave beam left a trail of agitated molecules along its path, a plasma wake, and luckily, we didn't wait too long before checking."

"So we have a trail or something?" Lois asked, not sure if she was following but hopeful.

"Yes. By using the infrared detectors on some low-orbiting satellites, I've backtracked the column of heated molecules to its source," she said, leaning back. "I'm switching over to the NIA spy satellite, so we'll have real time photos in a moment."

"The spy satellite?" Lois asks. "You can do that?"

"Shhh, it's a secret," she said, quite pleased with herself before the screen finished loading.

"Here we go! Eastern seaboard looks like New Troy, there's the river," she said as the image zoomed in, pinpointing the origin of the transmission. "Charlotte Drive. Looks like it came from right here in Metropolis!"

Lois sighed. "Of course, where else would it be? Every villain in the universe seems to operate out of Metropolis. For once I just wish there'd be a villain in Maui, or Aspen, or Monte Carlo," she said wistfully.

Carolyn laughed. "If only."

"Okay, well, how accurate is this?" she asked.

"Plus or minus six feet," Carolyn answered.

"I'd say that's close enough. Thank you, so much!"

"No problem, just remember to keep my name out of

it.”

“Of course,” Lois promised.

Clark entered Lois’ apartment and smiled at the sheets of paper scattered across her coffee table. After making sure the only heartbeat he heard within the apartment was Lois’, he spun into his less colorful attire.

“You know, one of these days you’re going to have to show me where you put those clothes when you’re not wearing them,” Lois said, entering the room.

Clark laughed as he sat beside her.

“Well, I’ve made a great deal of progress on the investigation, but now I’m mostly waiting to hear back from some people,” she said, gathering some of the papers to stack.

Clark looked at her with interest.

“Okay, to sum up, I learned the Space Station had been sent a signal and I, through a contact at STARLabs, was able to backtrack it and found the origin—which of course was in Metropolis—” she said, rolling her eyes. “And so I went to the location, a quaint little neighborhood, and found a weird little chip thing in the backyard of a house up for sale. I then brought that back to STARLabs. While I was there, my contact deciphered the computer code sent by this micro-transmitter chip thing and, apparently, if you hadn’t been able to save the space station, the main thrusters were programmed to stop, and the altitude thrusters would have fired. The Space Station would have saved itself.”

“So, you mean there was never any real danger?!” Clark asked, astonished and more than a little disturbed.

“Exactly.”

“But why program it to put itself in jeopardy, and then rescue itself?” Clark asked.

“That’s the 64-billion-dollar question,” Lois said.

“It’s as if . . .” Clark said with a frown. “As if it was a test.”

Lois nodded grimly. “That was my thought. Anyway, when I was at that house, I met this real estate guy named Dave Miller who said he was representing some buyers. No big deal, right? Well, I called the real estate place he supposedly worked at and, guess what, no Dave Miller.”

“Weird,” Clark said.

“Yeah. So, I called Detective Koromodo to see if he could find any mug shots on guys who might run real estate scams or be experts in microwave technology,” she said.

Clark laughed. “I bet he loved that.”

“He thought it was strange, but he knows me enough not to question things too much,” she said with a shrug.

“I’ll bet,” Clark agreed before growing thoughtful.

“What?” Lois asked.

“Do you have a paper and pencil?” Clark asked.

“Of course,” she said, getting up and quickly retrieving a notepad and pencil for him.

“Do you think you could describe him well enough to me?” he asked.

Lois blinked. “You’re kidding. You can sketch?” she asked.

“Fairly well. It’s been useful when I’ve spotted a glimpse of a person I couldn’t immediately get to for whatever reason,” he said with a shrug.

“Okay!” she said, sitting back down.

“So, start with a general description comparing his features to mine. It’s easier for me to draw then,” he said, lifting his pencil.

Lois nodded and started describing ‘Dave Miller’, starting with the overall shape of his face. Before too long, Clark was adding details and making touch-up after touch-up as Lois continued to describe.

“How is this? Is this him?” he asked.

“Oh my gosh! Yes! That’s amazing!” Lois exclaimed, very impressed.

“Thanks,” Clark said, a little embarrassed but pleased by the praise.

“Is there nothing you can’t do?” she asked teasingly.

“Well, actually I wasn’t always able to draw. Drawing is one of the few things I had to really practice at, outside of controlling my powers anyway,” he admitted. “Before I learned, I could only do stick figures and rudimentary faces. Drawing was very hard at first.”

Lois smiled tenderly at him, knowing how having this in common with the rest of the majority of humanity was special to him.

“Well, all that practicing definitely paid off,” she said.

“Thanks, although I could always use more practice. Maybe I could draw you some time?” he offered.

“Oh, so I would need to pose for you?” she asked, suggestively.

His cheeks pinked, but he responded without pause. “I already have your facial features memorized, so if you just want a standard portrait, I wouldn’t need much help there.”

“What about a full body?” she asked, smirking.

“Before or after we’re married?” he asked, redder than before.

She laughed. “I’ll stop torturing you,” she said.

“I wasn’t complaining,” he said, grinning before kissing her and wrapping his aura around her like a cocoon.

The sketch of Dave Miller was quickly forgotten.

Joseph beamed as his mother reached back and gave him his bag of snacks she had just gotten from the gas station. They were on their way back home from visiting

his grandparents and he knew his dad was eagerly waiting for them.

She turned back around and was about to start the car when a figure appeared on the other side of her door and flung it open.

The next few seconds passed before he could fully process them, but they would be ingrained in his mind forever.

His mother screamed as the man yanked her out of the car by her hair before slamming something silver into her side. A sound he had never heard before came out of his mom as the giant man dropped her.

“My son!” she shrieked, her voice as panicked as his soul as she tried to get up. “Please! Let him out! Take the car, but let him go!”

The man snarled and turned toward her, rearing his fist back. Joseph gasped when he saw that his fist was clenched around a large knife that was already marred red. Time slowed.

There was a loud thunderous boom as a massive form of red and blue appeared over his mom in front of the blade.

Joseph’s fear morphed into joyful relief.

Superman!

Superman grabbed the man as the now crushed knife clanged onto the pavement. Joseph would later swear Superman’s eyes were glowing red. He looked so mad! In a blur, Superman suddenly appeared beside a stop sign and bent it like a rope around the man before reappearing beside his mom again.

“Ma’am!” Superman called, kneeling beside her.

Joseph clamored out of the car.

“Mom!”

He froze as he saw red spreading out from her side. He had never seen any injury bleed so much!

“Superman,” she gasped, relieved.

“What’s your name?” Superman asked her.

“Martha,” she answered. “Martha Tyler. Where’s— Joseph!” She spotted him.

“Mom! You’re bleeding!” he cried, hurrying to her other side, opposite from Superman.

“We need to get you to the hospital,” Superman stated firmly, immediately placing his arms under her.

Joseph could hear people approaching, but he didn’t bother to look. His eyes were on Superman and his mom.

“Come on, son, let Superman help your mom,” a voice said behind him. “We’ll wait for the police in the store.”

Joseph felt as if he couldn’t breathe. What if he never saw his mom again? She was so pale.

“Joseph,” Superman said, wrenching him from his thoughts. “Get on my back and hold on.”

Joseph didn’t need to be told twice. He dashed around

and jumped on, wrapping his legs around the hero’s waist and hugging his neck and shoulders with his thin arms, never minding the cape now crumpled against him.

They moved fast, and he held on as tightly as he could, but he felt no pull from the abrupt movement. It was almost like riding piggyback with his dad, only in the sky. Everything around them was a blur, until it wasn’t.

They appeared just outside of a hospital, and he didn’t move to get down as Superman continued forward.

Doctors and nurses were suddenly there with a stretcher, and Superman gently lowered Martha upon it. Joseph peered over Superman’s shoulder down to his mom.

The blood was even more pronounced against her pale white skin and light blue blouse than before.

“She needs to go into surgery immediately. There’s a severed artery. My finger is on it, I’m keeping it closed,” Superman said, sliding his right arm out from under her legs while keeping his other around her back and side as the nurses moved.

People were talking quickly and placing things on his mother, blocking his view of the wound as his mother answered their questions the best she could.

“My husband is at home,” she said before she looked up over Superman’s shoulder and met Joseph’s eyes. “I’ll be okay, sweetheart,” she said, reaching out her hand.

He took it and tried not to cry.

“Be good, okay? We’ll be home before you know it,” she promised.

“Okay, mom,” he said.

“Alright, got it,” someone said, and Superman eased them back after helping his mom lay fully on the bed.

They wheeled his mom away and Superman let him stay as he was until she disappeared behind the double doors.

Carefully, he helped Joseph slide off his back with his right hand, keeping his other hand away – the hand that was covered in blood.

Superman knelt in front of him and touched his arm with his clean hand.

“They’ll take good care of her,” he said.

“Superman?” a voice asked.

They turned and found a police officer.

Mayson skimmed over the police report, once again approving of its thoroughness coupled with its impressive brevity.

“Thank you, Kal,” she said, putting it aside. “Like most other cases, I doubt you’ll be called to give testimony at the trial, but I’ll make sure Justice Stewart knows you are available if needed.”

“I understand. Is Mrs. Tyler and her son alright?” he

asked.

“Yes. She just got out of surgery and, as far as I know, is in recovery. The boy is with his father,” she said, watching Superman’s shoulders ease at her words.

“We have plenty of eyewitnesses, so, unless he wishes, Joseph won’t need to testify,” Mayson added.

“That’s good,” Kal said quietly.

Mayson inwardly frowned, never having seen this side of Kal before. He seemed . . . detached almost. No, that wasn’t quite right.

“Are you . . . okay?” she asked. She felt strange asking, but the thought of allowing him to leave without trying to make sure he was alright felt wrong.

“My mom was mugged once,” he finally said, not looking at her.

Mayson stilled.

“I was about Joseph’s age. It was nowhere near as bad as what happened today, but . . .” He didn’t continue.

“You saw yourself in him,” Mayson supplied.

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“Did they catch the guy?” Mayson asked.

“Eventually, but not before he hurt someone else.

While my mom had suffered a black eye, the other woman was in the hospital for weeks,” he said.

Mayson watched him silently for a long moment, wondering if he was talking about his birth mother or the human woman who had adopted him, but did it matter? She told herself she didn’t particularly care how long he had been on Earth before becoming Superman. After all, it wasn’t any of her business.

She made herself shift back to the present. “Did you use your heat vision on the knife today?” she asked.

“No. I’m afraid if I had I might not have stopped there,” he stated frankly before he looked up at her. “Why?”

“Some eyewitnesses stated your eyes had glowed red before you . . . wrapped the perp in the stop sign.”

She didn’t like that he had damaged public property, but compared to even Metropolis’ own police department, he damaged less public property each year than them. Besides, it wasn’t like the city wouldn’t be reimbursed by the Foundation. She also didn’t blame him. She knew many officers who might not have been able to restrain themselves from actually harming the creep.

“Sorry, that sometimes happens when I’m angry,” he said apologetically.

“No need to apologize,” she said, a little surprised he seemed to care what she thought. An uncertain quiet rose between them. “Kal, I know I haven’t always . . .” she trailed off, suddenly unsure of what exactly she wanted to say. “I mean, I had some reservations about, well, you, in the beginning, but I don’t have any now.”

He looked a little surprised but also touched.

“Thanks. I really appreciate that. I—” Kal began, but stopped as Henderson suddenly rushed into the room without so much as a knock.

“I’m sorry, but we just received a bomb threat! Front of the Metropolis Museum of Natural History. It’s supposedly in a backpack by the lions!” he declared.

Superman shot out of there faster than Mayson could blink.

[Chapter 15: Tested]

Superman appeared right outside the museum and instantly everyone nearby turned to face him in wonder and bewilderment.

What was he doing there?

He marched up the steps, and those on the steps quickly pulled back as he immediately reached down by the lion statue and picked up a backpack.

“Superman?” a woman asked. She appeared to be a teacher chaperoning a dozen students around her.

“There was a bomb threat, but there’s no bomb here,” Superman stated, opening the backpack and pulling out a piece of paper. He frowned as he read aloud. “‘Superman, if you’re reading this I assume you got my message. Here’s the location of the real bomb, it’s on this micro-CD. Unfortunately you have to assemble the player in time to play it. Good luck.’”

He looked tempted to crumple the note, but instead put it back in the bag and retrieved strange looking contents, including what was clearly a tiny CD.

“What’s that?” a kid asked.

The teacher quickly but gently shushed him, not the only one noticing how tight Superman’s posture was as Superman’s hands blurred for several seconds before suddenly stopping.

A CD player was now in his hands. Those around clapped and cheered, impressed.

“Wow! Neat! Can you make me one too?” the boy asked.

Superman smiled softly before putting in the disc and pushing play.

A condescending voice came out of the CD player. “Congratulations, but the bomb is still ticking. Here’s the bomb’s location: Number of years wandering in the wilderness and minus two dozen pies is the spot. Behind the oven.”

“That’s it?” the teacher who had previously shushed her student asked, clearly disappointed and baffled.

“Okay,” Superman said, processing the clues. “‘Number of years wandering the wilderness’. The most obvious answer is forty, when the Israelites were cursed to wander the desert for forty years because of their

disobedience and lack of trust,” he said before moving to the next portion. “‘Minus two dozen pies’. Minus two dozen. Twelve. Twenty-four. Pies. Minus twenty-four pies. Forty and minus twenty-four pies is the spot.”

“Twenty-four pies? That’s stupid,” the boy said.

“Why would anyone want to eat that many?” a girl asked, confused.

“No. It’s not pies, it’s *pi*’s,” Superman corrected gently, realization dawning.

“Huh?” she asked, not the only one confused.

“The number pi. 24 pi’s. 24 times pi is 75.398, rounded. So, it’s 40 and *negative* 75.398. It’s coordinates! ‘40°, -75.39° is the spot!’” Superman declared before he disappeared.

Kal landed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, knowing that was fairly close to 40°, -75°, and entered the closest gas station.

“Superman!” the clerk exclaimed as the door’s bell jingled behind him.

“Could I see one of your city maps, please?” Kal asked. “I need one with latitude and longitude displayed, preferably.”

“Y-yes, of course!” the man said, scrambling with the shelf beside him on the counter that had local and state maps.

He quickly pulled out the map of Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs and handed it to Superman, who was dutifully ignoring the curious onlookers from inside and outside the store.

Kal opened it and quickly scanned the large sheet on the counter, tracing his finger along the 40° latitude line until it went beyond the 75° longitude line, to about 75.4.

“There we go. Thank you very much,” Kal said, neatly folding it back up so it looked as if it had never been opened.

“No problem, Superman!” the clerk exclaimed.

With a parting wave, Kal vanished once more.

Newtown Township was a quiet and rather adorable suburb town. Following the mental image of the map in his mind, he hovered over Ivy Lane, which ran along the central square of the little shopping mall.

“ ‘Behind the oven’,” he muttered to himself, scanning the shops.

And then he spotted it, within a bakery, behind the main oven.

Not willing to wait a moment later, he shot down, hoping he wouldn’t startle the cooking crew too badly. He entered and moved the massive wheeled oven away from the wall, relieved no one was in the way.

The timer had a few minutes left on it as he x-rayed the bomb before carefully, but at super speed, removing it

from the wall. With a quick zap of his heat vision, he diffused it a second later, before examining it further. It was unlike any bomb he had ever seen, with crystals stilling out the top of it and looking quite futuristic.

“This can’t be,” he whispered under his breath, turning it in his hand and scanning it again.

It was Kryptonian technology. Or at least as far as he could tell. Had someone in Bureau 39 managed to copy or take something before Burton had sealed everything up? Or was....

“Superman, is it safe? Should we evacuate?” an authoritative, female voice asked.

He turned after burying his worried confusion and gave a kind smile.

There was a female officer (fresh donut bag in hand) and three bakers: two women and one man, who appeared to be siblings due to their physical similarities.

“It’s safe now. I’ve disarmed it but has there been anyone new back here recently?” he asked.

“Well, there was that health inspector two days ago,” one of the women said, connecting the dots and looking ill. “They showed their credentials though, it all looked legit!”

“Hm. They didn’t happen to call themselves Dave Miller, did they?” Superman asked with a frown.

“Oh my gosh!” the other woman exclaimed.

The man grunted. “Yeah. Thin, average height, black haired fella, right?”

“Matches the description I’ve been told,” Superman said. “I don’t know why he did this, but he’s dangerous.”

“Backup is on their way,” the officer said professionally, even as Superman placed the diffused bomb on the counter beside her.

“Very good, I—” Kal began, only to gasp loudly upon abruptly feeling a sensation he could only liken to walking through a dense spiderweb.

He physically shuddered as the ghost-like touch continued to ripple all across his form as he immediately peered through the building in the direction he believed it was coming from.

Through the bakery walls and across the mall square, he saw a man who was unquestionably Dave Miller—staring right back at him—just as surprised as he.

“Superman?” the officer hesitantly asked.

He moved, not about to allow Dave Miller (assuming that was even his real name) to escape. And if he was correct in his assumption, he had to be fast.

He shot out of the bakery as he saw Miller turn away and begin moving faster than any human could. But Kal was faster. Kal intercepted him while throwing out the most direct, commanding thought that he could at Miller.

/Stop! /

The man froze as they both came to an abrupt halt in

the middle of the square a few yards away from one another, giving Kal another opportunity to really look at him – although he already knew the truth.

With x-ray and microscopic vision, he could see that the man's exposed skin was just like his own in terms of density.

/I know you're Kryptonian and I will not allow you to continue threatening those under my protection, so stop. Talk to me,/ he thought to him, ignoring the confused audience around them.

The Kryptonian fully faced Kal, absolutely stunned.

"I am Kal-El, son of Lord Jor-El and Lady Lara. Now identify yourself and your reason for being here," Kal said, hopeful, more than anything else, for a dialogue.

"My Lord, Kal-El, I — I am Lieutenant Ching. The tests will end. It is now clear that you deserve your birthright," he replied while giving him an odd, chest-fist salute coupled with a low bow.

"Birthright?" Kal asked, rattled by the implications.

At that, Ching disappeared, choosing to run instead of fly.

Kal hesitated for a split second before making a decision.

He left with a sonic boom.

The telltale sound of Kal's arrival echoed through the Foundation, but instead of the normal, smooth swoosh, it was a loud concussion of displaced air.

"Mav! Julie!" Superman called out.

"Kal? What's wrong?" Mav asked, hurrying out of his office as Julie stepped into the hall.

"Call the UN and the US Embassy. I'm calling an emergency meeting. I need to meet with the United Nations as soon as possible," he said. "I met another Kryptonian. They were responsible for the Space Station falling out of orbit and the recent bomb threat. I don't think they're going to do anything else now, considering what they just said, but . . . I don't know."

"What did they say?"

"He said that the tests would stop, and that it was clear I deserve my birthright. He called himself Lieutenant Ching," Kal said as Mav led them into his office.

Mav picked up a phone as Kal retrieved a pen and notebook.

"Here, I'll write down what's happened," Kal said, his hand blurring.

"I'll call the Embassy," Julie said after quickly reading what he had written. She then immediately ducked back into her office as Mav spoke into his office phone.

"Hello, this is Maverick Ervin, Director of the Superman Foundation. Superman is urgently requesting an emergency meeting of the UN. Per section 2, paragraph 1

of the Treaty of El, he must immediately inform the Security Council if he ever encounters an individual, he believes to be Kryptonian," Mav said. He paused and listened to the person on the other side of the line.

"Yes, I'm quite serious," Mav continued, speaking to the UN official. "I have him right here. Shall he fly over now?"

Kal looked at him questioningly, silently asking if he wanted him to talk to the official. Mav shook his head negative.

"Very good. Main Chambers in UN Headquarters? . . . Alright. He's on his way now."

Kal nodded his thanks before vanishing, a sonic boom following soon after.

The person on the phone gasped at the sound.

Mav wondered how many would trip over themselves in Kal's presence that day.

Zara knew something had happened as soon as Ching entered their hidden craft in orbit. His expression was a strange combination of relief and astonishment.

"Ching?" she asked.

"He confronted me. I'm not sure how, but he sensed me looking through the wall at him after he stopped the bomb," Ching stated, sitting down. "There will be no more tests. He's worthy."

Zara was beyond floored. Kal-El had noticed Ching? Actually, sensed his gaze? And then confronted him?! And Ching was now sure he was worthy after weeks of making derogatory comments expressing the opposite?

"What did he do?" Zara asked.

"He intercepted me and he truly knows at least some Torquasm discipline. He sent me his thoughts as a warning before verbally introducing himself."

"Due to what his Foundation publicized, we knew he had some telepathy ability, despite no training," she said.

"You misunderstood me. Not only did he speak into my mind, the power. . . . Even if I hadn't wanted to stop, I would have because he told me to."

Zara blinked. "Torquasm Vo?"

"I think if it wasn't, it was close or a variant," he admitted.

"What else happened? Where did this happen?" Zara questioned, her mind now taking possible consequences into account. "Did people see!?"

"It happened near the bakery where I placed the bomb. And yes, people saw me, but we knew that was inevitable," Ching said. "So now we need to decide when to take the next step."

Zara stilled. "He's lived many years on Earth as Clark Kent, and while he also goes by Kal-El or Kal, I think he's going to take some convincing."

“What do you mean, convincing?” Ching asked uncomprehendingly. “It’s the law. He passed our tests, the law demands that he return! We’ll just tell him: it’s the law.”

“Kryptonian law,” she pointed out.

“Yes, and he is Kryptonian. He knows the Kryptonian language, as he displayed in that degrading interview, and there’s also the primitive work on crystals occurring, so he must have received some degree of instruction from Lord Jor-El. He’ll see what must be done and come with us,” Ching said, quite assured.

Zara placed her hand on his forearm.

“While I haven’t interacted with him as you have, I’ve watched him as Clark Kent. Ching, he loves Earth and its people. He views himself as their protector, perhaps even their Keeper, but it goes beyond that. His life as Clark is just as integral to his identity as Kal-El or Superman. I don’t think he will leave as easily as you believe, especially when he learns he won’t be able to come back,” she countered.

“Zara, he’s our future, and our children’s future.

Without him, New Krypton is doomed. When he realizes that, he’ll come,” Ching promised.

“I hope you’re right,” Zara said softly, “But if we are to convince him, we must be upfront. I think we should contact him sooner rather than later.”

“Very well.”

“What do you mean there’s someone else like Superman?” her mom asked from the other room.

Her dad had just returned from work as a server in the mall’s main restaurant and she could smell dinner cooking.

“Just what I said! There was this man who appeared when Superman sped into the mall square. A moment later, the man said something to Superman, bowed, and then shot off in a blur!” her dad answered.

Mary hurried into the room, very curious to hear more.

“What did Superman do?” Mary asked.

“He disappeared too. Some people think he went after the man. Maybe there’s something on the news about it,” her dad explained before turning on the television.

It didn’t take him long to find a channel with the news reporting on it since it was just after 5pm. Already, news stations were clamoring around the Foundation, expecting a statement concerning the ‘super’ individual who Superman had apparently confronted.

There were conflicting reports of what had been said between them, and unfortunately there was no footage of the incident, but what was consistent from eye-witnesses was that the man had bowed respectfully to Superman before dashing off in a blur.

Unsurprisingly, speculation was high and questions

multiplied. Was the man Kryptonian? Was he perhaps even a member of Superman’s family? Why did he bow? Why did he leave?

Fortunately, it seemed that they might be getting some answers as Mr. Ervin stepped out of the Foundation. Like so many times before, he went behind the podium and waited for those assembled to quiet.

“Thank you, I understand there are many questions on what has recently occurred, so I will get straight to it.

“Superman was in Pennsylvania today due to a bomb threat that originated in Metropolis. From what Superman was able to discern, the individual responsible had set up a series of problems to test him, with the final portion in Pennsylvania. For why exactly, Superman does not know. However, this stranger, who identified himself to Superman as Lieutenant Ching, did say the tests were over. He also seemed to suggest that Superman had passed, but again, the exact purpose of said tests is currently unknown,” Mav explained. He cleared his throat before continuing. “What is known is that Lt. Ching is a Kryptonian, and for that reason Superman is speaking with the United Nations this very moment. Per the Treaty of El, he is obligated to bring the existence of any Kryptonians to the immediate attention of the UN’s Security Council. As soon as he was able, Kal-El returned here and we called the UN and the U.S. Embassy to request an emergency meeting – of which, again, he is currently in. This is all that I can share at the moment. As soon as the meeting ends, he will make a statement. Thank you,” Mav finished.

The world stilled.

[UN Security Council Chamber, New York City]

Sekou Imani, the translator for the Representative of Angola, knew he wasn’t the only one staring as Superman pulled back from the mic.

He had just finished telling them what had occurred less than two hours before, as well as everything he knew about this Ching person, who had also gone by the name Dave Miller.

The Security Council Chamber had a large ‘C’-shaped table off the center of the far wall with three rows of chairs encircling the outside of it. On either side of this main seating area were three additional rows of red chairs facing the ‘C’, and facing the ‘C’-opening was an incline with several hundred chairs set in columned pairs.

Every seat was filled, with Superman seated at the 10 o’clock position of the ‘C’-shaped conference table so most of the chamber could clearly see him, although Imani had to turn his body slightly to see his face because he was seated just a few seats from him.

Cameras throughout the chamber were recording, but none of them were broadcasting live. This was a classified

meeting, although they all knew what was discussed would likely not remain outside of public knowledge for long.

“Thank you, Superman. And you believe he was also responsible for the Space Station falling out of orbit?” the current Head of the Security Council, Mr. Benjamin Jones, asked from the other side of the room.

“Yes,” Superman stated, before the representative from the US asked to take the floor after receiving a note from a messenger.

His request was granted.

“I just received information from my government. STARLabs has the micro-transmitter used to send the signal that caused the thrusters to misfire and found ‘Ching Ltd.’ inscribed microscopically on the center of the microchip. Also, the experts at STARLabs are floored by the chip’s intricacies. They’re confident no place on Earth made it,” the representative explained before sitting back.

“Thank you, Representative Jackson,” Jones said, before turning back to Superman. “Other than what he had said and his speed, are there any other indications that Ching is a Kryptonian?”

“I peered into his arm. His cell structure is like mine. He’s Kryptonian,” Superman clarified.

“And this birthright he mentioned?” Jones asked.

Everyone was very curious about that.

Superman sighed softly and actually looked a little self-conscious, or maybe that emotion was embarrassment?

“I’m the heir to the Noble House of El,” he answered.

“You’re nobility?” Jones asked, as surprised as most there.

“Yes,” he said with a nod.

“Was your father the leader of your people, then?”

“No, but he was in leadership. Kryptonian society was controlled by twelve Noble Houses, and a Noble Lord from one of those Houses ruled over the planet in turn through complex arrangements and negotiations. Those conditions were re-evaluated and remade each generation, so there was a rotation of power, of sorts. As for my father, he was Krypton’s leading scientist and the Head of the Kryptonian Imperial Council before they removed him.”

“He was removed as the Head? Why?” a council member beside Jones asked, not the only one who latched onto that bit.

“My father was demoted and ostracized for trying to warn the Council of the disaster that ultimately destroyed Krypton.” Superman’s jaw clenched before he went on. “From my parents’ recordings, there seemed to be more going on than an arrogant refusal to prove or disprove an unpopular theory. There were other things my father and the Council didn’t see eye-to-eye on. I believe when my father gave that warning and tried to inform the public, the

Council took it as an opportunity to get rid of him by painting him as a troubled scientist who had lost touch with reality,” Superman explained, clasping his hands together in what Imani could only assume was personal anguish.

“Do you believe a remnant of your people might have heeded your father’s warning?” Jones asked as Superman lowered his hands onto the surface of the table.

“I suppose it’s possible. I have no information outside of what my parents were doing those last few months. I hope someone listened, although if they did and Lt. Ching survived because of that, I don’t know why he felt it necessary to test me and put people in dan—”

Superman startled, as if his entire frame had been dunked in ice water, and exhaled heavily before pressing the bottom edge of his palm against the side of his head as if in pain.

“Superman?!” several people asked, understandably alarmed.

He could only liken it to a pulse, a strange droning sound echoing in his mind, like a radio trying to dial into the correct frequency. It was disorienting and more than a little painful, similar to his early experiences with super-hearing, but this was so much more encompassing.

Distantly, he could see and hear the people around him expressing concern, but then the echo refined and snapped to the edge of his mind, and the discomfort receded.

++Lord Kal-El++

He lowered his hand, the foreign haze lightening enough for him to focus and create a coherent thought.

He shifted forward in his seat and grabbed the nearest pen and notepad. Jotting down words, he motioned for the people beside him to read and follow along.

/Yes? Who is this?/ he asked, hoping he was projecting his thoughts properly as he wrote down the words being shared telepathically.

He knew the voice wasn’t Ching’s, for it was feminine.

++I am Lady Zara. We need very much to see you.++

/Zara?/ he questioned, his mind suddenly reeling.

She couldn’t be the same Zara, could she? The Zara whose name was written on his vessel that essentially stated they were betrothed?!

++Yes.++

The councilors around him shifted quietly, and he felt one of them—he believed it to be one of the translators, a black man from Angola—come beside him.

In a low whisper, the translator began reading into his mouth-piece what Kal-El wrote so everyone in the chamber could know what was being communicated.

/Is Lieutenant Ching with you?/ Kal-El asked, deciding to move on.

++Yes. And I know you have no reason to trust us. I can only give you my word that you must. There's so much to tell you, Kal-El.++

Clark closed his eyes, suddenly overcome with emotion that was both his and, astonishingly, not his. He could feel trepidation, hope and uncertainty, as well as his own jumbled emotions that one would expect to have upon learning you are truly not the last of your kind. But there was no time for him to even attempt to process what he was feeling before he was hit by whispers he could only assume were Zara's underlying thoughts.

Are we going about this the right way? Will he listen? What if he refuses to see us? We can't fail now!

His center seemed to waver, and it was with great effort he re-grounded himself and answered.

/Let us talk then, face-to-face, Lady Zara. Come to the UN Security Council in New York. I am there now. /

Fear and confusion swirled.

++You are currently speaking with Earth's leaders?++

/Their representatives, yes. I am open with them. /

Her bafflement and concern nearly swallowed him, and he felt a large hand grip his shoulder in support. Kal was grateful and didn't care how the person knew he needed such grounding as he continued to write down the mental conversation. He didn't jot down anything else he was sensing or 'overhearing', however. It was really a miracle he was able to transcribe what he did as her subconscious echoed into his core once more.

How open is he with the humans? Did he tell them what Ching did? Has that derailed any hope of us getting his help?

++Very well. If you're agreeable, I and four others will come shortly, ++ she replied, her voice steady despite her turbulent emotions and internal monologue.

/That is acceptable, / he replied, hoping she would sever the connection soon.

He felt he might throw up due to his lack of control and the bleed over of everything from her.

++Thank you, Lord Kal-El. You do not know how much this means. We will be there in ten minutes.++

The connection vanished and he heaved a sigh of relief. He held his head in his hands as his mind swam with questions, hopes, and fears.

"Are you alright, Superman?" Jones asked.

He blinked away the disorientation and faint nausea before pinching the bridge of his nose. He took a slow deep breath.

"I just need a moment," he said as he straightened and closed his eyes. The hand on his shoulder disappeared.

"Telepathy, I take it?"

He wasn't sure who asked, but he nodded.

"Here's some water," someone said, setting down a

glass by his hand.

"Thanks," he said softly, before drinking it slowly, hoping it would quell his mental uneasiness.

"We have alerted security to escort them here when they arrive," another stated as others began asking questions.

"Are they just going to fly here? And there will be five of them?"

"What if they're hostile?" another asked.

"She was afraid, desperate even," Superman stated, shaking his head and getting all of their attention. "I sensed she wants my help. Whatever they need me for, it's important. They're not going to jeopardize that anymore than they already have."

"Then let's make sure we're ready. I'm having the center table brought in. It should be here shortly," Jones stated before focusing on Superman. "They can sit on one side and you on the other."

Kal nodded in agreement.

"Shall we limit those in attendance? Perhaps even clear the chamber?" Jones asked, referring to the support staff of the council members and those with permission to view talks.

"No. It would be best for the UN to maintain full procedures, and actually, increasing the number of people in attendance might be helpful. Admittedly, I know traditional Kryptonians tend to—" Kal didn't attempt to hide his grimace, "—appreciate grandstanding, for lack of a better word."

"I see," Jones said, torn between amusement at Superman's reaction and his own misgivings on hosting the official intergalactic meeting.

[Chapter 16: Vindication]

Sekou Imani couldn't believe how fast everything was happening. Waking up that morning, he hadn't imagined he would have read a telepathic message out loud for the entire assembly to hear while also gripping the shoulder of Superman before dinner! And now they would be meeting five foreign Kryptonians.

Imani looked at Superman who had just taken a seat at the center rectangular table they had placed in record time. The table was in the middle of the 'C' and would provide the Kryptonians plenty of space. Nothing like this had ever been done before, obviously, so they were making it up as they went, but Imani was hopeful that it would all go well.

Imani once again caught himself staring at Superman, but how could he not? This was Superman! The being who had saved them from Nightfall and had selflessly served them for years before and after being discovered.

He could rule over them all and demand to be treated like a god, but instead he went out of his way to help them.

He glanced down at his hand.

He wondered what his family would say when they learned he had actually put his hand on Superman's shoulder.

Looking back, it had felt natural to do so and he was glad he had not hesitated. Anyone learning for the first time that they might not be the last of their people?! Imani didn't care how powerful someone was, that news had to be hard to process, and Superman had really looked like he needed a physical show of support. So as Superman mentally conversed with the foreign Kryptonian, Imani read aloud what was being written and provided a silent reminder to Superman that he had help.

What had he said during that interview?

"Being the 'only one' doesn't have to mean you're alone."

He hoped he provided some degree of assurance to him.

"They're here," Superman said, standing and looking up at a slight angle before slowly leveling his gaze. They all suspected he was looking through the walls and watching the Kryptonians enter.

After a minute, the side doors of the chamber opened and five individuals were led in by UN security.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the honorable Emissaries of New Krypton," the security guard introduced before swiftly stepping aside and allowing the New Kryptonians to pass.

Three were in layered, formal hooded robes that made them look like pseudo monks, and they were leading a man and woman who were in very form-fitting, dark clothing. The male was in all black, save for red cuffs at the wrists, while the female had a similar suit but with a long formal vest that had a decorative red boundary. The space monks were all men and it was clear the woman, unquestionably Lady Zara, was the most important individual of the bunch.

Superman, with everyone already standing, slowly approached the newcomers and stopped at the edge of the 'C' seating.

The oldest looking monk, who was leading the entourage, stopped five yards from Superman and held his hands out, palms up.

"My Lord, I am Trey, Chief of the Elders, and the Elders with me are Jen-Mai and Sel-Nen. We are humbled and grateful to greet you, Kal-El," he said, before he and those with him bowed low, including the man and Lady Zara.

Imani felt as surprised as Superman looked, but before Superman or anyone from the UN could respond, the Kryptonians straightened back up and Trey stepped aside and motioned to Zara.

"My Lord, may I introduce Lady Zara from the House of Ra, and her bodyguard, Lt. Ching," he said.

Zara stepped up and Superman hesitated for a split second before offering his hand.

"Lady Zara," he greeted. "Lieutenant."

"Thank you for agreeing to see us, Lord Kal-El," she said, taking his hand after looking at it in brief confusion before casting her eyes out to the many people standing in the chamber. From those at the 'C' to those simply in attendance. "And my thanks to the people of Earth, for providing your place for us to use."

Jones stepped forward and inclined his head. "It is a joy and an honor. I am Benjamin Jones. As Head of the UN's Security Council, allow me to be the first human to formally welcome you to Earth. Welcome," Jones said regally before stepping back once she had acknowledged his words with an appreciative smile.

Soon after, she looked to Superman who motioned to the table. They sat down quickly, with Superman sitting alone on the opposite side, directly across from Zara.

Everyone within the chamber quietly sat down as well, enraptured by those at the center table who seemed indifferent to all the eyes watching.

"Lord Kal-El, I imagine you have many questions, so please allow me to start from the beginning," Zara said. "On the day Krypton exploded, your father launched you into space. As infants, many of us had already been taken from the planet. We were part of an expedition in search of a more stable place to live."

Superman leaned forward slightly, briefly closing his eyes. "So my father's warning was heeded, by some at least."

She nodded stiffly.

"How many of you were there?" Superman asked.

"Roughly a thousand," Trey answered. "The expedition colonized a barren planetoid, which was named New Krypton."

"It wasn't easy, and even now there are challenges," the youngest looking 'Elder', Sel-Nen, said. "Our planet has a red sun like Krypton, so we don't have enhanced abilities there."

Superman straightened. "Is that why you're here? Are you seeking a new home? But if so, why those trials?"

"No, no. We have no desire to make a new home," Zara quickly assured, no doubt noticing the sudden unease from those watching.

Superman frowned. "Then why are you here? And why did you feel the need to test me?"

"Our people are bound together by an alliance between several families," Zara explained.

"The alliances are renewed by marriages between these households," Trey added. "As for the tests, you've been

without Kryptonian influence for a long time.”

“We had to find out if you were worthy,” Jen-Mai, the third monk, stated.

Imani did not like where this was going.

“Worthy of what?” Superman asked.

“Worthy of your heritage, Kal-El. Worthy of marriage. To me,” Zara braved.

Superman looked resigned. “So, you are the Zara mentioned on my craft. We are betrothed then. You want me to marry you?”

“No, you technically already are,” Zara softly corrected. “We want you to accept your place beside me, and come with us to rule over New Krypton.”

“What?!” Kal-El exclaimed.

Superman admittedly wasn’t the only one astonished – appalled more like – and many people had to physically stifle their reactions.

“Please-please, Kal-El. You don’t understand the urgency of our plight,” Zara pleaded, her regalness slipping slightly. “If you don’t return, Lord Nor will seize power.”

“Who’s Lord Nor?” Superman asked.

“Next in line for my hand, should you annul our union,” she explained solemnly.

“And I take it you don’t wish for that?” Kal-El asked, trying to understand.

“Nor is a monster, a soulless brigand who would enslave all who oppose him,” Ching stated, speaking for the first time. “We need a leader who can stabilize the Houses and deny him power.”

“Lieutenant, you continue to paint far too bleak a picture of Lord Nor,” Trey countered as the two other Elders all but rolled their eyes at Ching. “I still maintain that Nor is, at heart, loyal to the nobility. He knows his place.”

Zara pursed her lips, keeping her eyes on Kal-El.

“Do you have the craft that you first journeyed to Earth in?” Zara asked.

“Yes,” Kal-El answered slowly. “Do you wish me to retrieve it and bring it here?”

“Please,” she said with a relieved nod.

Superman looked at Jones who nodded his understanding.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Superman promised before vanishing in a blur.

Imani tried not to shift too much in his seat as they waited.

“Lady Zara, would you like for us to bring out refreshments while we wait?” Jones asked after silence had risen.

“Yes, thank you, Benjamin Jones,” she answered.

A minute later, a man brought out a tray with a broad

range of drinks to choose from and set it before them.

Ching quickly chose the coffee pot and poured himself a cup, black, while the others tentatively took a bottle or soda can closest to them. They ignored the water.

Trey opened a soda bottle and sniffed it. “What is this?”

“It’s called root beer. It’s a sweet North American soft drink traditionally made using the root bark of the sassafras tree,” someone answered.

He sipped it and slowly pulled it back, looking at it appreciatively.

The others had varying reactions, and Jen-Mai clearly did not like his drink, a Mountain Dew, and settled with water.

Lady Zara daintily tried a cherry coke, and happily kept it.

“Not bad for a primitive culture,” Sel-Nen said of his cup of Earl Gray. Fortunately only those seated in the ‘C’ area heard him, but Zara still sent him a warning glare. He didn’t seem to notice.

“So am I correct in that you call Lord Kal-El ‘Superman’?” Trey asked Jones after a moment.

“Yes. That was the name we gave him before he revealed his true name, and ironically before we had even seen the shape of his crest,” Jones explained.

“And he submits himself to you?” Jen-Mai asked, as if unable to imagine himself ever doing so.

Jones blinked. “I’m not quite sure what you’re asking. He follows our laws, if that’s what you’re asking, but he doesn’t work under me, or anyone really.”

“Hm. Well, I must say that is a relief. It would be unbecoming of a Lord to place themselves under one of a lesser station,” Sel-Nen put in.

Imani knew he wasn’t the only one taken aback or alarmed. He wasn’t sure how Jones kept his expression so calm.

Zara closed her eyes for a long moment, and a peculiar thing happened soon after. Trey frowned before straightening in his seat before the younger Elders gave a long blink together.

Had they just been reprimanded?

“Our apologies. No disrespect intended,” Trey stated.

Imani really wasn’t sure if he was sincere or not.

Fortunately, they were all spared from having to deal with the awkward moment by a rushing blur. It swiftly coalesced into Superman and what could only be the spacecraft he had arrived in.

It was so . . . *small*.

“I apologize for taking longer than I had anticipated. My mom was home so I updated her since I hadn’t gotten the chance to before. She had been worried,” Kal-El explained as he carefully placed the ship onto the end of

the center table, directly above a support.

“Your ‘mom’?” Trey asked, dumbfounded.

“My adopted mom. The human female who raised me,” Superman deadpanned.

“Ah, yes. I see,” Trey replied, though it was clear he was baffled.

“What?” Superman asked, taking in their reactions.

“It’s just astonishing,” Jen-Mai answered for Trey.

“The Lord of Krypton, taken in by, forgive me, two, low-end landworkers—”

“*Jen-Mai*,” Trey cut off warningly.

Jen-Mai lifted his hand in surrender and apology, though he didn’t look sorry at all.

“My apologies, Lord Kal-El, for any offense. We are just not accustomed to being among . . . well, *different* people,” Jen-Mai stated.

“Your loss,” Superman stated flatly, before looking at Zara. “I believe you asked me to bring my craft here to activate something?”

“Yes,” she said, standing up. “A message.”

She went to the end of the table with Kal-El as the elders remained behind, watching. Ching kept two paces behind her.

Imani and the other humans leaned forward, trying to make out the characters running along the rim of the little ship. It was a dark blue, elaborate capsule with Superman’s emblem on the front. Imani couldn’t get over the size, while also knowing *this* was what had brought their hero to them.

He had to have been a toddler, if not an infant!

“It says, ‘Behold Kal-El the Noble of Krypton, born from the House of Lo and into the House of El’,” Superman said, to the benefit of those who couldn’t read Kryptonian as he placed his hand into the geometric depression. “‘Kal-El, place your hand alongside the hand of Zara from the House of Ra’,” he continued, looking up to Zara.

She followed suit, immediately causing the ‘S’ on the nose of the ship to glow and a yellowish hologram of a man to appear.

“*I am Jor-El, the father of Kal-El*,” he said. “*If I am being seen it means that both Kal-El and his birthwife, Zara, are alive and together, for only your unified touch can activate this image . . . just as only your united lives will keep strong the dream of a peaceful Krypton.*”

The room was silent, torn between watching the Man of Steel’s reaction and the recording of his father.

“*My voice reaches out across the years and galaxies, calling upon my son to keep alive the watchfires of his people, bringing them from the darkness of chaos and into the light of peace.*” Jor-El turned his gaze to his son, somehow knowing exactly where he would be. “*My dear*

son, that is my legacy, that is your destiny.”

His image vanished and the light from the emblem faded.

Superman slowly bowed his head and those who could see his face saw how deeply struck he was.

He pulled his hand away, and no one of the UN knew what to say or think, though many began wiping their moist eyes.

“You see, my Lord? You belong on New Krypton, carrying out your father’s will. Please, Lord Kal-El, fulfill your destiny,” Trey stated, standing up from the table.

Jen-Mai and Sel-Nen rose soon after, following Trey as he stepped out and joined Ching and Zara.

Superman straightened, and none of those beyond the chamber’s center moved.

There were tears in his eyes.

“You passed the tests, Lord Kal-El,” Jen-Mai reminded. “It is the Law that you come with us.”

“Please, Kal-El,” Zara put in.

“Your home is with your people,” Ching stated, rigidly standing by Zara’s side.

“I have a Treaty with Earth,” Kal-El stated. “No matter my feelings on going with you, first you must know that I’m not going to defy or break any part of my treaty with them.”

To say the Elders were aghast would be a vast understatement. Zara and Ching stared at him, their expressions blank.

“You made a treaty . . . with them?” Sel-Nen gaped.

“Concessions can be made, my Lord,” Trey assured, quickly putting aside his initial reaction and looking at the new problem analytically.

“That shouldn’t even be necessary,” Jen-Mai scoffed. “Treaties can only be made between those of equal footing, so this supposed treaty is already null and void.”

“I agree,” Sel-Nen concurred.

Superman frowned, and Imani was instantly reminded of his father faced with an injustice. Imani wanted to duck.

“If the treaty is null and void, then so are all of my promises, past, present and future,” Kal-El stated, his tone obvious to any human that he was nearing the end of his patience.

“I understand you feel that way, Lord Kal-El, because being a Noble is new to you, but the fact is, you are above most and equal to the small remainder. Thus, you must concern yourself with your station, with how you appear. You must not degrade yourself by standing among those beneath you when you no longer must do so,” Jen-Mai said in a tone that attempted to sound consoling but utterly failed. “Your destiny—”

“**ENOUGH!**” Superman roared.

His voice thundered through the walls, rattling the windows, and was heard out onto the streets, but it was the least of what silenced Jen-Mai and astonished everyone in attendance.

Kal-El's eyes flashed red.

The air, though still breathable, had instantly become reminiscent of watery sand. Throughout the chamber, from high to low, a pressure – a dense, angry presence – was felt by all.

But it wasn't just angry.

It was disgusted, disappointed and . . . disheartened.

The New Kryptonians were all staring in wide-eyed fear at Kal-El.

And then Imani knew what this was.

Superman's aura.

Zara knew it was over the moment Jen-Mai countered Trey. She knew Kal-El, and Clark for that matter, enough to know he wouldn't tolerate such things.

But she never envisioned this.

Kal-El was more worthy than they ever could have imagined.

And they had lost him.

They had failed a more important test.

Trey fell to his knees in shock and lowered his face to the floor as Kal-El closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

His aura shifted around them, condensing so tightly against and through their frames she wanted to gasp at the force, the *power*, of it. But she didn't move, she couldn't.

She had never felt so small.

Kal-El's essence, it was so vast, and the depth of his feelings nearly drowned her.

Amid all his fury, disgust, and disappointment was the last thing she expected. Sorrow. But not for himself, or even for all the lives lost—or at least not exclusively. No, it was for *them*. For her and Ching, Trey, and even the two insufferable elders who had insulted him. But it went beyond that, he felt grief for the people of New Krypton.

How could one feel this much for a group of people they had never met?

Zara was baffled, and then a second passed and her confusion only expanded as his emotion gave way to what was behind them.

He saw such wasted potential. Such pain that was in vain and only led to more suffering. He was so certain their people could be so much more, and that was why he felt the way he did. He knew they **could be** great. But weren't.

And *that* unwavering conviction was enough to make her not only question all that she had ever known, but wonder on dreams she had feared to even contemplate. To hope.

She swallowed as she refocused and saw his expression.

"So nothing has changed," Kal-El stated harshly.

"Krypton and billions of people were lost due to arrogant elitism and instead of growing beyond that and developing some humility to create a better future, you come here expecting me to shore up a crumbling disgrace for a world empire that had ridiculed and censored my father before turning around and heeding his words just in the nick of time while leaving the 'lesser' population in ignorance to die on Krypton! And if you say your forebears didn't do that, you are either a liar or more of a fool than I already believe you to be!

"My parents constructed a craft for me from scratch, all by themselves in a matter of months—in *secret because they knew they would be stopped if discovered*—and the entirety of Krypton's leadership could only save one thousand people!? If they had incorporated the whole of Krypton's population into their efforts, tens of thousands, *millions*, would have been saved. But no, the Council and ruling bodies had to save face, concern themselves more about image than life and death! Heaven forbid they admit they were wrong!

"To say the least, your forebears were all guilty of gross negligence in not pursuing the truth in either proving or disproving my father's theory, and thus damned Krypton and her people, so, as the son of Lord Jor-El, former Head of the Kryptonian Imperial Council, and as the self-proclaimed voice of billions who were killed as a result, I, Lord Kal-El, invoke my Right of Vindication."

His aura pulsed, as if suddenly joined by all the souls of Krypton's damned.

Ching knelt down to one knee, his eyes wide in open hope. Zara joined him beside Trey, who was now sitting up, each now with their right fists against the center of their chests.

Sel-Nen and Jen-Mai clamored to their knees and followed suit, barely able to believe what they were witnessing.

"It is your right. We will obey your Edict for Vindication," they all recited, Kryptonian Law ingrained on their hearts—for good or ill.

"The fate of New Krypton is not in my hands, and it shall no longer be held by a select few. Instead, it will be grasped by the Kryptonian People themselves," Kal-El stated. He turned away from the kneeling Kryptonians and went to the edge of the 'C' table. He retrieved a pen and gratefully took a hurriedly offered notepad secured onto a clipboard from an astonished human representative.

"To that end," he resumed, facing them again as he quickly began writing, "You will carry out what I have written here and ask me to clarify any questions that come

up concerning the tasks within.”

His hand blurred for several seconds until he finally stopped. He went to Zara and held out the clipboard.

Slowly, his aura pulled back, and the air lightened.

Zara reverently accepted the written Edict and gave a solemn bow of her head.

“It will be done, Lord Kal-El,” she swore, getting to her feet.

Ching and the others silently stood up as Zara quickly scanned the page.

“I will contact you once I have the imaging crystals ready for you,” Zara promised.

“Thank you,” Kal-El said.

Zara hesitated before speaking once more, suddenly keenly aware of their audience. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. We never should have come to ask you to support the same body that condemned.... I don’t understand how, but we failed to see. However, I think your father was right. You were destined to save us, and after experiencing today, I think you will through this.” She brought up the clipboard with Kryptonian written in dark blue ink.

Trey stepped forward while Jen-Mai and Sel-Nen kept their heads bowed low.

“I’m ashamed it took me this to finally see that our people’s watchfire had become fading embers, but now that I do, I will do everything I can to see your Edict done, my Lord. Our people have been in darkness long enough,” Trey said.

“Good,” Kal-El said.

Trey stepped back beside Zara and Ching, and then the five vanished in a blur.

[Chapter 17: Ekhyad]

The world waited anxiously, hoping a statement would be made by the United Nations, the US Embassy, the Foundation, *someone*, but they too were waiting for word from the UN Security Council.

News stations had gathered outside all the typical places, but everyone was focused on the Headquarters of the UN, where it was known Superman was meeting with officials. Security was high, and it was noted additional personnel had been sent out to the front. No explanations were being given.

And then the air was rocked by a cascade of sonic booms.

The next second, five blurs shot down from the sky and stopped at the entrance of the UN. Five people who could fly like Superman.

No one moved as the oldest looking individual of the clearly Kryptonian group straightened.

“We, the Emissaries of New Krypton, come seeking Lord Kal-El. Please take us to him,” the man said

commandingly.

A brave soul from UN security stepped forward.

“Please follow me. I will take you to him,” he said.

The Kryptonians followed, ignoring everyone watching.

Whispers erupted as they were escorted into the building.

How were there still Kryptonians? Weren’t they all dead? What did they want with Superman? What was happening?!

Nearly half an hour later, a brief bout of excitement came when a red and blue blur left the UN through a window before returning with something large ten or so minutes after, but still it was anyone’s guess as to what was happening.

Time passed agonizingly slowly, which was only made worse by tight-lipped officials. As boredom began to rise and questions remained unanswered, restlessness grew around the Headquarters of the UN and around the world.

What was being discussed? What did they want?

And then all musing instantly vanished upon a single word that was bellowed from the heart of the UN.

“ENOUGH!”

The windows rattled violently and the shout reverberated down the streets like the sound of a gong. Car alarms began to blare.

The voice was so intense, many would swear it echoed into their bones. Though, oddly, it did not leave their ears ringing like any other loud noise would.

No one moved for a long moment as they processed what had happened.

“That . . . was Superman,” someone said, breaking the stunned silence.

Lois was, for one of the few times in her career, as clueless as the rest of the press about what was going on. So she was watching the television like everyone else.

The group of Kryptonians had just left the UN, and now it was clear the officials were preparing to make a statement.

A podium was being set up in the front, and the press core was chomping at the bit. Even from the bullpen of the Daily Planet, she could feel the anticipation there mingling with the unease bleeding from her and her coworkers.

“What do you think made Superman shout?” Jimmy asked quietly.

“I don’t know, but Kal doesn’t get angry easily,” Lois whispered.

Someone began to ask a follow-up question upon hearing her answer Jimmy, but then all their attention snapped to the screen as Superman and a dozen UN officials exited the building.

“Thank you for your patience as an unprecedented meeting took place,” the man said. Lois was fairly certain he was the Head of the Security Council, Jones—if she remembered right. “As you are no doubt aware, Emissaries from New Krypton came and spoke with Superman within the Security Council Chamber. Much was discussed during this meeting, and we will be releasing the coverage of it all within the coming days, but rest assured all is now well.”

He looked over at Superman who nodded.

“Superman will now make a statement and then I will answer some questions,” he said before stepping aside.

Superman moved forward, everyone giving him a large berth. It struck Lois, for while people always looked at him in awe, there was now another layer that had never been there before. She wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“Thank you,” he said, gripping the edge of the podium with his right hand. His gaze panned the assembled mass of people for a long moment before he started, his eyes never dwelling on one place for too long.

“There’s so much I could say,” he said with a frown. “But I’ll keep this short, admittedly for my sake.” He briefly looked down before looking up again. “Today, I learned that I’m not the last Kryptonian. I’m one of over a thousand.” He took a shaky, deep breath and swallowed before continuing. “I also learned they wish for me to take my place among them.”

The reaction was as one would expect, and Lois gasped loudly as many others around her exclaimed their shock as well. Clenching her hands tightly against her chest, she waited fearfully for his next words.

“I declined. I’m not leaving Earth,” he promised vehemently.

The world breathed again, and Lois managed to not pass out from relief.

“Instead, I offered an alternative.” He paused, as if struggling on whether or not to clarify something, and then he went on. “For the next few weeks, my people will remain here, on or near Earth, as I help them restructure their government before they return to their home, New Krypton. Also, to assure anyone with concerns, they will not do anything without my expressed permission while they are here.”

He let go of the podium. “I’ll leave it there. The UN is free to answer whatever they wish, but for me, I’m done for today.”

He turned back to Jones and they shook hands. “Please call the Foundation when the copies of tapes are ready or if the UN wishes to discuss updating the Treaty of El. I do think we should give Lady Zara a week though. There is a lot to do before I wish to address anything more with them.”

“Of course, Superman,” Jones answered.

Superman gave Jones a departing nod before smiling softly as his eyes sought and found a camera.

He looked straight into it.

“Mom, I know you’re watching. I’ll be home later this evening, I just need to talk to someone. And Dad, please fight the temptation and save me some pie,” he said, before looking back at the crowd. “Good night.”

A second later, he disappeared in a blur and a powerful sonic boom thundered overhead.

Kal hovered high above the Daily Planet, over the clouds, watching as Lois finished her article and pressed ‘send’.

With a smile, he concentrated.

/Lois? /

She startled at her desk.

/Sorry! Maybe I should have waited until you were out of the Planet./

She shook her head and looked up with a smile, knowing she couldn’t respond while at work.

/I’ll wait out front for you./

She nodded happily and swiftly gathered her things.

“I’m going home, Jimmy!” she declared.

“Okay, Lois,” he said, somewhat surprised.

“If the Chief asks, I sent the article to copy. It’s more of an opinion piece, but I think it’ll make him happy. I’ll get on the Kryptonian story tomorrow.”

He nodded as she hurried to the elevators.

Clark met her outside and before too long they had ducked into an alley and were headed to Smallville.

He held her tightly as he flew them and tried to prevent himself from shaking.

He had refused to think about the last few hours up to that point, but now, with her pressed up against him and her hair by his face, all he could think about was how different his life could have been if one of so many things hadn’t lined up the way they had. He wouldn’t have Lois.

He had always been grateful for his life, but he had never been so grateful as he was at that moment.

So grateful, and yet so troubled.

As happy as he was to learn he wasn’t the last Kryptonian, the realization of learning of their state and everything that went with it....

His people were a mess. There was no gentler way to say it.

And he tried not to feel the way he did, but there was no denying it. He felt disappointed.

How could a people so advanced, so logical, so intelligent, be so . . . so blind? So lost?

But disappointment was not the only emotion desperate to spill out.

So many had died, and for what?

He knew from the crystal his mother had left him that Krypton had been home to nearly *twenty-three billion* people, but it is one thing to know the number and another to actually comprehend it.

Like reading about famine in history, where millions died in a single year. On the page, the number is tragic, unquestionably so, but it isn't . . . personal.

But once one learns about the people involved, sees pictures of their lives before tragedy had befallen them or personally meets the survivors . . . it becomes different. It is suddenly *real* instead of a detached reality somewhere far away.

He had never really thought about it, not like he was now. It had been more than enough to accept the likelihood of being the last Kryptonian. Thinking about the fact that there had once been tens of billions of Kryptonians too . . . it had been impossible to completely wrap his mind around. It still was. But now he didn't have the luxury of it being some far off place in the distant, untouchable past.

But what made it so much more raw was that so many hadn't needed to die. More than a remnant could have survived.

A remnant that was now his responsibility.

"Clark?" Lois asked as they broke above the clouds.

He wasn't in uniform. His cargo pants and long sleeve shirt rustled in the wind. He couldn't wear the uniform right then. He needed . . . to just be.

He slowed down, as high as he safely could with Lois, and then stopped, hovering. He looked at her when she touched his cheek.

It was wet.

When had he started to cry?

"Clark? What is it?" she asked, concerned but calm.

He suddenly couldn't speak. His throat was so tight it was a wonder he could breathe.

Lois saw his struggle, so didn't ask another question; instead, she hugged him as tightly as she could and kissed one of his tears away.

"It's just the two of us up here," she whispered. "Do whatever you need."

He closed his eyes and let out a ragged breath that bordered a smothered sob as he did as she said and just . . . let go.

His breathing was slow and deep as he completely relaxed his aura, letting it expand out as far as it wished. His aura passed through the wind and clouds like they weren't there, but he was keenly aware of Lois' change in heart rate as she was suddenly immersed in all of his emotions.

She didn't fight them, and silently wept with him.

Finally, after several minutes, he reined in his aura, and raised his head from her shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I had promised myself I would never make you cry," he said, wiping some of her tears away with his thumb while ignoring his own.

"Not sharing your pain with me is what would really hurt me," she stated, before adding, somewhat playful but just as serious, "Besides, I'm a woman. Crying doesn't hurt us. And despite popular belief, crying isn't bad for men either. And I bet that goes for Kryptonian men too."

Clark laughed, rattling away the roughness in his throat as she tenderly brushed his cheeks clear. "Okay, I can't argue with that."

"That's right. You might be royalty, but I'm Lois Lane."

He grinned. "Yes. Yes, you are."

"Now, do you think your dad has left you any pie?" she asked.

"I guess we'll see," he said, flying forward again.

The following week passed both faster and slower than he had expected.

The coverage of the meeting had been released, but he wasn't privy to the world's reaction due to the amount of work he was doing with Lady Zara, Ching, and Trey up in the palace orbiting Earth.

Zara gave him the imaging crystals he had requested and he transposed the video coverage onto the crystals so those on New Krypton would be able to see what had transpired. Trey especially was impressed with the act, as it would remove any opposition that might have occurred within the Council of the Elders.

The Edict had been fully read and the process of changing the structure of the Kryptonian government had started.

As all Krypton survivors were members of specific houses, the houses themselves were now to be treated like small (very small) nation states. Each of them would select their leadership, which would then decide on an overarching council and Head of New Krypton.

Kal-El spent days with Lady Zara and the others on creating clear, concise rules and going over human examples of government, both the good and the bad, to root out as much possibility of future corruption and the like as possible. Checks and balances were set, along with protected rights and all the rest that comes with moral and responsible governance.

When it was all done, Kal-El returned to Smallville. Six days, working at superspeed non-stop with others working at the same speed, communicating telepathically because speaking at superspeed is just **weird**, he was exhausted.

"Mom, I'm going to bed. If anyone calls, let them know I need six hours. Also, remind me to call Burton

later,” he said as he entered, putting his cell phone on the kitchen table.

“Okay, honey. Is there anything you’d like me to make for dinner?” Martha asked, relieved by his arrival.

She hadn’t been sure if he would rest at the Foundation, his place, or there, but she was glad he was finally at a point to rest.

He had told her he would be gone for several days, and had forewarned Lois and the Foundation as well. He had also briefly returned on the third day with an update, before disappearing again.

“Chicken and dumplings. Thanks, Mom,” he said, before disappearing into his room.

He was out cold before he hit the pillow.

Martha quietly began making her famous chicken and dumplings as she thought over the past week. Considering everything, the world was handling it all well she thought, in some ways better than Jonathan and herself.

Granted, seeing Clark have to cope with all that it meant to be Lord Kal-El was more than what the world knew.

The evening after the press conference, he and Lois came to Smallville and ate dinner with them (followed by pie). During that time, he told them everything and then sat with Lois on the couch.

It was so surreal to know the baby she had cared for had been chosen to be a leader of an entire people. The same boy who cared for their farm and had had a pet praying mantis was royalty.

Martha was snapped out of her thoughts when Clark’s cell phone rang.

Steeling herself, she answered at the third ring.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Uh, is Kal there?” the voice asked, sounding very confused as he recognized that the voice on the other end was not Superman’s. “It’s Mav.”

“Oh! Uh, he’s asleep right now. He said he wanted six hours. Is this an emergency?” she asked.

“No. Uh, just please let him know the UN called asking to meet on updating the Treaty.”

“Okay, I will.”

“Is there, I mean, do you know if there’s anything he needs right now? Anything I or the Foundation can do?” Mav asked.

“Honestly, he just needs rest. He’s been running himself ragged. He just got home. I’ve never seen him this tired except in the rare instances he’s actually been hurt. He’s been up for six days straight, and most of that time he was going at super speed,” Martha said, taking the opportunity to get some worry off her chest.

She could practically hear Mav frowning through the

phone.

“I see. I’ll do what I can to reduce the amount of load on him then,” he promised.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely.

“It’s no problem, Mrs.... El,” he returned.

Martha laughed but didn’t correct him. It wasn’t out of lack of trust, but from an abundance of caution.

“Well, good night. And, Mav, thank you for always helping my son,” she said.

“It’s an honor. Good night.”

Lois sighed as she closed her apartment door behind her. The week so far had been crazy, and it didn’t seem that it would let up any time soon. The UN was now meeting with Kal and the other Kryptonians on updating the Treaty.

She had barely seen Clark, but with how busy they both were, it wasn’t a surprise.

The world was slowly getting back into their normal routines, while still glancing hopefully for updates concerning Superman and the New Kryptonians. Most of what was going on was behind closed doors in relation to the reformation of New Krypton’s government, but the Foundation was always providing updates on where Superman was and if anything was going on at the UN.

She decided to keep the television off as she removed her high heels.

She was just about to head to her room and change into something a bit more comfortable when the phone rang.

Hoping it was Kal, she quickly picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Lois?”

It was her mother.

“Mother!”

“Hi, Lois, I’m so glad I caught you,” she said. “I was wondering . . . I was wondering if you’ve had dinner yet.”

“Uh, no. I just got home,” she said, a little baffled.

When did her mom ever call her?

“Is something wrong?” Lois asked quickly, suddenly concerned.

“No! Everything is fine. Well, I mean I hope it will be. I mean, I was hoping we could . . . talk? Over dinner?”

Lois paused. She had a strong suspicion what this was about but was finding it hard to imagine what had brought about the sudden desire to actually potentially address it.

Did her mother want to discuss what had happened at Christmas *now*?

It had been months, and while they had briefly touched base, they hadn’t really dealt with the elephant in the room, though she had apologized. Sorta.

Lois hadn’t gotten the chance to have the more serious conversation she had talked about with Clark. With

everything going on, she just never got the time or the energy to carry it out. Well, now it seemed an opportunity had presented itself. She probably shouldn't waste it.

"Um. Sure. Just let me get changed. Where do you want to eat?" Lois asked, deciding to just go with it.

"Maybe that little Mexican place a block or so over from your place?" she proposed.

It seemed her mother recalled that she did like Mexican, or at least chips and salsa.

"Sure. I can be there in twenty minutes," Lois said.

"Okay. And thanks, Lois. I imagine with what's going on lately, you're pretty busy," her mother said, once again surprising her.

"Uh, no problem. See you in a bit. Bye," she said.

"Bye."

They hung up soon after, and Lois cringed at the awkwardness before pushing on.

Fifteen minutes later, she entered the restaurant and was escorted to the table with her mom.

After ordering drinks, Lois slowly took a tortilla chip and waited for her mother to start a conversation as she dipped it into the salsa.

"I imagine you didn't expect this. I'm not . . . I'm not very good at these sorts of things. I'm not very good at many things, but then, you know that already," Ellen began.

Lois lowered her chip, but didn't say anything. What could she say?

"About Christmas." She swallowed. "I'm so sorry, Lois. Your father and I were . . . idiots doesn't even begin to describe us. I know apologizing isn't enough, which is why . . . why I asked to talk today," she said, before pausing as the waiter brought their drinks and left.

They both ate a chip.

"I never want to do anything like that again. And, well, I'm . . . getting help," Ellen continued after a moment to collect herself.

Lois was completely and utterly stunned.

"Help? Y-you mean like—a therapist?"

"Yeah. She works in the same practice as Lucy's psychotherapist actually," her mother admitted.

Lois, in her stupor, slowly put the pieces together.

"Lucy spoke with you," Lois realized.

"If by spoke you mean ranted and raved.... She's definitely my daughter, no doubt about that," Ellen said, returning to the chips and salsa. "She didn't need to do much convincing. She really just provided me the answer."

"I . . . don't know what to say," Lois said. She really didn't.

She just knew she was now grateful that Lucy had caught her kissing Kal and they were able to talk in depth about everything.

Had Lucy talked with their dad too?

"There's nothing you need to say. It's me who needs to talk. I wasn't really a mother to you and Lucy, and I'm eternally sorry for that. And while I could blame your father for everything, that would be giving him too much power. He wasn't responsible for my actions. I was." Ellen hurriedly took another chip and a few swallows from her glass.

Lois knew her mother hated getting sappy. She just wished her mother felt the same about getting angry.

Maybe she would.

The waiter returned and took their order. Lois was happy for the reprieve, and then it was just them again.

"I'm glad you're talking to someone," Lois said finally. "So, what now?"

"Well, hopefully now I can help you with your wedding?" she asked hopefully, before promptly adding, "In as much as you're okay with, of course."

Lois smiled. "Sure. We know we want a small wedding, just family and close friends. Nothing huge or too fancy. We haven't decided on any colors or anything like that, and, actually, I think we'd be fine with someone else handling all that."

"Okay," Ellen said, relaxing more. "Well then, I'll come up with some ideas and run them by you two?"

"That sounds good," Lois agreed, somewhat surprised she actually meant it.

This might be a second chance for mother and daughter.

"So what is this about, Clark?" Burton asked as he handed him a can of soda and sat down on the sofa. "I'll admit I was concerned when I heard your message."

Clark opened the can and settled on the armchair adjacent to Burton.

They were at Burton's house and they were alone.

"I'm not quite sure who to tell. This sort of thing wasn't specifically included in the Treaty," Clark said before taking a sip and continuing. "Zara and Ching warned me that Nor might have sent an assassin to kill me."

Burton immediately straightened. "An assassin? Are they Kryptonian?"

"No. But according to Zara and Ching, he's never failed."

"Does he have abilities like yours?" Burton asked.

"I don't know. Ching feels he has some abilities but doesn't think they're like ours. Kryptonian, I mean," he said.

"Do you think he could already be here?"

"It's possible, which is why I'm being especially careful about who to tell. I don't want a panic and I don't

want him to learn how much we know, as little as it is,” Clark explained.

Burton frowned. “I’ll inform those who need to know, and considering this Nor person, I’ll take a few extra precautions. If he’s serious enough to send an assassin, he’s serious enough for something more.” Burton looked at Clark, pained. “I’m going to have a science team do some special work.”

Clark nodded in grim understanding.

“No one will know what it can be used for unless it becomes necessary,” Burton promised.

“Thank you.”

“Hopefully it won’t be needed and the program will dissipate into obscurity like many before it,” Burton said, though he didn’t sound all that assured.

Clark left soon after, hoping the next time he met with Burton it would be under better circumstances.

The Council of the Elders bowed low as he left the meeting chamber.

“You won’t need to deal with all the bowing much longer, Kal-El,” Zara said, noticing his unease.

They were in the palace, hovering invisibly high above Europe, and were now in its inner chambers. The inner chambers were where they took Kal after the often intense meetings to clarify anything before he returned to Earth. It had been the routine for the past several weeks.

The new government had been formed and all was ready for their return to New Krypton. All that was needed for their departure from Earth was the official installment of Kal-El’s position detailed in the now updated Treaty of El.

“It wasn’t so bad initially, but after they saw the recording of the UN meeting...” Kal sighed. “They’re scared of me.”

“They’re more intimidated than anything else,” Zara gently pointed out.

“I don’t really want that either,” Kal stated.

“You’re an Ekhyad. This reaction to you shouldn’t surprise you,” Ching stated.

Kal blinked. “I’m a what?”

“You don’t know? I thought you would have known, after everything else you know,” Ching said, surprised.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. What’s an Ekhyad?” Kal asked.

“It’s been a while since one has existed, but they have the ability to mold their life force. Usually, a tool is required to harness one’s life force, like a drei, but that is limited to offensive use only. For an Ekhyad, they can extend their life force from their body at will, and even bolster the life force of others,” Ching explained.

“My aura?” Kal asked, astonished.

Zara and Ching nodded.

“The last known Ekhyad died roughly fifty years before we were born. He had been Chief of the Elders at the end of his life, and Elder Trey is said to have met him as a child,” Zara added.

“That certainly explains a few things,” Kal said, suddenly realizing how much easier him being an Ekhyad had likely made things.

Zara sighed softly. “Our apologies for not inquiring earlier. We didn’t realize you didn’t know that . . . our treatment of you wasn’t merely because you’re Lord Kal-El. Being an Ekhyad is, well, not a simple thing. It is steeped with meaning, which is why we’re surprised you didn’t already know. You have been acting as one would expect from an Ekhyad. Mostly, anyway.”

“Mostly?” Kal questioned.

“You are not as harsh as you could be, and you have not invoked your aura much since the first day,” Ching clarified.

“I know it makes you all uncomfortable, especially the Elders. The people of Earth don’t fear me like the Elders do. Why are they so afraid?”

“They know the old stories of what Ekhyad were said to do to their enemies. One’s life force can be just as terrible as it is wonderful,” Ching warned. “It’s actually why I’m not too concerned about the assassin.”

“What stories?” Kal asked, deciding to not think too much on what Ching meant by his last comment.

“One ancient tale tells of an Ekhyad who was able to kill by using their . . . aura. It wasn’t without sacrifice, just as bolstering the life of others isn’t without cost, but they apparently could do it. Another is one who could terrify their enemies so badly that they became shells of their former selves,” Ching said.

Kal suddenly wanted to throw up as he wished he hadn’t asked. For someone to kill another living being was bad enough, but to do so with their aura?! They would sense every aspect of the act at an unparalleled level. They would feel the victim’s final emotions, their last moments of consciousness, and sense the instant their life ended.

What a horrifyingly heinous thing to carry out on purpose!

“Not everyone believes those stories. Most believe them to be myths, but the fact you demonstrated the primary aspect of an Ekhyad, projecting your essence to display your displeasure, proves at least some of those tales are true. And that means you’ll have the awe of the people on top of what you already have with the Right of Vindication and being Lord Kal-El,” Zara added upon seeing his face.

“Your being an Ekhyad provides a link to Krypton’s past. And for many, that specifically means the time before

the strength of Krypton began to notably wane,” Ching pointed out. “It’s an act of providence. A sign our people’s best years don’t have to be behind us. They can be before us.”

Kal straightened.

“I’ll be sure to iterate that in the coming ceremony, then. The future is what we make of it. And for New Krypton, that future is up to her people. I’ve done all I can,” Kal stated. “She’s in good hands.”

Ching and Zara smiled proudly, physically expressing the most amount of emotion since he had known them.

“Thank you, Kal-El. We will be ready for the ceremony tomorrow. You wish for all to be in attendance?” Zara asked, once again verifying.

“Yes, unless their presence is required on the ship, I see no reason to limit it. The memory crystals will capture the event, but nothing compares to personally witnessing a moment like this,” Kal assured.

“Very well, M’Lord,” Zara said, who grew amused at Kal’s exasperated look.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, and yes, I have the item you sent to Mav,” Kal said, knowing what she would ask next.

“And you’ll wear it?” she prodded.

“Yes. It actually isn’t much of an addition to my normal formal attire for high-ranking business,” he replied. “Surely you two saw what I wore during the first signing of the Treaty of El?”

That seemed to assure them before he went through the palace’s exit for what he knew would be the last time.

[Chapter 18: Keeper]

Martha and Jonathan entered the town’s favorite place to go, Lazy Luigi’s, and hurried to the sports bar area with the large televisions.

They could have watched from home of course, and they were recording it on their VHS, but they wanted to see as much as they could live, and the best way to do that was to watch it from Lazy Luigi’s, which prided itself on having the largest collection of televisions in Smallville.

Martha looked around as they managed to get a corner table. The place was crowded, and everyone was facing the televisions in anticipation.

“This was not a unique idea,” she commented.

“No it wasn’t, but at least we have a good spot,”

Jonathan agreed as they sat down.

The United Nations was on the television and the news reporter was summarizing what had already transpired, which was just a lot of waiting it seemed.

‘Behind me is the stage where Superman and the New Kryptonians will meet with UN representatives for the signing ceremony,’ she said excitedly.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this,” Jonathan

admitted aloud.

Martha smiled softly as the waitress brought out their usual.

“Thanks, Dorothy,” Martha said.

Dorothy beamed, just as happy as the news reporter on the television.

“This is so exciting! Can you imagine being there during this in person?!” she exclaimed before bustling to serve the next customer.

Martha and Jonathan smiled, though not as easily as they would have liked.

It was exciting, but it was also nerve wracking and nausea inducing.

Their boy was negotiating treaties and creating world governments! Well, a world government.

Whatever future New Krypton had, it would be in large part due to their son.

Good heavens, how could this be their lives? They were farmers! But he was theirs the moment he had come to them, and they wouldn’t change a thing.

Not really paying much attention to their appetizer, their eyes were glued to the screen.

The camera panned back, and the view encompassed the entire courtyard and back field behind the UN buildings. UN officials and country representatives were all about, primarily at or near the tables surrounding the massive platform that had several rows of vacant chairs on either side of and facing a small, elaborate, center table.

Every single nation of the world had a representative present, and security was as high as one would expect for a gathering of this importance. It was almost time.

‘Within the hour, Superman and members of New Krypton will arrive,’ the news reporter said, possibly for the tenth time that morning. ‘All the nations of Earth have already signed the updated Treaty of El, and the signatures of Superman and New Krypton’s leadership will be added today, sealing the historic agreement. Afterward, it has been confirmed that the New Kryptonians will depart,’ she explained, even though it was unlikely anyone watching didn’t already know. She went on anyway.

‘These past few weeks, the UN, Superman, and New Krypton representatives have been hard at work in updating the Treaty of El, connecting two worlds and designating Superman himself as Keeper. Although a Kryptonian term that was borrowed from their mythology rather than their actual history, a Keeper is a guardian or watchman of an entire world, serving as a sentry of sorts. After deliberation, Earth has accepted New Krypton’s proposal in placing Superman in the honorary position, as well as making the position equivalent to Ambassador.’

Martha and Jonathan looked at each other. They still couldn’t believe how much was happening and how much

responsibility their son now held.

Suddenly, a floating structure, that was unquestionably a Kryptonian vessel, materialized high above the area – far beyond throwing distance from the top of the nearby skyscrapers. It was huge, the size of an ocean liner.

“Whoa!” people gasped, along with other exclamations.

‘And the Kryptonians have arrived!’ the news reporter said, trying not to appear too overwhelmed.

It was a long, domed ellipse with sharp angled features running irregularly along the spine and bottom surface. It was as alien a spacecraft one could imagine, and how it was suspended in the sky was anyone’s guess, not to mention how it had been invisible moments before.

Soon after, a stream of forms shot from the main opening of the craft and fourteen of them landed on the platform while the rest (at least a hundred!) remained in the sky, hovering in formation two hundred feet above the ground and to the left of the center table.

The colors of their form-fitting clothing varied, although most seemed to hold darker tones with ornate borders of bold color. With their formal garb, all of them had a crest different from Superman’s on their front, with some shrouded behind a vest or shawl.

UN officials respectfully began going to stand in front of the vacant chairs on the opposite side of the platform, mirroring the actions of the fourteen. Those below fell silent and began taking their places at their appropriate seats if they weren’t already there. The news crews covered everything with rapt attention and tried to get every angle.

Seconds later, a sonic boom echoed forth, and Superman appeared on the platform wearing the same uniform he had for the first signing of the Treaty of El, which was a more elaborate version of his usual uniform.

Tight red and gold cuffs accented in sapphire blue were on his wrists, extending slightly over the top of his hands in a gentle ‘V’ shape. His boots had a thin line of gold all around the rim, and the toe tips were blue with a matching strip of gold as a border between the blue and the red. And over his shoulders and overlapping the red cape was the gifted golden capelet bearing the emblems of Earth’s nations. The only notable difference between what he had worn in the original signing of the Treaty of El was the additions to his red cape.

The news crews were quick to zoom in.

Surrounding his golden ‘S’ shield, edged with a trim of blue and golden thread, were fourteen smaller crests. As the fourteen people on the platform had matching crests, the reason for them on Superman’s cape was easily evident. These were the Houses of New Krypton.

‘I’ll admit, a formal version of his uniform makes

sense and looks good,” Jonathan said softly, even though, originally, he had been leery of doing anything fancy.

Martha looked at him smugly, but he didn’t see, his eyes were still on the screen.

With all representatives assembled, the Head of the UN stepped forward with a beautifully crafted six-by-six inch box and stood before the gathered Kryptonians.

“Lord Kal-El, Emissaries of New Krypton, it is with great pride we, the Nations of the Planet Earth, gather with you to seal the new treaty between our two Peoples,” he said as he held out the gift. “Before we commence, please accept this collection of Earth’s finest teas and rare spices.”

Superman smiled broadly, very pleased with the gift as he graciously accepted it and handed it to a Kryptonian beside Lady Zara who also expressed her gratitude before introductions and pleasantries were exchanged all around.

Martha found it a bit tedious, but how often did something like this happen? Fortunately, before too long, things moved forward and papers were signed — and so, oddly enough, were scrolls. The New Kryptonians had some traditional ceremonial aspects they were intent on keeping, so those were performed as the world watched, baffled but intrigued.

Superman was the last to sign, and as he finished his signature on the scroll New Krypton’s copy of the Treaty), he straightened and held his hand out in front of himself. Many people watching gasped as his eyes flashed red and held the glow for several long seconds, his gaze focused on his forefinger. The beam of heat then stopped, and it was from sheer luck that one of the news cameras was at the right angle to catch a bead of red blood ooze out from the tiny cut before Superman smeared it on the scroll, over his signed name.

Superman rolled up the scroll and handed it to Lady Zara.

“The name Kal-El will once again be proclaimed by our people. As Krypton praised your forebear, your namesake, New Krypton will forever remember your deeds and share them with the next generation. This I swear, Lord Kal-El, Keeper of Earth,” she said, her eyes gleaming.

And then all the New Kryptonians placed their fists over their hearts and declared in one voice, “**Strength in Hope, Hope in Strength! Kal-El! El-Kal!**”

Lt. Ching stepped forward from beside Zara and held out his hand. Superman moved forward and gripped his forearm, allowing Ching to grip his.

“We will lead New Krypton as you directed,” Ching promised, pulling back before looking to the UN leaders. “Earth is blessed to have Lord Kal-El.”

At that, he stepped aside, and all eyes fell on Lady Zara

as she then addressed the assembly and the world.

“In one of our first meetings with Lord Kal-El, he told me something that I will take back to New Krypton,” Zara said. “No people can be forced to turn from chaos and embrace peace. They can only be shown it to be possible and the path to make it so. Whether they walk it or not is up to them.”

Zara straightened, her eyes passing over the people before her and even briefly looking into a few of the cameras.

“He learned that here. Here, where he was embraced and treasured by people who knew he was different. The people of New Krypton are in your debt, for without you, I am quite certain Kal-El would not be who he is. And so, as Lady of New Krypton, I gift the people of Earth a map of the cosmos – as far as our technology can see,” she said, giving a nod to a Kryptonian at the edge of the group on the stage.

The Kryptonian with a crest of a backward ‘C’ went to the Head of the UN and presented a crystal in a clear box set into a dark cube.

The UN members clapped in enthusiastic appreciation for the gift.

“We know the people of Earth are boundless,” Zara stated.

She then turned to Superman as another Kryptonian moved forward and handed her a sleek, dark blue box.

“And now, before we go. Within is the name and age of every current citizen of New Krypton, so you will know the identity of every immediate soul whose future you have helped place on the path to peace,” Lady Zara said, handing the box to Superman.

Martha gasped, immediately knowing how much the gift meant to Clark as the cameras captured Superman’s clearly touched expression. He held the gift reverently in both of his hands.

“As you told us before, the future is what we make of it. And for New Krypton, that future is now up to her people. You’ve done more than we could have ever expected. We’ll take it from here,” Zara said, before doing what they all knew was quite un-Kryptonian.

She placed her hands on either side of his face, gazing up at him tenderly.

“Your place is here, on Earth,” she stated.

He closed his eyes for a long second, and Martha and Jonathan knew how much emotion was desperately wanting to escape.

Opening his eyes, he took an unsteady breath as she stepped back with an encouraging nod. He looked up at the floating group that was staring at him in what Martha could only identify as rapt awe.

The image on the television screen suddenly flickered,

as if the reception had suffered a flash of interference, but the timing of it suggested there was something more to it as several people on screen startled, including most of the Kryptonians.

Everyone was motionless for roughly five seconds, their attention obviously on Superman who slowly relaxed his shoulders. The screen flickered briefly again.

“Thank you, Lord Kal-El,” Lady Zara said, before she gave one final look to the UN officials and gave a respectful bow of her head.

With that, the forms of the New Kryptonians blurred and shot back to the vessel far above, before that too disappeared.

As far as Lucy Lane was concerned, the past few years had been the most insane ones in the history of planet Earth, and the past two months had been the most intense.

Everyone she knew had seen all the videos of the UN’s meetings with Superman weeks ago, and many were still talking about them.

It was very hard to reconcile the reality that her sister was going to marry this . . . man.

He was larger than life.

And she was going to personally meet him very soon! And no, she didn’t count the brief minute they had been in the same room after she had caught him making out with her sister.

Although that image of him surprised would forever stay with her, and it was odd to know that he was the same man who had just finished updating an intergalactic treaty. Was it intergalactic? Or was it planetary? Bi-planetary?

Well, whatever. A huge, gigantically important treaty.

She shook her head, reminding herself to calm down.

‘This is the same guy who Lois had babbled about for months, telling you he was a renown private investigator and was insanely handsome, a great cook, an adorable farm boy, and very down to earth,’ she told herself.

She snorted. “Down to earth. Right.”

He had abilities out of this world and could fly through the sky whenever he wished. Although perhaps that proved her sister’s point. He could do and be whatever he wanted, and yet he chose to be Clark Kent. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say he chose to remain Clark Kent while being Kal-El and Superman on the side.

She shook her head, recalling how he had extended his aura in farewell to his kinsmen and unknowingly disrupted the broadcast of every present news station for a fraction of a second.

She knocked on her sister’s door.

“Lucy, hi! Ready to help me decide on things so mom can stop fretting?” Lois asked, opening the door.

Lucy chuckled, easily imagining their mother

obsessing as she entered.

“Sure. Has she tried to convince you to have doves?” Lucy asked.

“Argh, yes! Why would I want a thousand birds?! There would be bird droppings everywhere!” Lois complained with a laugh.

Lois led them to the couch in front of the coffee table that already had some snacks on it. They sat down.

“Would you like anything to drink?” Lois asked.

“Sure, a Coke?” she answered, not sure if Lois had Coke since, usually, she only had cream soda.

Lois nodded happily but didn’t get up to get it, which confused Lucy.

“Ice or no ice?” a voice asked from the kitchen.

Lucy startled, suddenly realizing her sister’s fiancé was already there. She wasn’t sure why, but she had thought he would arrive later.

“Uh, ice please,” she squeaked.

Lois looked amused.

A moment later, Clark Kent, Kal-El, Superman, whatever, entered with their drinks.

“Hi!” Clark said cheerfully, looking as ordinary as most any other normal, good-looking guy.

And as if he wasn’t the most powerful being on the face of the planet.

She blinked.

“Uh. Hi,” she returned a bit late.

He smiled, and thankfully Lois took mercy on her - sort of.

“So, you’ve already met Clark, however briefly,” Lois said. “Clark, my baby sister, as you already know.”

“You are enjoying this too much,” Clark said teasingly, setting their drinks down and sitting beside Lois who quickly shifted closer to him.

It was so strange to see Lois completely at ease with a man, and it was just as crazy as knowing the man was also Superman!

“She’s my sister, I’m allowed,” she countered with a grin.

Clark shook his head good naturedly before looking at Lucy.

“I imagine this is pretty strange for you,” Clark said.

Lucy laughed. “Very!”

Clark smiled. “It’s strange for me too.”

“How many people know?” she asked.

“Other than my parents? You, Lois, and a General who is a family friend,” Clark answered. “Of course, I suppose technically all of New Krypton knows too, but...” He shrugged helplessly.

“Wow,” Lucy breathed.

“So welcome to the world’s most exclusive club,” Lois announced gleefully. “Now, shall we get on finalizing stuff

for the wedding? I would really like to be able to get mother off our backs. As you can imagine, mother is eager to tack on as much as possible since Daddy is paying for it all.”

“Okay. Have you picked the colors?” Lucy asked.

“Well, blue seems like an easy choice,” Lois said, glancing at Clark.

“But what *kind* of blue?” Lucy pressed. “And what about a second color?”

“How about cerulean and silver?” Clark offered, pointing to the suggestion Ellen had listed on the page before them.

The discussion went on from there.

The wedding, despite Ellen’s best, gentle efforts, was small, and the weeks leading up to it had been mercifully mellow, especially when compared to the weeks before.

Attending were Clark’s parents, Bill Henderson (along with his family), Mayson Drake, General Burton Newcomb, his wife, and a few family friends from Smallville. Whereas Lois had her family, Jimmy, Perry, his wife, and Bobby Bigmouth.

Henderson was Clark’s Best Man and Lucy was Lois’ Maid of Honor, while Henderson’s children, Melissa and Paul, were the flower girl and ring bearer.

Although Melissa (who was fourteen) was a little old to serve as a flower girl, she was not going to pass up the opportunity to have a part in her idol’s wedding. As for Paul, he had worked all week with his dad to practice his job as ring bearer and he viewed the job very seriously.

“All set?” Ellen asked her eldest.

The three female Lanes and Melissa were about to go out to where everything was set up: in front of the Kent Farm, under the sycamore tree bearing the names of the Kents that had come before. Lois had shown her family that not long after they had arrived, and they were immediately even more taken with the loving atmosphere of Clark’s home.

“I think I’ve been ready for a long time,” Lois said with a content smile.

Lucy nodded in understanding, before giving a teasing smirk. “When you first started gushing about Clark, I knew he was a keeper.”

“Yeah,” Lois agreed with a proud grin as they got up to head out.

Ellen left first to sit in the front row beside Clark’s parents, then Lucy left to stand on the stage across from Henderson and Clark with the pastor in the center. After that, the music came on and Paul went with Melissa close behind.

“Princess?” Sam asked, stepping beside her and offering his arm. His eyes were misty.

Beaming, Lois took his arm and he escorted her down the aisle to the man she loved more than she ever thought possible.

Before she knew it, she was blushing at Clark's awed expression and was standing before him.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony . . ."

THE END

... of Act III