

*The gambler calculates the unreasonable odds.
 The philosopher submits to fate.
 The statistician discards an anomaly.
 The scientist suspects a hidden order.
 The believer sees the hand of God.
 They are like cold travelers at a remote inn,
 each calling for fire in the language of his homeland.*

*Maru-An, The Book of Unity**

4. Luck

July 25, 10 A.S.

On general principles, Lana detested the factory outlet mall that flanked the old Ross farm, now the Smallville UFO Museum. It was a place of and for the tourists that the museum attracted, and sold nothing that was even remotely useful to the prairie farmers who once had been the center of the region's economy. At night the parking lot lights diminished the stars, making it highly unlikely that anyone would ever again spot a UFO in Smallville – except possibly on Sunday evenings, when a county ordinance mandated that the mall power down. And even by day, the bright reflection from the lot's concrete slab and the blinding glint of sunshine off the cars changed the light environment for miles around. No one even remembered what it had been like, not today in this age of sunglasses. The natural prairie ground cover – the green of spring and summer, the gold of fall, the brown of winter – had a softening effect on the light. On the real prairie, Lana knew, you could walk for hours with naked eyes and never get a headache.

Of course there was the increased traffic, whose sound was hard to ignore no matter where you were these days, but Lana was forced to admit that the traffic predated the mall. The traffic had a million fathers: It was the museum's fault, or Clark's, or Jor-El's. Or maybe it was just random chance that had picked this particular spot for a Kryptonian rocket to fall out of the sky. *But I can't complain about the luck of that. If it had come down somewhere else Clark wouldn't have been raised by Jonathan and Martha, and I would never have known him.*

Detestable as the mall was, however, the Seattle Supreme Coffee shop on the second floor was the only place in Smallville, other than her own kitchen, where Lois could get minimally acceptable espresso drinks. Being three quarters of a mile (as the crow flies) from the house and surrounded by noise of all sorts, Seattle Supreme was also a reasonable place for girl talk; Clark wasn't likely to hear them here unless he made a concerted effort, which they trusted him not to do.

Lana sat at a table in the corner and sipped a cup of tea, which was the one reasonably priced drink on the menu, and actually (she had to grant) quite good. Lois was still at the counter, chatting with the clerk over the whine of the bean grinder and the frothy howl of the machine (whatever it was called) that blew steam through milk. It had taken several of

* English translation from the original Kryptonian, Kal-El, 3 A.S.

these coffee-and-tea dates for Lana to realize that the multiple-source din of the shop and the busyness of the mall were more than just a way to mask their talks from Clark – on the contrary, Lois actually found them comforting. They reminded her of larger and more crowded places like *The Daily Planet* newsroom or some of the other places in Metropolis where she used to spend her time. Peace and quiet was an acquired taste for Lois, and though she had worked mightily to acquire it, she would probably never slide into it as comfortably as Lana.

“How’s the book?” Lana asked when Lois arrived with her double cafe mocha.

“I can’t imagine what possessed me to propose it,” she answered as she sprinkled liberal quantities of cinnamon and sugar into her mug. “I mean, there’s plenty of intrigue in the story of the Asian currency bubble, but you end up having to know a lot of economics and banking technology to make sense of it. And I can understand that stuff when I need to, but explaining it is something else again. At least I got to show Jon a bunch of Singapore and Hong Kong.”

Lana continued sipping her tea. “You’ll get through it. You always do.”

Lois looked at Lana as if expecting something more, then mimed striking herself on the side of the head. “You meant Clark’s book, didn’t you?”

Lana shrugged. “It was rude of me not to ask about your book first.”

“But Clark’s is much more interesting. Don’t apologize. If I had to pick one project to go well and the other to be a disaster, I’d be rooting for Clark myself.”

Lana smiled, because she knew that Lois meant it. That was what had sold her on Lois as Clark’s wife, originally, in spite of her facade as a hard, cold, self-centered journalist. Lois’ love was like a fortress, you didn’t wander across its boundaries gradually over time and wonder how you got there. One day the drawbridge came down and then you were inside. That was what Lana had seen instantly, the second time Clark brought Lois back to Smallville. He was inside her fortress, and she would stand by him even if it turned the whole world against her. “So how’s it going?”

“Well, I think.” Lois sipped her drink, frowned, and stirred some sugar up from the bottom of the mug. “At least Clark has managed to make the project his own, rather than just something the rest of us foisted on him.”

“That’s the way he’s always been. That’s the way Jonathan was. If a tornado blew the house down, by the next week Jonathan would be out there rebuilding like the whole thing was his idea. It wasn’t in him to do anything half-heartedly, and it’s not in Clark either.”

Lois nodded in agreement. Years ago, Lana knew, Lois had bristled when Lana made pronouncements based on her knowledge of Clark’s whole life. But over time the two women had developed an understanding that allowed each of them an acceptable role. Some of the credit went to Martha, who had always treated Lana like a daughter, while

fully approving of Lois at the same time. “There are so few of us who really know Clark,” the old woman had said many times. “We’d be awfully lonely if we didn’t stick together.” Eventually, both Lana and Lois had come to see the wisdom in this. At Martha’s funeral the two of them had hugged as if they really were sisters. Their sorority had only two members now, and there would be no more until Jon married or Laura came of age.

“So far there’s nothing tangible to point to, but he just seems livelier somehow,” Lois observed. “I wouldn’t say happier, just livelier. In some ways he’s more miserable than ever, but it seems healthy somehow. It’s like he’s facing the darkness instead of running away from it.”

“It’s got to be strange, writing as if he was writing about somebody else. You know: interpreting, speculating, when really he knows what happened.”

“He’s used to it. Or at least he should be. He covered Superman most of his career.” Lois laughed. “I remember the first time I had to cover a Superman story, after I knew. It took me a couple hours back at my desk to figure out what to write. Perry was going nuts. I told Clark, ‘I can’t believe you’ve been doing this all these years. You just bang these things out like it’s perfectly normal.’ I think he just laughed at me.”

“Has he left the house yet?”

Lois shook her head. “Just at night with Jon for flight training. And he’s been up to the Fortress a couple times to check Jor-El’s orb for some details. But that place is even more sheltered than the basement, and he’s got a route to the Arctic Circle that keeps him far away from people.”

“And he probably goes fast enough that he’s past before he has a chance to notice what anyone says or does.”

“So far he’s only been working on parts of the book that he can do from memory or from his files or mine,” Lois continued, “plus what’s public. Eventually, though, he’s going to have to go back to Metropolis and talk to some people face-to-face. If he wants to do the job right, and I’m sure he does.”

Lana checked her watch. They had another fifteen or twenty minutes before they needed to head over to the ceremony. Less, if they wanted a chance to check things out beforehand. The steam machine was howling again; she tried not to let it bother her. “He’ll do it,” she said. “I don’t envy him, though. Imagine listening to a whole city like that, knowing everything that’s going on.”

From the look on Lois’ face, Lana realized she had just described a reporter’s fantasy. “It’s no wonder he got all the good stories,” Lois said. “Still, I know what you mean. He hasn’t said anything, but I know he’s really dreading it. It was demanding enough before his powers grew. Now ... I think he’s afraid he’ll lose himself. That he won’t be able to say no to the demands, and they won’t ever stop.”

“What about you?” Lana asked. “Aren’t you afraid of the same thing? What if he goes to

Metropolis and never comes back?"

Lois took a gulp of her coffee and looked sad. "Then maybe I'll do a Brian Edgar," she said. "Maybe I'll go jump off a tall building and see if he catches me."

Lana reached out to Lois' free hand and gave it a squeeze. "You won't," she said. "And you won't have to. He'll get through this somehow. I have faith in him."

Lois smiled, but it was half-hearted. "Join the cult," she said. "Speaking of which, we'd better get rolling if we want a good seat."

Lana finished her tea with two quick swallows, and Lois transferred the remaining half of her cafe mocha into a paper cup. They left the coffee shop and walked to the escalator.

"How are the kids doing?" Lana asked.

"Laura woke up with a headache, but other than stuff like that how should I know? You tell me. You're the one they talk to."

This was another subject where the two women had an understanding, but Lois was a little less happy with her role. Still, Lois was wise enough to realize that human nature was to blame, not Lana. As they got older, children always tried to create some distance between themselves and their mothers.

"I was the same way," Lana sympathized. "I'd go talk to Martha while we waited for Clark to come home from football practice. Mom would never even have known where I was if Martha hadn't insisted that I call her."

Lois didn't respond, and Lana quickly guessed what she was thinking. By the time Lois was Jon's age, her parents were divorced and she was living on an Air Force base with her father and his new wife. Her teen-age rebellion had been real enough, but it had been against her step-mother, not her mother.

"Anyway," Lana said. "Jon's having second thoughts about quitting football, but he knows there really isn't anything else he can do. And Laura is afraid she's going to go through life as a total mediocrity."

Lois' eyes blazed. This, apparently, was a topic Lois and her daughter had discussed at length. "She's smart. She's pretty. She's creative. She understands people. She's not mediocre, she's just *human*. What's so bad about that?"

Lana nodded understandingly at the smart, pretty, creative woman on the other side of the table. "You know it and I know it, but I think she's going to have to figure that one out for herself. She's not going to listen to either one of us. Maybe in a couple years she'll fall in love and some boy can tell her."

Lois looked up at the skylight over the open area at the base of the escalator. "God help us," she said.

Out in the parking lot Lois' black SUV had been baking for half an hour. The leather seats were blisteringly hot against their bare legs. Lois lowered the windows and didn't

bother with the air conditioning; they wouldn't be driving far enough for it to matter. Left to her own devices Lana probably would have walked, but she recognized that it might be handy to have the SUV parked nearby in case they wanted to leave quickly, or just so that they wouldn't be overheard.

Next to the mall was the UFO Museum, a kitschy glass-and-metal structure that had grown haphazardly over the years, and had come to house all manner of alleged extraterrestrial artifacts and exhibits from around the world, whether they had anything to do with the Smallville UFO or not. Highway billboards three states away ticked down the mileage to the Museum, which had become the most famous roadside attraction in the central time zone. Nothing in the Museum or its advertising, however, made any mention of Superman. The Smallville UFO had its own mythology, full of government cover-ups and covert alien influence over human affairs. That myth had been developing for more than twenty years before Superman had broken into the headlines, and the conjecture that Superman was connected to the UFO hadn't appeared in print until a well-researched book called *The Kansas Angel* was published in 7 A.S.

In retrospect it was obvious that the Museum and its paranoid-chic following would reject the Kansas Angel theory, which required the abandonment of all previous Smallville UFO theories. The major Smallville UFO writers – who agreed on almost nothing else – were unanimous in denouncing *The Kansas Angel* as a new and diabolical chapter in the long history of the government/alien cover-up. The Museum had always viewed itself as a non-sectarian player in the UFO movement, and so did not endorse any specific theories. But it recognized that if the Smallville UFO ever became just another piece of the Superman legend, its importance and profitability would suffer. Consequently, *The Kansas Angel* was not sold in the Museum bookstore, and there was not a single S-shield to be found anywhere on the Museum grounds. Even visitors who wore the shield, or any other Kryptonist insignia, got dirty looks from the Museum staff and many of the regular patrons.

Kryptonist reaction to *The Kansas Angel* had been harder to predict. The original and largest Kryptonist sect, the Church of the Kryptonian, had maintained a resolute silence on the issue, as if they also could not figure out what they should do. The book had sold well, but not spectacularly, as the general public's interest in the historical Superman had waned. But among both Superman buffs and serious journalists the theory seemed to be taking hold. As inward-looking as the Church of the Kryptonian frequently seemed to be, still it proselytized among the general public, and so it could not completely ignore ideas that got into the public's mind. Sooner or later, it was going to have to state an opinion on the Kansas theory.

That opinion was summed up in the imposing CrystaLex-and-marble structure that had gone up across the highway and a quarter mile down from the Museum. As Lois turned the SUV into the crowded parking lot, Lana looked up in awe at the enormous marble S-shield over the doorway. Three television trucks with satellite dishes had parked across the highway, not wanting to mar their own visuals.

Lois parked, and took a last gulp of cafe mocha before getting out of the SUV. Then the two women walked up the steps and into the sanctuary. They were just in time for the dedication ceremony of the Shrine of the Arrival.

Chapter Two. The Myth of Krypton

We know from Professor Hamilton's laboratory tests that Superman was not human. There being no other humanoid species on Earth, he must trace his ancestry to some other inhabited planet, which we may as well call "Krypton," whether or not we believe anything that Superman has told us about it.²¹

Superman is the sole public source of information about Krypton. If, as has been recently speculated, Superman arrived in the famous Smallville UFO, and if the United States government recovered the spacecraft and has studied it in secret - a very big assumption - then a large number of Kryptonian artifacts may exist somewhere. We can hope that someday they will be released and we will be able to draw many independent conclusions about Krypton, its technology, and its culture. In the meantime, however, we have nothing to go on other than Superman's testimony. We can believe Superman or not, but if we doubt him we have no way to propose an alternative theory.

What Superman told us about Krypton

Krypton was an advanced civilization on a planet that orbited a red sun. Unlike Earth, Kryptonian culture did not look outward into space. It established no off-world colonies, in spite of the fact that it could easily have created the necessary technology. Other than a well-developed science of astronomy, it showed little interest in anything beyond a high planetary orbit. Krypton knew of other intelligent species, but unless they were planning to come to Krypton it had no interest in them.

It was not a planet of superbeings. That strange quirk of Kryptonian DNA that gave Superman his powers requires a yellow sun for its activation. Under Krypton's red sun, the Kryptonians' physical powers were no greater than ours.²²

21 One thing we don't know is whether the word "Krypton" is transliterated, translated, or otherwise approximated. The Kryptonian language surely must contain phonemes not used in English; have these been dropped out or fudged in some other way? I prefer to think that "Krypton" is instead some kind of translation. For example, the planet might be named after the element which is called "krypton" in our language. My favorite theory is that Jor-El was even more artful, and had access to a great deal of Earth lore. If so, he might have derived the name from the ancient Greek *krupton*, which means "the hidden place."

22 How such a mutation could have occurred and persisted in a dormant and apparently useless state is an evolutionary mystery. I discussed this with Professor Hamilton, who offered two possible explanations: (1) Under a red sun the mutation provides some other survival advantage that we have not identified. In other words, the interaction with yellow sunlight is simply a bizarre coincidence. (2) Kryptonians evolved under a yellow sun, realized the social disruption caused by the universal emergence of super-powers, and voluntarily relocated to a planet orbiting a red sun, thereby giving up their powers. This would also explain the taboos against off-world travel. Neither of these theories has the ring of truth, in my opinion, but I can propose no better ones.

One reason the Kryptonians had no interest in exploring other worlds was that they believed Krypton to be nearly perfect, and could not imagine that life would be better elsewhere. If Superman's reports are accurate, they had some justification for this view. The Kryptonians had established nearly total control over the planet's climate, for example, and had what they regarded as ideal weather year-round. The social system prevented poverty and aided each individual to find his or her own productive place in the world. The economic system reliably produced sufficient goods without inspiring its members to want more and more. Medical technology provided Kryptonians with a long lifespan free from pain and infirmity. Because procreation had for centuries been removed from the realm of irresponsible passion, the population was stable and well within the carrying capacity of the planet.

Jor-El and the Green Death

About twenty years before the birth of Jor-El's²³ son Kal-El, Kryptonians began dying from a strange new plague. For the first few years there were only a handful of deaths, but the plague spread at an exponential rate. The dead had a strange green pallor that caused the plague to be nicknamed "the Green Death." Before long the entire planet was terrified.

Kryptonian science had not faced a new cause of death in many centuries, and so it is not surprising that they were so slow to come to grips with it. Unfortunately for the Kryptonians, the cause of this plague was one they were psychologically unprepared to face. Jor-El was (by Kryptonian standards) an unorthodox free-thinker, and even he had trouble accepting the theory that his intuition led him to propose and then prove: Krypton itself was killing them, and would eventually kill them all.

For many centuries, perhaps millennia, an atomic reaction had been taking place at the core of the planet, creating a strange green mineral containing a radioactive trans-uranic element the Kryptonians had never seen before. Now the planetary mantle was starting to break up, releasing this radiation to the surface. Some were more susceptible to it than others, and the effects were more intense above fractures in the mantle, but no one was immune. In only a few years the energies in Krypton's core would become uncontainable. The entire surface would be irradiated at deadly levels, and ultimately the planet itself would break apart.

Something in the thought "Krypton is killing us" was not acceptable to the Kryptonian mind. When Jor-El first thought of this solution to the puzzle of the Green Death, he went into a depression for more than six months, and was unable even to formulate experiments to confirm or disprove the hypothesis. When finally he roused himself to action, he proceeded in a grim, fatalistic manner that to his associates seemed to be nothing more than the next logical step in the mental illness that had caused his depression. He was allowed to continue his experiments more as therapy than as science.

23 Some authors have tried to read significance into the resemblance between these names and the names of Judeo-Christian angels. (The Hebrew suffix "el" translates as "god" or "of god." So, for example, Gabriel means "God is my strength.") I can find nothing other than coincidence in this. Neither Jor-El nor Kal-El is the name of any angel listed in the standard references, and neither name translates to anything interesting in Hebrew.

When at last he had collected sufficient evidence to make the truth of his theory apparent to any objective observer, he announced his results at a meeting of Krypton's most distinguished scientists. It produced not a panic, as he had expected and feared, but a scandal: one of Krypton's greatest minds was insane. The associates who had been covering up what they saw as evidence of his instability could no longer do so, now that he had gone public with his theories. The work that his inner circle had hoped would be therapeutic now was clearly seen to be contributing to his delusional structure. The work was stopped; the evidence for his theories went unread.

Unsurprisingly, the failure of his efforts and the loss of his public honor led to another collapse, and three more months of depression bordering on catatonia. A depressed person typically suffers from one or more of the following beliefs: that all effort is pointless, that problems are unresolvable, or that everything he loves is doomed. Jor-El knew these statements to be scientific facts.

To his credit, Jor-El once again rallied. He did not recover the cheerfulness that he had before he began studying the Green Death, but he did regain energy. He proposed a new scientific project, one that had nothing to do with the Green Death. He proposed to study exo-biology, in particular the intelligent inhabitants of distant worlds. Jor-El's previous reputation, combined with the great relief that the Science Council felt to see him up and around again (and not babbling about deadly rays emanating from Krypton's core), netted his project a remarkable amount of support, given Krypton's overall lack of interest in other worlds.

Jor-El's exo-biology proposal shows what a great scientific mind can do when it dedicates itself to subterfuge. The purpose of the project, of course, was not simply to gather knowledge about other inhabited worlds out of curiosity, or even to assess the likelihood that they would soon discover the existence of Krypton. Jor-El was searching for a world where a Kryptonian would be able to live unnoticed, and possibly even breed with the natives. The project's state-of-the-art remote-viewing equipment required a lab equipped with state-of-the-art radiation shielding, ensuring that Jor-El would be free to continue his work until the planet itself began to break up. Finally, the project needed a small faster-than-light ship for the placement and recovery of unmanned probes. Had Jor-El proposed to develop a manned ship, or even a ship large enough to carry an adult Kryptonian, suspicion would have arisen about his motives, and his proposal would almost certainly have been denied. But a ship with a payload of less than fifty pounds - what harm could come of that?

The Destruction of Krypton and Kal-El's Journey to Earth

We do not know at precisely what point Jor-El's wife Lara became aware of his true intentions, or when she signed onto his scheme. She was not a scientist, and it is not clear how well she understood or appreciated her husband's theories. Until the earthquakes, the only confirmation of Jor-El's theory of the Green Death was in the data of those experiments that no one else was willing to examine. The only facts accessible to a non-scientist were that Jor-El believed his theory, and that he was alone in this belief. Some human wives have stood with their husbands against the judgment of an entire planet, but most have not. (Often the ones who did not were correct, and saved their families from destruction

by mitigating the effects of their husbands' lunacy.) We know so little about Kryptonian marriages that Lara's point of view is hard for us to imagine.

At any rate, we know that her consent was required for Kal-El's conception,²⁴ and that the earthquakes had not yet begun at that time. The continued spread of the Green Death had demoralized Krypton; very few babies were being conceived by parents who could not be confident of their own continued survival. Lara's consent to Kal-El's conception was clearly an act of faith, but whether it was faith in Jor-El's plan or faith in the continuance of life on Krypton is hard to say. Given the general reaction to Jor-El's theory, Lara's decision may have been based on simple denial.

We do know that the gestation chamber was kept in Jor-El's lab, an unusual placement that made no sense unless you believed in the necessity of shielding the child from harmful radiation. Jor-El also spent as much time in the lab as possible, and encouraged Lara to do the same. They both remained free of the symptoms of the Green Death until the final days of Krypton.

When the earthquakes began, Lara could no longer doubt Jor-El's vision, and Jor-El had no reason not to reveal his plan to her in its fullness. In the final days of Krypton, Jor-El checked and rechecked his findings about Earth and Kal-El's potential life there, including the remarkable discovery of the yellow-sun interaction. Their son, Jor-El assured Lara, would someday be the most powerful being on his new world. The probe-launching ship was fitted with an infant life-support module. At the last possible moment, Jor-El prepared his message for Kal-El and launched the ship.

Behind the escaping baby, Krypton broke to pieces, bathing the area in deadly green radiation.

Why We Might Doubt Superman's Story

The more independent sources a reporter can find for a story, the more he trusts it. Single-source stories are inherently untrustworthy, because the source may be misinformed, deceived, delusional, or even dishonest.

Superman's story of Jor-El and Krypton rests on an even more unsteady foundation: Not only is the story dependent on a single source (Superman), but that source was himself dependent on a single source (Jor-El). No independent confirmation is even imaginable: Not only was Krypton so far away that no Earth technology can hope to detect it, it no longer exists. If we could somehow travel there instantaneously, what would we find? Presumably, a red sun orbited by some radioactive asteroids containing a trans-uranic green element. How much support would that give to the details of the story?

Worse, each link in our chain of single sources gives us reason for doubt. Superman would not be the first abandoned child to invent parents for himself. As we know from countless examples of abandoned children on Earth, these fantasies can seem quite real. Frequently no conscious deception is involved. And when we examine the character of Jor-El - a

²⁴The Kryptonian mastery of reproduction served Jor-El's plans well. He and Lara removed Kal-El from a gestation chamber only hours before launching him into space.

highly intelligent loner who is misunderstood and suspected by those less gifted than he, a hero who is willing to die in peace if he can save his much-beloved son – we have to ask: What better father could an orphan boy create for himself?

We also cannot discount out of hand the point of view promoted by (among others) the Human Defense League: that Superman invented this story intentionally to hide his true origins and make his presence on Earth seem as benign as possible. Certainly the lone survivor of a planet-destroying catastrophe seems far less threatening than a scout from a technologically superior civilization.

An Earthbound alien who wanted to create a cover story for himself would surely want to incorporate human mythic patterns into his invention. The Krypton story certainly fits such patterns. It is, in essence, a baby-on-the-water myth, like the origin stories of such heroes as Moses in *Exodus* or Karna in *The Mahabharata*. Deep space stands in for the ancient river, and a translight craft has taken the place of the floating basket, but the basic form is unchanged. If you are inclined to distrust Superman anyway, this coincidence is hard to swallow.²⁵ Another coincidence concerns the form of Kryptonian technology: What little Superman said about Kryptonian technology implied that it was crystal-based rather than metal-based. How strange that this story should emerge just as crystalline technology was becoming widespread on Earth. To a skeptic this is a trait of bad science fiction, like the 1960s miniskirts worn by the 23rd century women of *Star Trek*.

Then there is the matter of the transmission. According to Superman, this story was part of a message that Jor-El somehow implanted in his infant mind, which he spontaneously remembered when he reached the appropriate age – an age suspiciously close to the time when humans deduced on their own that he was an alien. On the one hand, if we admit the existence of Krypton at all we can hardly doubt that Kryptonian science would be capable of such a marvel. But on the other hand, the scenario is far too reminiscent of the repressed memory syndrome that has been so controversial on Earth. Memories that spontaneously appear in the mind years after the events that they allegedly recall sometimes turn out to be true, but sometimes not. Frequently they are true in a symbolic or mythic sense, but false in their actual details.²⁶

Finally, the story itself tells us that Jor-El was considered by his fellow Kryptonians to be insane. What if they were right? The necessity of dispatching his son to a distant and benighted planet may have been entirely delusional.

But, in the final analysis, we have no alternative explanation of Superman's origins, and I refer to the story as a "myth" not because I disbelieve it, but because it lies beyond the reach of journalism. It can only be believed or disbelieved, not verified or disproved. The story of Jor-El and the destruction of Krypton may not stand up to

25 A less cynical view would be that Jor-El did his research well: He knew that his son would be accepted on Earth precisely because human culture has such a tradition around orphans who eventually rise to great power.

26 In my mind, the credibility of the transmission goes up if we assume that the message from Jor-El was embedded in the ship itself, which (according to the Smallville UFO theory) the U. S. government confiscated and kept secret. If Superman either induced or forced the government to show him the ship, he may have been able to decipher the message.

journalistic standards of trustworthiness, but it is the only story Superman's origins that we have or are likely to have.

Ecuador; January 31, 24 P. S.

Shaman wished that he knew what was going on.

Not that this was a novel wish or even an infrequent one. At times it seemed to him that he spent most of his life wishing that he knew what was going on. And at other times ... well, he usually didn't know what was going on then either, but at least he felt more accepting about it. Right now he was tired and hungry, and the emerald glow of the jungle canopy was starting to fade as the sun began to think about setting. Maintaining an attitude of acceptance was proving to be a challenge.

He really didn't want to make camp again. The dream had come to him with a sense of urgency, and (as little as he understood the significance of what he was doing) he didn't want to screw it all up (*screw what all up?* he wondered) by failing to move fast enough. And the road couldn't be much further, could it? He had made this trip several times before, most recently only ... Well, it had been two years, he had to admit now that he thought about it. But that time he had found the road on the second day with daylight to spare. And he had been doing his age-slowness meditations diligently – well, *fairly* diligently – so he shouldn't have slowed down much.

But he also didn't want to have to keep going in the dark. If you weren't a flesh-eating insect or a large poisonous snake or a predatory black cat with night vision, the jungle could be a nasty place after sundown. And while it was true that his previous few years as a tribal shaman had given him a certain rapport with the jungle, that wasn't all it was cracked up to be either. It was, he reflected, a little like the rapport he had developed with sharks during his sea-faring days. It didn't mean that they wouldn't have eaten him, just that he would have understood exactly what they were thinking while they did it.

And then there was his protective magick, but Shaman hated to count on that. It had never failed him – not yet, anyway. He was still alive after all. But magick never seemed to work for him in a way that inspired confidence. The magickal universe, he was pretty sure, wasn't put together in a gears-and-pulleys sort of way that you could draw up in a blueprint and get patented. When things worked out, they did so with an air of happenstance and ambiguity that usually caused him to shake his head and say, "I got lucky that time."

No, stopping for the night was out. And traveling through the jungle in the dark was out. Under the circumstances, the best solution he could come up with was denial. "It can't be much farther," Shaman said to himself.

He considered trying to encourage himself by focusing on how important this mission was, and how satisfying it would be to accomplish it, but he thought better of it. Shaman's missions on behalf of the Powers didn't usually end in a decisive, fall-of-Sauron way. Or if they did, he never found out about it. That was the problem with being a servant of the Powers: They are the Powers, and you're not. Shaman suspected that they

didn't understand human beings all that well. They certainly weren't very good at communicating, or maybe they just saw no need for it. Or maybe their godlike perspective was so beyond human perception that they had given up trying to explain it. Whatever the reason was, the problem seemed to get worse with time. Shaman's mentor had believed that communication with the Powers became more tenuous as change in human culture accelerated. That had been one of the reasons Shaman had come out here to be with the most primitive tribe he could find – that and a vague message from the Powers that he was starting to believe he had misinterpreted anyway.

The light was really starting to fade now. Glancing upward, he could tell that the sun was still shining on the top of the canopy, but the angle was all wrong for the rays to penetrate the layers and layers of vegetation. "Can't be much farther," he said, and increased his pace a little more.

The message this time had been very direct and clear, as these things went. Just before morning on the previous day, Shaman had dreamed of the Blue Lady. The Blue Lady was an Earth goddess – or rather, she was a Power who was generally interpreted as a Earth goddess by the humans she happened to appear to – and one of Shaman's favorite contacts. Visitations from the Blue Lady always left a residue of happiness behind, and though she was as enigmatic as any of the Powers, she wasn't nearly as much of a trickster or manipulator as some of her colleagues. In Shaman's experience, getting involved in one of the Blue Lady's plans hardly ever led to massive destruction or large quantities of bloodshed. He appreciated that in a goddess.

The Blue Lady had only said two words: "Call me." And when Shaman woke up, he found a long string of digits in his mind: a phone number. And that was what this two-day journey was all about. He was looking for a phone.

Not that Shaman really believed that the Blue Lady was physically manifested as ... well, as a blue lady, of course ... and was sitting next to a phone in Wherever waiting for him to call like a high-school girl waiting for a prom date. That seemed very unlikely, when he thought about it. And where was Wherever, anyway? Something about the number made him think America, but it had been a long time since he had been to America, and he remembered nothing about the area codes. He just hoped she wasn't in some de-natured rat-hole like Metropolis or Gotham. Shaman couldn't guess what would happen if a drug-pushing street gang decided to hassle a manifestation of the Blue Lady, but he was sure he didn't want to find out.

Faster.

In the distance Shaman could hear a strange whine that sounded vaguely familiar but didn't correspond to any animal call he knew. It was too high-pitched and too steady and too long. The uncertainty set his mind racing on the question of whether this jungle contained animals whose calls he didn't know, or perhaps even animals that he had never seen or heard of or imagined. Maybe they only came out during this twilight period, like the fairies of Ireland or the hellhounds that had been sighted periodically all over the

Balkans for centuries. He gritted his teeth and prepared himself not to faint dead away if the still air should suddenly be torn by some blood-curdling howl.

And then the sound registered: automobile tire spinning in mud.

The road.

In five minutes Shaman found the spot where he had hidden the waterproof bag of what he now called his “yankee clothes”. He congratulated himself on the success of the don’t-bother-me spell he had cast on the bag, which had kept it undisturbed these last two years (or maybe it was just luck), and quickly stripped away his tribal costume, replacing it with jeans and a denim shirt. He checked the passport to remind himself of his English name, then looked to see that his wallet was still stocked with money and plastic.

A quarter mile down the road, a man in his thirties was gunning the engine of an old truck and digging one rear wheel deeper and deeper into a mud hole. Shaman could tell from the sound of it that panic had set in. The young man, whoever he was, clearly hadn’t planned on spending the night in the jungle, and was getting more and more desperate as the last light vanished. (This was *panic* in the original sense, Shaman realized: Fear of Pan, the god of wild and unfamiliar places.)

Shaman, now looking like any other English- or Spanish- or Portugese-speaking man of indeterminate age, walked directly up to the truck and rapped on the driver-side window. The driver, who was also wearing jeans and a denim shirt, and was puffing fruitlessly on the filter end of a cigarette whose tobacco had burned away some time before, responded by screaming and jumping all the way over to the passenger seat.

“Maybe we could push it out together,” Shaman suggested in Spanish, shouting to be heard through the truck’s closed windows.

“Stay back!” the man yelled, also in Spanish, while his hand groped under the front seat. “I have a gun!”

Shaman calmly took a step backwards, put his hands in his pockets and tried his best to look nonthreatening. Eventually the man found his gun and waved it to Shaman without pointing, which Shaman interpreted as at least a partial step in the direction of civility. “Maybe we could push it out together,” he repeated.

The man nodded, moved back into the driver seat, and repeated “I have a gun.” The wheel began to spin again, as fast and as ineffectively as ever.

About ten feet in front of the truck Shaman found a relatively dry spot on the road and squatted down to wait. If the wheel should suddenly find purchase, he knew, the truck would come lurching forward and probably run over him. But this possibility seemed extremely remote, barely in a league with the chance that a large snake might drop down on him from some branch hanging over the road. After a minute or two, the wheel stopped spinning and the driver looked at him with confusion. Then he gunned the engine again. This time he stopped after only half a minute and stared at Shaman for

considerably longer. Then he spun the wheel again, half-heartedly, for about ten seconds.

Finally the truck's window opened just far enough for the driver to shout through. "Maybe we could push it out together," he said.

"Good thinking." Neither man moved. "I think you need to get out of the truck to do that."

Tentatively, the door opened and the man stepped out. Ten minutes later both men's jeans were mud-drenched up to the knees, but the truck was free.

"Thank the Mother and Child," said the driver, and Shaman remembered a painting of the Blue Lady manifested as the Queen of Heaven, holding a charming blue infant on her lap. The child was supposed to represent Hope or maybe New Beginnings. He took the driver's choice of words as a good sign.

"I would be ever so appreciative if you could drive me to the village. I must find a telephone."

Inside the truck the gun was still on the seat. The driver hastily stuffed it back underneath like a young husband clearing away evidence of a female visitor. "You gave me quite a scare," the driver said as they began moving down the road. It was almost dark now; the headlights were necessary and barely sufficient to follow the road's twists and turns. "I did not expect to see a man out here. I thought you must be either a ghost or a highwayman."

"Nothing so interesting," Shaman answered. "I got into an argument with my brother, and he insisted that I get out of the car. I was sure he would change his mind and come back for me when he had some time to cool off, but he didn't. I suspect we'll find him broken down somewhere between here and the village."

Ah, guile, Shaman thought. *I forgot how much I missed it.* Lying was still an undiscovered art among his tribe, whose main use of language was to call another person's attention to something he could see perfectly well if he would only look. They were unable to grasp the value of pointing to a green thing and saying "red", and so Shaman's considerable talent at spinning a yarn had been going to waste ever since he had wandered into their midst and found the old shaman dying without a successor.

"What were you arguing about?" the driver, who had identified himself as Julio, asked innocently.

Shaman didn't answer right away. Instead, he took some time to arrange himself on the seat. It had been years since he had ridden in a truck, and years since he had bounced down a road while wearing jeans and sitting on a wallet. He tossed the wallet onto the dashboard, and pulled his legs up under him as if he were sitting on the ground, which would have increased his comfort if it hadn't caused his head to bang against the ceiling every time the truck hit a bump. He rearranged himself again to put his feet on the floor.

And then, like a spigot opened after an entire season's worth rainwater had built up

behind it, Shaman gushed forth an unlikely tale of Faulknerian proportions, full of large patrician families with multiple generations of incest and perversion. Julio nodded frequently, and commented that he had often suspected such things were going on inside those ancient mansions. The dirt road's dark and rutted miles rolled by slowly but pleasantly.

The truth was somewhat less believable, which was one reason why Shaman had not told it to anyone for several decades. He hated being disbelieved, and so he preferred to lie about himself whenever anyone asked.

In truth, Shaman's given name was Daniel Gladstone, and he had been born in London a few years after the turn of the century. This made him considerably older than he looked – or, as he preferred to think of it, considerably less dead than by rights he ought to be. By all accounts he had been an above-average child – bright, healthy, inquisitive, and so forth – but not until adolescence had his true talent started to emerge: he saw visions.

At first he reacted as any well-educated young Englishman of his time would, and rationalized it all away as dreams, imaginings, hunches, and intuitions. In time, however, he developed a very strong hunch that he was rationalizing, and that there actually was a phenomenon here worth paying attention to. At that point he had a second very English reaction and began to study the occult with the kind of detached thoroughness that had given the world the Encyclopedia Britannica and the British Museum. He read voraciously, dabbled in half a dozen schools of meditation, and practiced numerous rituals that (though they seemed rather harmless and silly in the twentieth century) would have gotten his ancestors burned at the stake.

His new studies fascinated him, but they brought him no closer to understanding his visions or bringing them under control. Unlike the revelations of those who had seen the Virgin Mary or who in later years would meet aliens, Daniel's visions stubbornly refused to form themselves into sweeping prophecies or reformulations of the wisdom of the ages. No matter what he did they continued to be annoyingly dreamlike and chaotic. One day he had a vision of a book – not some seven-sealed tome of Destiny, but the thirteenth book in a series of cheap novels. Not knowing what else to do, Daniel had gone to a bookshop, found its lone copy of the book, and wandered off to a corner to examine it. Try as he might, he could find nothing of significance in it. But while he was there, a woman came into the shop and glared disgustedly at the empty spot where the book had been. After a few moments, she grabbed randomly and came up with a different book by a different author. She bought the new book and left. Daniel never saw her again.

On another occasion he saw himself at a racetrack placing a wager, something he had never done. Figuring that perhaps he was at last being shown how to make his fortune, he located a nearby track. It was exactly like the track in his vision. Encouraged, he went to the betting window, hoping that something in the situation would tell him which horse to choose. He read the names carefully, hoping for an inspiration that refused to come. The clerk was becoming quite impatient, and a man behind him was swearing, so he picked the longest-odds choice on the board. The ticket-printing machine jammed, causing a

further delay. As he left the window, he heard the man who had sworn try to place a very large bet on a different horse, but he was turned away because the race had now started. Daniel watched the race, and saw the swearing man's horse win.

Three years of diligent occult study brought Daniel to the attention of the Light Bearers, a secret society which, until it dissolved in fratricidal strife in the 1930s, served as the occult world's version of the Oxford Club. Every British occultist of any reputation either was a member, had been thrown out for breaking the society's rules, or had slammed its door loudly and stalked off in a huff.

For Daniel, now in his early twenties, the Light Bearers seemed like a fantasy made real. They were the hidden priesthood of the modern world. They worked behind the scenes to illuminate and ennoble the consciousness of humankind. And best of all, they could explain where his visions came from and how they fit into the larger scheme of things, if only he could rise to a high enough grade to be initiated into the appropriate secret.

Rising through the ranks of the Light Bearers entailed completing a rigorous and highly structured program of study roughly equivalent to a graduate degree at Cambridge. Daniel learned the basic forms of myth and how they manifested in a world's various cultures, the structural principles that governed all human religions, the elements of ritual, the 14 varieties of trance states and how to induce them, the mystical properties of numbers and shapes, 23 distinct methods of divination and where they were practiced, countless techniques of psychic swindlers, and a considerable number of top-secret magical techniques that one authority or another swore to be devastatingly effective. At each stage of his training he was passed on to a new teacher or set of teachers. He described his visions to each of them at the earliest opportunity. "Isn't that interesting?" they invariably commented, and then went on to explain the requirements for advancement to the next level in the Light Bearers' program.

Daniel became disillusioned during the Grand Schism of 1928, the first of the major splits that would eventually splinter the Light Bearers into numberless groups each barely large enough to field a bridge team. The schism began with a rupture in the Light Bearers' innermost circle, which forced the lodge's junior members to choose sides in a dispute whose causes and issues they were not allowed to know. Then followed an ever-rising level of pettiness and nastiness which Daniel tried valiantly to reconcile with the Bearers' claims of enlightenment. Eventually he began to doubt that one or two more initiations would tell him any more about his purpose in the Universe than he could figure out on his own.

The night after he resigned from the Light Bearers, Daniel had a dream. In the dream, he saw himself walking down a particular street in the direction of one of his favorite parks. He was chewing gum, something that he never did in his waking life. At a particular spot, he spat the gum out onto the sidewalk.

The next day he bought a package of gum and began walking toward the park while he chewed. When he reached the appropriate spot, he waited until no one was looking at him

and spat the gum out onto the sidewalk. Then he crossed the street and sat down on a bench to wait – for what he wasn't sure. The gum remained undisturbed on the sidewalk for more than half an hour. A child on a bicycle swerved to avoid it and came close to running into a pedestrian, but that hardly seemed unusual or interesting. Then a student, a young man with long brown hair, came walking absent-mindedly down the street, carrying a bookbag on his back. He noticed immediately when he stepped on the gum. It pulled him out of whatever daydream or problem had been occupying his mind. Annoyed and disgusted, the student retreated to a bench directly across from Daniel and began looking for something he could use to scrape the gum away. For no apparent reason he froze, staring up into a nearby tree. He held that pose for some while, and then removed his pack and began fumbling inside it without looking down. Eventually he held a sketchpad on his lap and began drawing furiously, looking back and forth between the pad and the tree. Daniel wondered if he would ever see the drawing, or what significance it could possibly have. He suspected he would never know.

“A job well done, I'd say. Wouldn't you?”

Somehow Daniel hadn't noticed the well-dressed, white-haired gentleman sitting next to him, and at first he wasn't sure that the comment was addressed to him at all. But as there was no one else within earshot, and the old man did not appear to be the kind who sits on public benches talking to no one, Daniel ventured a reply. “What job?”

“The gum. Well placed. Excellent. Couldn't have done better.”

Daniel paused to study his new companion. He wore a correct but unremarkable dark suit. He was slightly shorter and slighter darker than average, which made Daniel suspect that he was not English, but rather Mediterranean or perhaps Semitic. He spoke with the flawless professional-class accent that all English teachers this side of America attempted to instill in their students, though they seldom succeeded.

“Who are you?”

The corners of the old man's mouth turned up in understated amusement. “Come now, that's not the question you want to ask at all. You don't want to know who *I* am, you want to know who *you* are. I happen to know.”

Daniel's eyes went wide. He had a sudden temptation to stand up and walk quickly home. Off the top of his head he could list fifteen or twenty folk tales in which a mysterious stranger appears from nowhere to answer a young man's deepest questions or grant him his heart's desire. He couldn't think of a single one that ended well.

“Who?” he asked.

“You're my successor. And I must say it's about time, too. I was ready for retirement ten years ago.”

Daniel considered this answer and found that, while it was promising, by itself it was not particularly helpful. “Your successor as what?”

“As a fulcrum.”

“A what?”

“Good heavens, have they stopped teaching physics?”

Daniel knew what a fulcrum was: the little wedge that a lever rests on, the thing it pivots around. Archimedes had said that he could use a lever to move the world if he only had a place to stand, but what he really would have needed was a fulcrum.

“The reason you haven’t been able to figure out the purpose of your talents is that you’ve been trying to figure out their purpose *for you*. You’ve been wondering what they mean for you or what you should do with them. But the fulcrum doesn’t *do* anything, and nothing is done to it, either. The Subject uses the Lever to move the Object, but the Fulcrum just sits there while the world changes around it.”

Across the street, the student was drawing more slowly now, and spending more of his time examining and reacting. At times he looked pleased with himself and his creation, but mere seconds later he displayed annoyance and looked as if he were about to tear the drawing from his notebook and start again. He noticed his observers not at all. Watching him, Daniel felt as if he were peering through a *camera obscura* at someone a great distance away.

“You’re saying that there’s no point in me going over there and looking at his drawing, that the drawing is part of *his* life and doesn’t concern me in the least.” The old man nodded, which encouraged Daniel to continue. “And that looking at the effect this event has on his life is also pointless for me, because the forces responsible for that change aren’t ever going to be under my control.”

“That sums it up quite nicely, I’d say. Gold star for you.”

“But if I’m the fulcrum, and he’s the object, who is the subject? Who’s pushing the lever?”

He didn’t get an answer that day. What he did get was two years of training. He and Stavros (the old man turned out to have come from Greece) traveled the world together like two corks bobbing on a choppy sea. Stavros read omens, got hunches, took hints from synchronicities, and led his disciple on an apparently random walk through most of the inhabited globe. Along the way they did ... things. They painted graffiti in an alley, requested a song on the radio, bought lemonade from a child’s sidewalk stand, left objects of all sorts in locations they would not otherwise have been, asked for directions to places they had no intention of going, hitchhiked, told outrageous stories to strangers on trains, begged, sang on the street, underlined sentences in library books – there was no logic or pattern to it. Sometimes Daniel saw that their actions had definite effects. Sometimes he didn’t see, but could easily imagine what the effects might be. But sometimes it just seemed like random activity that did nothing but increase the world’s general unpredictability.

One day they hiked deep into the Arabian desert. "You never tell me anything about the history of our lineage," he said.

"We have a lineage?"

"You know we do!" Daniel protested, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "I'm your successor. You had a predecessor. Didn't he tell you anything about the ones before him?"

"Oh, yes," Stavros answered. He walked easily across the desert and barely seemed to perspire at all. "He told me many stories. He traced our kind back to Egypt and Sumeria."

"Really?" Daniel had hoped for a line of succession stretching back to the Middle Ages, but Egypt and Sumeria! He had not dared to imagine such a thing.

"I'm fairly certain he made it all up," Stavros commented. "He loved a good story and could never bring himself to say 'I don't know'."

Daniel visibly deflated, but then took a deep breath and doggedly pressed forward. "What about our name? You said we were fulcrums."

"Fulcra," Stavros corrected. "Latin, you know."

"Is that the name of the lineage? Are we the Order of Fulcra or something?"

Stavros stopped beside a desert shrub which to Daniel's eye looked identical to hundreds of other desert shrubs they had passed. "When I retire you can use whatever name you like. You'll be the only one, so who will argue? Now help me dig this out."

The shrub had an impressive root system. Just below the surface it grabbed on to a layer of hard clay. The two men worked for hours to dislodge it.

"Is that true?" Daniel asked. "Are we really the only ones?"

"Maybe," said Stavros. "Maybe not. How would I know?"

When they were done, Stavros took the shrub and tossed it as far as he could, which was not all that far. "Time to head back," he announced.

Daniel was still kneeling next to the scar they had made on the desert's crust. He was tired and thirsty and hot. "This is crazy! Why did we come out here? Why did we dig this up? Why did we dig up this one and not that one or that one or that one?"

Stavros accepted these questions as calmly as he accepted any of Daniel's questions.

"Perhaps this shrub is a windbreak," he suggested. "Without it, the wind may wear away a small piece of the desert there." He pointed to a spot five or six feet away. "Years from now a lost traveler will cross from there to there, and the sun will be perfectly positioned so that an odd glint will emanate from here. He will investigate and scratch up a small coin he cannot identify. With a bit more work he will find another coin. He will mark the spot and return the next day with tools. Eventually an entire temple will be unearthed, a temple dedicated to a goddess whose worship has been neglected for four thousand

years. ... Now, let's get going. We're not dressed to deal with the desert at night."

Amazed, Daniel staggered to his feet and trotted to catch up with Stavros, who was walking with strides of impressive length for a man his height.

"Do you believe that? What you said ... about the temple and the goddess?"

"No," Stavros responded. "I made it up. It wasn't very good, actually. I don't think anyone used coins four thousand years ago."

An hour later they stopped to rest, and Stavros made his longest speech of Daniel's training. "I grew up in a rural part of Greece, among people of no education. You would have found us quite primitive. We told stories, we had myths that were very real to us. My predecessor knew me. He knew that I expected to know the stories of things, that I would not be happy until I knew them. So he told me stories. He created a fine and colorful mythology for me, and for many years I was happy."

Stavros sighed, and then continued. "But you, my fine young Englishman. You grew up in an age of reason in a place of science. If I make a nice story for you, you will be happy for twenty minutes. Your Light Bearers knew that, which is why they kept secrets from you. If anyone gives you the story of how things are, you will not rest until you have torn it down. You will keep tearing it down until no brick rests on top of another, no matter how long it takes. And even then you will not be happy.

"And so I give you no fine story. You wonder why we do the things we do? Do we do it because it makes us important? We don't know whether we are important or not. Perhaps the Powers we serve are pitiful beings of a bygone era. Perhaps their plans are but futile gestures in the face of larger forces. Do we do it because the Powers are good and our service makes the world better? What evidence do we have of that? We simply see the world that is; we will never see the world that would have been if we had not interfered. Are we men of faith, who continue with confidence in spite of the lack of evidence? I think not. I have known men of faith. They are quite different from you and me. All these answers are nothing but tales for children."

Daniel could barely speak. "So why then?" he whispered.

"It is just what we do," Stavros said. "There is no other reason for it."

By the end of the story – the false one full of sex and money – Julio had long forgotten that it was supposed to explain why Shaman's brother had thrown him out of the car. He responded by beginning to relate what some of his friends had claimed about a girl in his village who had very long legs and wore very short shorts. But somewhere in the second sentence he realized how totally outclassed his story was, and after making two or three more false starts he sputtered into silence.

As if in sympathy, the truck's engine began to falter. In less than a minute, it too had fallen silent. "I think we're out of gas," Julio said sheepishly. "I must have spun the

wheels longer than I thought.”

“I guess we walk the rest of the way then.”

Julio stared at Shaman as if he must be insane. “We wouldn’t get twenty paces. It’s dark out there now. There are *things* in the jungle at night.”

“There are things in the jungle by day, also,” Shaman answered, and then realized that this thought was somewhat less comforting than he had intended.

“I say we keep all the windows up and the doors locked and we pray to all the saints in heaven to keep us safe until morning. Maybe then we walk, or better yet we catch a ride from someone else.”

Shaman found this plan to be eminently sensible, and he knew immediately that he would not follow it. “Call me,” is what the Blue Lady had said in his dream. Not “Call me sometime” or “Call me by the end of the week and we’ll do lunch.” Just “Call me.” *Who knows how long she’ll be there? It might already be too late.* The Powers never offered the chance to just sit down and chat with them. The possibility that a Power might communicate with him not through hints and coincidences and ambiguous visions, but vocally – it was far too important to pass up, no matter how unlikely it sounded.

“I gotta go,” Shaman said as he opened the door and jumped out. “If I make it I’ll see if I can get somebody to bring you some gas.”

“Are you crazy?” Julio shouted through a half-inch crack – which was as far as he was willing to roll down the window.

“Definitely,” Shaman said definitely. It wasn’t a response that would make it into the movie of his life, but at least it let Julio stay in the car without losing face. *No sense getting us both killed.*

Why can’t it ever be easy? Shaman wondered as he walked away from Julio’s headlights and waited for his night vision to kick in. And then he reflected that actually it was easy sometimes. Spitting gum on the sidewalk hadn’t been all that hard, after all. No, he observed, the problem wasn’t with the state of the Universe or even his own general sense of persecution. The problem was that he was walking down a jungle road at night, that there were a million noises, any one of which could correspond to something terrible, that he was really and truly scared, and that he was in grave danger of fainting dead away if he didn’t manage to translate some of this fear into anger.

“WHY CAN’T IT EVER BE EASY?” he shouted angrily.

Better. Angry, edgy, and somewhat less overwhelmingly scared now, Shaman kept putting one foot in front of the other. If he could just add in one more pinch of denial, a sprinkle of false confidence, and stir, his mood would be almost back within his normal range.

“The village can’t be far from here,” he said optimistically. “I’ve gotten through worse.”

He also tried to have a little faith, though he had realized long ago that (as Stavros had told him) faith was not his strong suit. Still, if the Blue Lady had wanted to get him killed, she could surely have found some simpler way. And if she had some purpose other than getting him killed, then maybe she would look out for him. (On the other hand, it would be just like a Power to give similar visions to a few dozen sensitive souls and figure that they wouldn't *all* manage to get themselves killed. But he could see that this line of thought was not helpful, so he cut it off.) And if she was looking out for him, well then the best thing was to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

The jungle was starting to thin a little. Occasional beams of moonlight made it down to the road now, and once in a while he got glimpses of what seemed like artificial light up ahead. Maybe that was why the village was where it was. Maybe the jungle was just naturally thinner there, so it had been easier to clear a spot for a few buildings. Or maybe ... no, Shaman was too happy believing that he was close to the village and its telephone, so he decided not to indulge in any more maybes. The jungle was thinning. That light up ahead was from the village.

And then something dark crossed the road in front of him. It was the size of a jungle cat, and maybe thirty yards away. Or else it was the size of an elephant and much farther. (Night vision was one thing, but night depth perception was not part of the package.) Whatever it was, it sat in the middle of the road, between the wheel ruts, and its eyes glowed green.

And that, strangely, reminded him of something else about Stavros. He once had asked Stavros how he had known that Daniel was his successor. Was it a vision, a message, a sign? "The first time I looked at you," Stavros said, "your eyes flashed green light at me."

"But my eyes are blue," Daniel had protested.

"That's what made it a sign."

But this cat – it looked more and more feline to him now – was not his successor, much as he would like to find one and take a well-deserved retirement. It could be the Adversary, a rival Power come to keep an eye on whatever the Blue Lady had in mind. A large black cat was the Adversary's preferred manifestation when he wanted to look menacing. Or, more likely, this thing on the road really was a large black cat who had come to invite Shaman to dinner, an invitation he hoped to refuse without giving offense.

Carefully, Shaman marshaled his denial, his courage, and his anger, and set them in the balance against the urge to run screaming, a strategy which, despite its considerable physiological appeal, seemed unlikely to succeed. "No problem," he whispered, and began tracing a sigil in the air while he slowly advanced and softly chanted. It wasn't an invisibility spell, exactly – Shaman knew several and was pretty sure none of them worked – but more of a don't-look-at-me-I'm-not-very-interesting spell. He figured this had a much better chance of improving the situation, especially if the cat wasn't hungry. And besides, it gave him something to do other than run screaming.

As he finished his third repetition of the chant, the cat began to move toward him silently as a shadow. At the end of the fourth repetition they were separated by perhaps two lengths of the cat's body. Suddenly, Shaman heard a racket coming out of the jungle on his right, sounding like a running elephant or stampeding herd of hippos (all of whom would have to be very lost, since they belonged in Africa). In seconds a wild pig exploded out of the brush and ran across the road, trailing vines and leaves and sticks behind it like the streamers on a parade float. It disappeared into the brush on the left side of the road, where it sounded like phalanx of bulldozers. The cat slipped silently onto the pig's newly-blazed trail and was gone.

Shaman stopped chanting and stood still for a second, listening to the pounding of his heart. "I got lucky that time," he said.

The village was indeed only a short distance. Shaman arrived five minutes after losing sight of the pig. Of course, Shaman remembered now, *village* was something of a compliment, if not an outright flattery. This *village* consisted of a general store and gas station – closed now – and three modest houses. The light he had seen was inside the gas pump, a shiny machine whose cousins no doubt looked right at home on an oasis of the Indiana Toll Road. Shaman had no idea why the pump was still lit. Outside the store was a pay phone, which should have been lit but wasn't.

Time to call a goddess, Shaman thought, feeling nervous in a way that reminded him of the first time he had asked a girl for a date. He took a couple of deep breaths, then reached into his pocket for the wallet that contained the telephone credit card that was going to pay for his call to the Blue Lady who he hoped was sitting next to a phone somewhere in the concrete-and-steel wilderness of America.

Except that his wallet was still on the dashboard of Julio's truck.

Now Shaman began to panic. And to realize that he had been kidding himself before when he thought that he felt the way he had just before asking for his first date. *This* was what he had felt like just before asking for his first date.

Shaman's mind always worked very quickly when he was panicking, but unfortunately it achieved this speed by racing through the same short list of thoughts over and over: Should he run back to the truck and get the card and come back? Would he live? How long would it take? Would the Blue Lady still be waiting? Should he try to wake somebody up? What should he tell them? Should he run back to the truck?

"There are no accidents," he announced to himself as authoritatively as he could manage, using English this time because English worked so well as the language of authority. "When you do the work of the Powers there are no accidents. All of your plans are just tiny pieces in the larger plan that you know nothing about. The only way to know the plan is to watch what happens. If you're here with no money and no cards, then that's exactly where the plan says you're supposed to be."

He almost believed it. Or rather, he *did* believe it, except for the caveat that sometimes

you only *think* you're doing the work of the Powers. And in those cases the whole operation is one big accident, like those forty-car chain reactions that sometimes happen when the autobahn gets foggy.

"Don't think about that," he ordered, and tried to force himself to imagine how this could be part of the plan. Maybe he was here with no way to pay for the call because he wasn't supposed to pay for the call. It could be a symbolic thing, a reminder that you're always calling collect when you call the Powers.

He picked up the receiver, asked the operator to reverse the charges, and gave his English name. He heard a few clicks and two or three changes in the level of static before an American operator came on the line. Shaman repeated his request, and soon the line was ringing. It rang more than ten times.

"Hello," a male voice answered in English. Shaman had trained himself to listen to the nuances of voices. The man was middle-aged, and had probably been asleep fairly recently. Overtones of worry and exasperation combined to give his voice tension and energy.

"I have a collect call from a Mr. Daniel Gladstone from Ecuador. Will you accept the charges?"

There was silence on the line.

"A Mr. Who from where?" Exasperation was winning out over worry.

"Ecuador. Mr. Gladstone."

"I don't know anybody from Ecuador named Goldstone or anything else. Do you know what time it is?"

"In the central time zone," the operator said helpfully, "it is 2:45 a.m. Will you accept the charges?"

"No I'm not going to accept the charges!" the American said angrily. "What kind of a joke is this?"

A firm click told Shaman that the American had hung up. In his mind he saw a man slamming down a receiver with great authority, but he couldn't have said whether this was a vision or simply his imagination making an obvious deduction.

"The charges have been refused," the operator said helpfully.

"I had figured that out," Shaman answered, and thanked the operator for her trouble. He hung up the phone, and for the first time since that strange and wonderful dream had woken him, he allowed himself to feel tired and disappointed and very, very old. He wondered if it had all been a mistake, if his dream had been nothing more than a simple human wish fulfillment, the kind of dream that requires no response beyond a long, wistful sigh.

I wonder if anyone will ever thank me for my trouble.

But he knew the answer to that one. He sat down on the ground, leaning his back up against the pole that supported the telephone. Shaman considered the possibility of falling asleep right here, and hoped if he did that he wouldn't dream. *I'm too old to keep doing this*, he thought, wondering how many more decades he could hold out. *I have got to find my successor.*

He thought about Yehnu, a boy of the tribe whose aura at birth had impressed him. He would start training the boy soon, but Shaman hadn't seen any green flash in his eyes. The boy might his successor as shaman, but could he really be the next fulcrum or butt-of-divine-jokes or whatever else Shaman was? He doubted it. Maybe civilization had completed its work, even out here. Maybe the Powers were just too distant now. Maybe they didn't have it in them any more to make or find or designate a successor for him.

Stavros was right, he observed dismally. *We aren't men of faith. But whether Yehnu can be trained to do this job or not, I have got to find somebody somehow. I can't keep this up forever.*

July 25, 10 AS

The interior of the Shrine of the Arrival was designed and decorated in a style Clark had once labeled "Pop Krypton". No one outside of Clark's inner circle had ever seen the images from Jor-El's orb, but that hadn't stopped the popular culture from working out its own vision of Superman's home planet. The big-budget movie *The Last Son of Krypton* had started the process back in 5 S, portraying Krypton as a high-tech version of Atlantis. Atlantis, in turn, had long been envisioned as an idealized Greco-Roman civilization, so the Hollywood Kryptonians wore white flowing robes on ceremonial occasions. Their everyday attire, on the other hand, borrowed from the super-hero genre: no capes, but bright colors and stretchable fabrics, with the family crest or other insignia worn on the chest.

The subsequent two decades had seen an increasing refinement in the Pop Krypton style, as each movie, television show, cartoon, or video game carried forward the better ideas of the previous ones, while proposing three or four additions which might or might not be ratified by subsequent works. The Church of the Kryptonian played an ambiguous role in this process. On the one hand it disliked the idea that the public's image of Krypton might be formed by someone else, but it also held a position similar to Clark's: the details of Kryptonian civilization should remain an inner-circle secret. (In the Church's case this position had the practical advantage that the inner circle could change its mind without anyone being the wiser.) And so it supplied "technical advisers" to the larger Hollywood productions, but never endorsed any of them as accurate. Its own constructions, like the Shrine of the Arrival, borrowed liberally from the pop culture traditions, while officially denying that it did so.

One major theme of Pop Krypton (and also, coincidentally, of real Kryptonian fashion in the era of the destruction) was translucence, while another was that every surface should faceted. And so the interior walls and ceiling of the Shrine contained no smooth segment

larger than a foot. Each wall was a three-dimensional mosaic of translucent polyhedral pieces, lit indirectly from behind, providing an effect somewhat like a stained-glass window, but with more texture. The ceiling was a very dark blue with occasional small panels of color representing the stars in deep space. The back wall abstractly connoted the escaping rocket, seen over the rim of a vast red sun, with an exploding green planet in the background. The left wall portrayed a shooting star over the prairie, presumably Kal-El's arrival on Earth. The right wall showed Superman flying above a nighttime skyline that suggested Metropolis. The room's brightness came from the front, where a yellow wall with spots of glowing orange represented the Kryptonian host waiting inside the Sun for the Day of the Return.

The chamber was filling up as Lana and Lois entered. They found empty space in a pew a few rows from the back. The arrangement of the chamber was just enough like a protestant church to give Lana a vague feeling of blasphemy. The "pews" were laid out as concentric semicircles, and were made not of wood, but of one of those transparent new materials from LexCorp. As she sat down Lana noticed with surprise that the apparently glassy surface was actually soft, and conformed itself into a seat rather than a bench. In the front, where the Smallville Community Church would have had its altar, stood a four-foot-tall marble S-shield, supported on either side by slightly-larger-than-life statues of Jor-El and Lara. In fact, Lana knew, these statues looked more like the Kryptonian parents in *The Last Son of Krypton* than like the historical Jor-El and Lara. The statues portrayed a man and woman with a clear family resemblance to Superman, rendered as an optimistic, early-20th-century vision of male and female human perfection. The real Jor-El and Lara, the ones whose images were projected by the orb, made Lana think of Jack Spratt and his wife. By the time of the destruction, Jor-El had been skeletally thin, as if he could not be bothered to eat more than was necessary to keep his body going, while Lara had a Renoir-bather plumpness. Whether either of them had been attractive by Kryptonian standards was impossible to guess at this point.

Lana supposed that if she were a different kind of person she could sit here and smugly revel in her superior knowledge, poking fun at the shamelessness of the Church hierarchy and the gullibility of its followers. But Lana had never liked smug people, and she dearly hoped that she would never become one. Instead, she felt guilty about her complicity in deceiving the ever-increasing ranks of the Kryptonists. Many of them, she knew, were sincerely looking for something that seemed to be missing from the world: a powerful individual whose goodness was more than just a PR campaign, someone who had a vision of a better world and accepted the duty of trying to achieve that vision. The real world had plenty of good people in it, but when push came to shove they always seemed to lose out. The real world was always being shaped by the Lex Luthors and Eric Randalls, people who were self-centered and arrogant and always ready to take what they wanted. If Superman had been both good and unbeatable, then why shouldn't they love him? And if they imagined him to be more than he was, if they made up things about him and then believed in their own creations – isn't that what everyone does when they love someone?

No, much as Lana might despise the hierarchy, she couldn't look down on the Kryptonist rank and file. She was embarrassed for them, but she was also embarrassed for herself, who knew the truth and told no one. Part of her wanted to stand up and yell, "I know Kal-El, and he doesn't want this. He wants you to live your lives and be good to each other and try to make the world better." But that secret wasn't hers to tell, and besides, who would believe her?

She found that she couldn't really blame Clark, either. He had never told anyone to make him a god. Maybe he could have been more forceful about discouraging the Church, but who knew it would get this far out of control? Maybe there was something better he could have done back in the beginning, but she wasn't sure what. And now that he was supposed to be dead, his options were even more limited.

In front of the marble S-shield stood a lectern, and in front of the lectern a small table with a veiled box sitting on top. As Lana began speculating about the contents of the box, the prelude began to play. Pop Kryptonian music, according to every source from *Last Son* on down, was aetherial and heavenly, with an emphasis on sounds of great purity. Harp, harmonium, and bells were the appropriate instruments, preferably synthesized and seeming to come from no particular direction. An angelic choir, singing from a balcony behind and above, intoned syllables that purported to be a Kryptonian chant.

The mosaic Sun's light dimmed as the music died away, and when it came up again a young woman stood at the lectern, looking vaguely familiar to Lana. She wore the white robe of a nun or monastic or whatever the Kryptonists called them. Her blond hair was cut short all over, as if it had been done with a razor. She raised her arms skyward and the congregation rose. Then she shouted: "Look up! Look up! He descends from the skies to save us."

"Look up! Look up!" the crowd responded enthusiastically. *"He comes again in glory."*

Lana and Lois had stood with everyone else, but did not speak. Their voices were not missed. As she stood silently, Lana noticed the involuntary thrill she always felt when masses of people spoke in unison. Something deep in her body wanted to join in. Whatever it was, it cared nothing about who the people were or what they were saying. It just wanted to be a part of that One Big Voice. *When you get right down to it we humans are herd animals*, she thought.

The young woman introduced herself as Susan Miller, who had run away from her Smallville home at the age of 15. "I remember her," Lana whispered to Lois. "Parents were heart-broken."

Susan's story, with a few obvious emendations, could have been told at any tent revival, 12-step meeting, or televangelist talk show. She had been a bored girl in her early teens, finding nothing worthwhile in the life that seemed to be waiting for her. Her parents' lives seemed empty and oppressive, they criticized her constantly, and then the real battles erupted when she began to rebel by experimenting with drugs and sex. She ran

away to Metropolis, where she supported herself by a combination of shoplifting and prostitution.

In Metropolis she was free of her parents, but no happier, no less empty. “There are no secrets on the street, because there’s no place to hide. I knew very quickly what happened to girls like me. I knew that I was headed for a disease, or a drug overdose, or being beaten to death by some man. And I didn’t care, after a while. I didn’t cry and I didn’t complain about it. I just didn’t care. I was going to die and I didn’t care.”

She had been standing on a sidewalk, leaning against a store window when the reactions of the other people on the street told her that something important was on the television screen on display behind her. She couldn’t hear the sound, but she knew it had something to do with Superman. They were saying he was dead, but he couldn’t be dead. Even then she had known that someone like Superman couldn’t die.

She found herself following others into the store and watching as the story unfolded: Superman had gone to the Sun to save the world. And he had succeeded, but he had died there. Died so that other people could go on living, people who didn’t even belong to the same species, people like her.

“And then something came over me and I started crying. And I realized that things didn’t have to be this way for me. That I was doing something wrong. That I was throwing my life away for nothing when here was somebody who had done something important with his life. He was dead – yes, by then they had convinced me that he was dead – and I would be dead soon too, but he had done something with his life and I hadn’t. And that had to change.

“That afternoon I walked ten miles to the First Church of the Kryptonian next to Franklin Park. It was full of people that day – all kinds of people of all races and all ages and all walks of life, from bank presidents to homeless bums from the park – and we were all crying and hugging each other. And then the Prophet came out to talk to us. And he told us that there wasn’t any need for us to cry, that Kal-El was not dead, but he had gone to the Sun so that he could come into his true power.

“The Prophet told us that he might be gone a long time, and that this was the time of our testing, to see if humanity was worth saving. This was a time to dedicate our lives to Kal-El, and make ourselves ready for the day of his return.”

Susan stopped and wiped a tear from her eye. “She’s good,” Lois whispered.

Lana answered, “I don’t think so. I think she really feels it.”

“You’re too trusting,” Lois countered.

“That day hundreds of us dedicated our lives to Kal-El. On that day I gave up my old ways and became a new person for Him. Since that day I have been drug free and self-supporting and law-abiding. I have devoted myself to his teachings and have risen through the circles of His Church.”

“I hope Clark’s not listening,” Lois whispered. “This kind of thing drives him nuts. You try to be an example, and it starts out as a good thing, and then people like Randall get hold of it and use it to build their power.”

“Maybe Clark should have beaten him to the punch and started his own religion.” Lana was a little surprised to hear herself say this. She couldn’t remember ever having thought it before.

“Yeah, right,” Lois chuckled. “I can imagine Clark telling everybody that he’s a god.”

Lana had meant her suggestion seriously, but she had to admit it was amusing when Lois put it like that. “And what about you?” Lana mocked a bow. “Holy Lois, wife of God ...”

Lois actually started to giggle audibly now, try as she might to suppress it. Nearby worshippers began to stare at her. “Martha would have thrown a fit.”

“Wouldn’t she just? I don’t know how you spank somebody who’s invulnerable, but she’d have found a way.” Both of them clamped their jaws tight and shook with laughter.

“I can’t tell you how thrilled I was,” Susan continued, “when I rose high enough to learn the secret that the Church publicly acknowledges this morning for the first time: that the great and holy Kal-El, who is resting at this minute in the center of the Sun, raising power for the day of His return, came to Earth in my very own hometown of Smallville.”

The room filled with a warm applause. Lana wondered what these people would think if they knew that the great and holy Kal-El was probably sitting in a basement less than a mile from here. Lois collected herself and commented, “Of course this is how they would play it: They knew it all along, and now that the rest of us have started to figure it out, they might as well admit it.”

“And now I am even more thrilled that I can continue my work for Kal-El by returning here to Smallville to be the archon of this magnificent mission, the Shrine of the Arrival. After all these years, Kal-El has brought me home.”

The applause was thunderous now. Looking around, Lana didn’t see that many Smallville people; she could classify just about anyone she saw as either a Kryptonist pilgrim or a curious tourist who had wandered in from the museum. But you didn’t have to be from Smallville, she supposed, to get all choked up about a runaway coming home and being reunited with her parents. *If they are reuniting*, Lana thought. *Seems like the Church would put the Millers on display if they were here. If they approved.*

The PK music began again, and a dance troupe performed a 15-minute ballet telling the story of Kal-El’s escape from Krypton. The story was “told” to a female member of the troop whose character was listed in the program as “Earth Woman”. In the finale, the tellers raised their hands above their heads and a prop spaceship “flew” across the stage from hand to hand. Those who didn’t have a hand on the ship fluttered around it to represent both the vicissitudes of space and the infant’s angelic protectors. When it came to ground, the lights dimmed for moment, and came up again to show Earth Woman

alone with the ship. She danced around it several times in fear and wonder, then opened it to find a real baby. She held the baby up as if to offer him to everyone, then pulled him to her chest. The lights went off again.

“That was good,” Lana whispered in amazement.

“I guess they’re trying to tell us that they do more than collect change at airports these days,” Lois responded.

The ballet was followed by a second speaker, Julia Carter, a woman with African features and cafe-au-lait skin who Lana judged to be in her late thirties. The program identified her as the founder of the Eyes of Warmth Mission in Metropolis. “She goes way back,” Lois said. “She’s one of Randall’s original recruits.”

The speaker put some papers on the lectern and took reading glasses out of a jacket pocket. “Today is another large step in the progressive revelation of Kal-El and his mission on Earth.” Her voice was uncertain, as if she had little experience reading speeches in front of crowds. Lana realized that she must not be able to see the audience at all, with the floodlights in her eyes to prevent the audience seeing her as nothing but a shadow against the solar mosaic. Susan Miller must have had the same problem, but it hardly seemed to have bothered her. “Today we celebrate ...”

Suddenly she stopped speaking and stood very straight. The glasses fell to the ground and she made no effort to retrieve them. She stared over the heads of the audience with wide eyes. Lana felt a chill as the gooseflesh rose on her arms.

“Is she having some kind of a seizure?” Lana whispered.

“Oh no,” Lois said. “Worse than that. It’s a vision. Next they’ll be curing people’s hangnails.”

If this was a fake it was an extraordinarily good one. Lana did not turn to look at whatever Julia Carter was seeing or hearing, but she felt a sense of presence, a heightened awareness of the importance of the moment. She decided to say nothing to Lois. *Maybe I’m just gullible. Maybe I’m just like the rest of them.*

“Yes,” whispered the speaker, her voice amplified by her clip-on microphone. “Yes, I will.”

She stepped back from the lectern, took a deep breath, and then waved away someone who came in from the wings. She stepped back up to the lectern and spoke now without notes and without glasses.

“People often ask me where the Eyes of Warmth Mission gets its name. In the winter after Kal-El began his public career as Superman, the homeless people who lived in Metropolis’ Franklin Park discovered something that saved many of their lives: The old stone amphitheater, the one that no one used in the winter time, stayed warm at night. Everyone thought they knew why: there were steam pipes that ran under the city, and this was where they came close enough to the surface to make a difference. In truth, there

were no steam pipes. On cold days Kal-El heated the stones at sundown with his heat vision. He told no one, and even though rumors got out, no one was sure until the first cold snap of 1 A. S. The stones were cold that night, and they've been cold ever since.

“This is a side of Kal-El that is too easily and too quickly forgotten. We remember his voyage through space. We remember his feats of strength and speed and courage. We remember that he saved the Earth from Kal-El's Comet. It is the greatness of Kryptonism, the greatness of this Church, that we do not offer an ancient myth or an abstract principle. Our god has been seen by millions. He lived among us for a dozen years. His miracles are real.

“But it is too easy to remember His miracles and forget what those miracles were for. Too easy to forget the example that He set. He helped people who could never repay Him. He helped people who did not even know they were indebted to Him. He helped them not for money or gratitude or glory, but because they needed help.

“I threw away my speech because it is not the speech that needs to be given today. You don't need to hear any more about His legions in the Sun and the Day of Return. We should not wait here helplessly for our god to come back. We should not spend our time in nothing but worship and the contemplation of His relics and convincing others to worship Him. *We should finish His work.*

“We tell each other that Kal-El lives, that He is waiting inside the Sun for the Day of Return. We admit today that He lived in Smallville a long time ago. But what if He were alive in Smallville today? What if He could see through these walls and hear what we are saying? What would He say to us?

“Would He thank us for this magnificent building? Would He thank us for singing His praises, for dancing His story, for honoring the place where He arrived on Earth? Or would He say to us, ‘That's not the way to honor me. That's not what I want from you. Live your lives. Be good to each other. Make the world better.’”

Lana gasped. “How ... what is she doing?”

“It's Social Kryptonism,” Lois explained. “It's a heresy. People get excommunicated for it. I don't know what they're doing, introducing it here.”

“Maybe she had a vision.”

“Randall is the only one who is authorized to have visions. If she's doing this on her own, there's going to be big trouble.”

“We've got to talk to her.”

Lois shook her head. “Leave me out of it. I try to stay away from the inner circle. Besides, if she really is doing this on her own, you won't get close to her afterwards. They'll have her on a plane back to Metropolis so fast Clark wouldn't even catch up to her.”

Chapter Three: The Kansas Speculation

When Superman first flew across the skies of Metropolis, he did not provide us with a resume. The mayor had not appointed a hero-finding committee, so no one was in a position to ask "Where have you been a hero before?" and insist on an answer. Superman was also not the type to sit down over coffee and doughnuts and chat about old times, at least not to anyone who talked to the press. And so we were left to sift through the evidence and speculate.

"Come on, people," Perry White exhorted *The Daily Planet's* reporters the day after my first interview with Superman. "He didn't just fall from the sky. I want to know who he is and where he's been all his life."

I'm sure we weren't the only people trying to figure out where Superman came from. Reporters, amateur detectives, and probably even governments were applying considerable effort to the question. The problem was where to start. Investigation is the art of taking little seeds of information and watering them with perspiration until they sprout into verifiable stories. We had very few seeds, and almost all of the ones we watered grew up to be weeds. Most of the people who investigated Superman, myself and Lois Lane included, spent years tracking down hunches that turned out to be false.

Everyone's first idea was technology. Metropolis was the center of the Crystalline Boom, and we had gotten used to the idea that unanticipated new materials and gadgets might appear at any moment. It seemed natural to suppose that Superman flew by wearing some new material that blocked gravity, or that he performed his feats of strength by redirecting gravitational forces. During our first interview, Superman denied using any devices, and insisted that he flew by some natural power that he couldn't or wouldn't explain. But nothing in our human experience had prepared us for the idea that powers like Superman's could be natural. Surely he was using miniature equipment developed in some secret experiment by the U. S. government, or a private think-tank like STAR Labs, or a technology company like LexCorp or WayneTech.

The revelation years later that Superman was an alien sent all of us back to the drawing board, and once again left us wondering where to start. Reporters couldn't simply check their Rolodexes for sources who had helped them on previous alien stories. Amazingly, the pieces that now constitute the best theory of Superman's arrival and childhood were not assembled until years after his death.

Eventually, Superman told us a great deal about Krypton. But he was never equally forthcoming about his upbringing on Earth. No doubt he had his own reasons for drawing a veil around this part of his life, but an unfortunate side-effect of his decision is that we may never know the identity of the people who raised him. Whoever they are or were, Superman's human parents are the hidden heroes of his story.

For a being who was once nicknamed "the Man of Tomorrow," Superman was in many ways quite old-fashioned, and an old-fashioned phrase was frequently used to describe him: well brought up. In other words, he was polite, modest, responsible, considerate of others, and possessed a strong sense of duty.

We can only guess what parenting techniques or childhood experiences developed these traits in him, but whatever his Earth parents did, we should be grateful to them. It is possible to debate how much good Superman did for the world in the long run, but it seems inarguable that

he could have done a great deal more harm. A super-powered being who reached adulthood feeling abused or angry or bitter is a terrifying thought. A Superman who was selfish, power-hungry, lustful, or simply unconcerned about the secondary effects of his actions could have caused incalculable damage.

Kryptonian genetics fated Superman to be powerful, but it can only have been his human upbringing that made him a hero. The fact that the Kryptonian infant fell into the hands of parents who were responsible and loving, rather than abusive or exploitive, is one of the great strokes of luck in human history.

February 1, 25 PS

Jonathan Kent was wide awake now. He stood in the cold kitchen wearing his pajamas and bathrobe and only one slipper, having kicked the other slipper under the bed in his rush to get downstairs to answer the phone. The tiled floor was freezing, so he mostly stood on the slippared foot, putting the other one down every few seconds to balance himself.

“Jonathan,” Martha called softly from the top of the stairs. “Is everything all right?”

“No, everything is *not* all right,” he answered. “Some joker from South America just tried to call us collect. I don’t know where these people get their nerve.”

Martha could tell from his tone of voice that a simple come-back-to-bed wasn’t going to work, so she finished putting on her robe and started down the steps. “I hope he isn’t in any trouble,” she said.

“He’d be in trouble if I could get my hands on him,” Jonathan growled, but his temper was already starting to fade. He pulled a chair away from the kitchen table and rested his bare foot on it.

“Well,” Martha said soothingly, “why don’t we have a nice cup of tea and go back up to bed. You can still get a few hours of sleep before you have to start the chores.”

“Oh, Martha, no need to go to any trouble. I’ll be fine,” he protested, but she had already lit a burner and started filling a pot with water. “You just go on up and I’ll be along in a minute. You know how hard it is for me to settle back down once I’ve got myself riled up.”

Martha continued bustling as if he hadn’t spoken. Jonathan hopped over to the window and wiped away enough condensation so that he could see the thermometer outside.

“Fifteen degrees,” he announced. But then his attention was drawn to a trail of green light in the sky, coming downward toward the southeast field where he was planning to try out a new strain of wheat as soon as the snow melted. “What the --”

The house shook as if a series of bombs had gone off.

Martha grabbed at a handle to keep the pot of water from jumping off the stove. “What was that?” she shouted.

Jonathan had leaped away from the window, and was headed up the stairs like a fireman running toward his engine. "Something just fell out of the sky over in the southeast field," he answered from the top of the stairs. He was already pulling off his robe and trying to remember where he had dropped his overalls. "I think I saw right where it landed."

"You're going out there *now*?"

"You bet I am," Jonathan answered. "I was lucky enough to be looking right at a meteor as it came down, and I'm not just going to go back to bed. I've never seen anything like that in my whole life."

Martha looked down and the stove and switched off the gas. "Well, wait for me then," she said. "No sense you go running around in the freezing cold in the middle of the night by yourself." She went up the stairs to their bedroom and grabbed some clothes out of the closet. Jonathan was in the next room over, where he kept his clothes. They had originally pictured the other two rooms upstairs as children's rooms, but things hadn't worked out that way. It still wasn't impossible, Martha knew, but they were in their mid-forties now and the odds weren't good. *Still*, she thought, *we're younger than Abraham and Sarah were in the Bible.*

Well armored against the cold, Jonathan and Martha got into the truck, which protested a little before starting. It was beginning to snow again – big wet flakes that usually only formed when the temperature was closer to freezing. Jonathan drove on a dirt road that at the moment was indistinguishable from the harvested fields on either side of it. "Are you sure it came down this close?" Martha asked. "People are always thinking things like that are closer than they are. Remember the time we drove to Denver? When we crossed the border into Colorado you thought the mountains were only a few miles away."

"It's over here," Jonathan said with a little more certainty than he actually felt. "Maybe it could be over on the Ross land, but I don't think so. You heard it. It wouldn't have been that loud unless it was pretty close."

At the edge of their property Jonathan stopped the truck and they both got out. "Are you sure it was over here?" Martha asked.

"Maybe just a little ... There!"

A little ways into their neighbors' land, a few hundred feet at most, was a faint greenish glow. "That's not natural," Martha observed.

"I never said it was natural. I said it fell out of the sky."

"Maybe we should wait."

But Jonathan was already moving, and she had to run to catch up.

"Good God in Heaven." Jonathan stood stock still a few feet from the glow, which he could now see to be some sort of unearthly egg about three feet long. A few dozen feet away from it was another slightly smaller object with fins like a rocket. In the moonlight

they could see a long scar on the snow where the finned thing must have skidded to a stop.

Martha caught up but didn't go past Jonathan, as if the scene were cordoned off by invisible police tape. "We should call someone," she suggested.

Jonathan crept slowly forward, taking steps of only a few inches. "What is it?" he asked. "Why does it glow like that?"

"It might be dangerous. Maybe it's radioactive. Or it might blow up. We don't know why it crashed."

Jonathan continued moving slowly forward. The rocketlike object sat at the center of a ring where the snow had melted, but the egg sat on top of the snow as if it had been carefully set down. "I don't think it's hot," he said.

A whimper came from somewhere. Jonathan stopped and listened. The wind had picked up and was blowing snow around. It was easy to convince himself that he had imagined the noise.

And then there was a long muffled wail.

"Somebody's in there!" Martha exclaimed. She strode past Jonathan and walked straight up to the egg.

"Or some *thing*," Jonathan answered. "Don't touch it. We don't know what this is. It's an experiment of some kind, probably. The government probably shot some kind of animal up in a new kind of rocket or something."

The wailing continued. Jonathan carefully moved up behind Martha, who stretched out her hand to touch the glowing green surface. Instantly, the glow vanished and the top half of the egg seemed to dissolve. Jonathan jumped back, but Martha stood her ground. He came back to peer over her shoulder.

Inside the egg a naked baby boy lay crying. No blanket covered him, and Jonathan couldn't see what he was lying on. In fact, he couldn't see anything at all inside the egg other than another glowing green object, this one a sphere about the width of a man's hand.

Martha quickly threw her gloves on the ground and picked up the baby who squirmed in the air and clamped his eyes shut tight as he yelled. Jonathan had wondered if he would be attached to the egg by tubes or wires or something, but he wasn't. Martha held the boy up for just a moment to examine him for wounds, then tucked him inside her coat with his head against her neck.

"Oh you poor thing," she cooed as she started to bounce slowly up and down. She seemed oblivious to his cries, even though his mouth was mere inches from her ear. "You don't look hurt but you must be *so* scared. And ... well, I guess you aren't cold. You feel even warmer than I do, but you must be hungry."

After three quick shallow breaths and three loud yells, the baby stop squirming and settled down to sleep on her neck.

“Maybe we shouldn’t move him,” Jonathan suggested.

“Jonathan!” his wife scolded. “He’s a little baby. Are you going to leave him laying naked in the middle of a field in February? It’s fifteen degrees out. We’re going to take him back home and get him warm and feed him if we can.”

“We don’t know what he’s doing here.”

“He’s not doing anything here. He’s a baby!”

She began walking back toward the truck, bouncing a little with each step and chattering comfortingly to the child.

“Well, should we take some this other stuff with us, then?” he asked, looked at the glowing globe. As he watched, the top half of the egg rematerialized. It wasn’t glowing any more, but it seemed perfectly solid. Looking at it, Jonathan could see nothing but his own reflection distorted by the curvature of its surface. Whatever might be inside was concealed.

“Come on, Jonathan. It’s cold out. We’ve got to get him home.”

Jonathan picked Martha’s gloves up out of the snow and hurried back to the truck. “Fell right out of the sky and not a scratch on you,” Martha said to the baby, who responded with an impressive stretch and yawn. “Aren’t you just the luckiest little guy in the whole world?”

The Smallville UFO

Twenty-five years before Superman’s appearance in Metropolis, a bright shooting star was seen by dozens of people near the tiny town of Smallville, Kansas, where I grew up. At that point, agreement ends and the stories begin to diverge.

Incredible numbers of books and articles have been written about the Smallville UFO, and more appear each year. A mind-bogglingly complete bibliography of these publications is contained in Carl Rosen’s *Smallville and Roswell: What the Government Doesn’t Want You to Know*.²⁷ Even a cursory look at this record demonstrates how easy it is to go round and round the same mulberry bush – quoting witnesses, debunking the motives or reliability of the witnesses, debunking the motives of the debunkers, and so on.

As a reporter, I know that a certain amount of contradictory testimony is typical of any unusual situation. But in the case of this UFO, it seems clear that some or all of the witnesses are not being completely truthful, and some have changed their stories several times. This situation creates enormous freedom of interpretation for authors who come with an ax to grind. Has one person sensationalized his story to get attention and make money? Has another toned his down after being intimidated by government agents? The wildest account was given by a man

²⁷ I must comment that I find Rosen’s conclusions unlikely, though I do admire his thoroughness.

who claimed to be just passing through town. Was he really there at all? And if not, did he make up his story for the fame and money? Or is it a paranoid delusion? Or did the government recruit him to tell an outrageous lie that would discredit the legitimate witnesses? Or is he, on the other hand, the only witness who was open-minded enough to see what was really happening, and too independent to be threatened or blackmailed into making his story fit the mold that the government and/or the media want to put on the story? All these claims and more have been expounded and defended at length.

If I could avoid joining this controversy, I would. However, I do know something about it, and I believe it to be relevant to the story of Superman. Having grown up in Smallville, I know most the major witnesses personally. After all, the Smallville UFO landed in Jack Ross' field, which is right next to my parents' farm. If Jonathan and Martha Kent hadn't been such sound sleepers, maybe their stories would be the ones being analyzed and dissected by authors around the world. Over the years I've had ample opportunity to hear the stories that people tell after the cameras are off and the big media names have gone home. And I know who likes to exaggerate and whose memory has a tendency to play tricks.

What follows is my own interpretation of the evidence. As an objective interpretation of the written record, it is no more compelling than half a dozen other versions of the story. In its broad outline, it agrees with the theory proposed by Jennifer Stuart in her book *The Kansas Angel*. (I'll discuss her other theories more fully in the next section.) I have decided not to give a line-by-line and document-by-document analysis of the record, and not to make any of my private conversations available. The various witnesses have been quoted and requoted and misquoted again and again, and I would merely add to their suffering if I published what they thought were merely conversations with a curious neighbor. I readily concede that (because I am not making my sources available for scrutiny) my account falls short of the standards of a serious reporter or historian. Take it simply as a statement of my own beliefs about what happened.

According to Jack Ross, on the evening of February 1, 24 P.S., he had just come home from visiting his mother in the Good Shepherd Nursing Home when he and his seven-year-old son Roy saw what Jack thought was a meteor. This would put the time of the sighting at about 10:30 p.m., assuming he stayed until the end of visiting hours at 10. Much has been made of the discrepancy between this account and other sightings that vary between 1 and 4 a.m., and the fact that Sheriff Jackson claims not to have received Jack's phone call until nearly 5, but the most likely explanation is fairly simple and easily verified if you know who to ask: Jack did not go straight home after visiting his mother, but instead stopped at The North 40, a bar just across the county line where he was a regular customer.²⁸ He stayed until the closing at 2 a.m. Roy Ross frequently woke up in the middle of the night and could not go back to sleep until he knew that his father was safely home. And this was how the two of them happened to be standing on their porch between 2:30 and 3 a.m. when they saw the Smallville UFO go almost straight over their heads and crash in a nearby field.

If the UFO Museum is correct in its determination of the crash site, the

²⁸ At the time Plains County, which contains Smallville, was dry. The law was changed in 15 PS to accommodate tourists drawn by the UFO Museum.

UFO came to rest less than a quarter mile from the Ross' porch (which is now an X painted on the surface of a mall parking lot). Half of that distance was taken up by a long, dark skid mark in the snow. All the land between the porch and the crash site was flat and treeless. Many authors have asserted that it could not possibly have taken more than half an hour to find the UFO, which leaves the hours between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. unaccounted for - a length of time that seems to cry out for the kinds of radical explanation that are staples of the overall UFO mythos: alien abduction, memory manipulation, government cover-up, etc.

I believe that it took two hours for Jack and Roy Ross to find the UFO. This allows time for Roy to change into warmer clothes, for Amy Ross to get up and lose an argument about whether or not Roy was going out on some wild, middle-of-the-night expedition with his father, and for Jack to stumble around in a snowy field on a dark, cold night. Looking at the situation this way, it is surprising that they found it so quickly.

What they found - and the two stories accord remarkably well here - was a very odd-looking "rocketship," as they both described it. The propulsion unit, in the back, had fins and looked something like a booster rocket. But it appeared to be far too small to have lifted the payload, which was an egg-shaped glassy object. The "rocket" portion of the craft was about two or three feet long, and the egg maybe three or four.

The rocketship was at the end of a skid-mark about an eighth of a mile long and was very hot. (Fortunately, it had partially buried itself in the earth, which kept it from setting fire to the crop stubble left over from harvest.) The glassy egg reflected their flashlights, but eventually it had cooled down enough for Jack to get close enough to it to try to look in. He claimed that he saw a pair of eyes looking back at him.

At this point I believe Jack and Roy did a very human thing that they were ashamed to admit in their depositions: They got spooked. Jack had been prepared for a meteor, and had been willing to adapt to the situation when he found some kind of vehicle instead. But being looked at by some less-than-human-sized visitor from another world was more than he had bargained for. He grabbed Roy and raced back home at top speed. And that was when he called Sheriff Dave Jackson with a somewhat incoherent story about alien invaders.

A major snowstorm was underway by this time, so I am less amazed than some other authors that Sheriff Jackson did not immediately drop his regular duties and come out to investigate. It appears that he did not take Jack Ross' call seriously at all until about 7 a.m., when the state police called to see if he had anything to add to the reports they'd been getting of strange lights in the sky.

By the time Jackson arrived on the scene around 8:30, the fins of the booster were still visible, but the egg itself was just a smooth lump in an eight-inch blanket of snow. He and Jack uncovered the egg, which was reflective and far too light to contain any passengers. Jackson could find no way to open the egg without breaking it, so he decided to leave it where it was and wait for assistance.

Sheriff Jackson was appropriately impressed by what Jack showed him, but discounted the eyes-looking-back part of the story. Wasn't it just possible that Jack saw the reflection of his own eyes, just as he had

been seeing the reflection of his flashlights? Jack didn't think so, but his denial was not convincing. Sheriff Jackson postulated some kind of rocket experiment, and figured that if they publicized their find, the lab or rocket club that had launched this vehicle would have to come out and claim it. He called the state police back to see if they had any new information. He called *The Smallville Clarion* to start the process of getting the story out. And he called the astronomy department at Wichita State University to see if they knew anything about rocket clubs or experiments in the area, which they didn't.

At this point the story becomes fuzzy, because Jackson claims not to remember who he talked to at Wichita State. (For what it's worth, I believe him. He was not interpreting this as the event of a lifetime, and probably thought he was already doing more than his job just by making the call.)

By noon the area had been secured by half a dozen men in suits who carried guns and flashed FBI credentials. They claimed to have been dispatched by someone in Washington, who had gotten a call from someone at "the university." They assured Jack that his family was in no danger, and that the vehicle was an unauthorized experiment by some renegade undergraduates, who would be severely disciplined. Jack was told to go home, and Sheriff Jackson was also urged to be on his way. From a distance, Jack observed an 18-wheel truck arrive with more men. The booster and the egg were loaded aboard, and all the men drove away.

Since that day, neither the FBI nor any other agency of the U. S. government has taken responsibility for the alleged FBI men on the Ross farm, or admitted to having any knowledge of the existence or location of the confiscated craft. No one at Wichita State admits to having received Sheriff Jackson's call. Amateur investigators of all sorts have shown mug shots of known or suspected federal agents to the Rosses and to Sheriff Jackson, with inconclusive results.

The situation got worse three days later, when a drifter named Mark Kittle came into town telling the first versions of a fantastic and ever-changing story in which his mind and car were hijacked by a short and spindly green alien. The exact points where Kittle picked up the alien or let him out kept changing, giving rise to a county-wide panic that took nearly a month to fade away. Every stolen chicken or broken milk bottle was potentially the work of aliens. Every stray dog glimpsed dodging through the brush at twilight was a possible sighting.

Eventually normal life returned to Smallville. Mark Kittle began his endless trek through the radio talkshow circuit, and the Smallville UFO incident became a staple of supermarket tabloids and wacky paperbacks. When Superman came on the scene 23 years later in distant Metropolis, making real news and performing feats that provided us with numerous witnesses and trainloads of supporting physical evidence, no one thought to connect him with Smallville.

But if the infant Kal-El was in that egg when the UFO landed, and was gone when Sheriff Jackson examined it the next morning, what happened to him? The Ross farm is only a few miles from U.S. Highway 36, which crosses Kansas east-west. It is not a heavily traveled road at night, but is rarely entirely empty either. I believe that someone on that highway saw the falling UFO and had the luck and/or skill to track it down before Jack and Roy Ross arrived. The egg, then, was already empty

when Jack Ross was spooked by his own reflection. The snow quickly filled in the tracks of this mysterious finder, who escaped into the uncharted regions of history.

February 1, 25 P.S.

Jonathan Kent poured the last of the coffee into his cup, sugared it liberally, and swirled it around a little longer than was strictly necessary. "Martha," he said, not looking up.

"Don't start," she said softly but firmly, glancing into the bedroom at the cherubic baby sleeping on their bed. Jonathan was no expert on babies, but if this one was more than a week old, he'd sweep out the barn with a toothbrush. "I know what you're going to say, and you can save your breath."

"I'm just trying to say that I don't want you getting too attached to this baby. We don't know who he belongs to."

"We know that somebody stuck him in a rocketship and crashed him into the Ross' field last night. We know that somebody ought to give him better care than he's been getting."

Martha picked up the pad on the telephone table and added something to the list of the supplies she would need. They'd both been up all night and it had been daylight now for several hours. He had been waiting for the snow to stop, which was starting to seem unlikely. Jonathan tried again. "What if his real mother and father was to come knocking on the door right now?"

"Then they'd have a lot of explaining to do, wouldn't they? Nobody's taking that little angel away from here if they're just going to go do more experiments on him. He's a baby, Jonathan. He's not guinea pig or a white rat or even a monkey. I can't believe I'm hearing you defend people who would do something like that."

Fifty-one weeks out of the year, Martha was as gentle a soul as Jonathan had ever known. She could live-and-let-live with the best of them. But once in a great while God (or Somebody) whispered into her ear what was Right and what was Wrong, and then you would do just as well to go have a conversation with a fence post as to try and change her mind. Jonathan was sure it didn't help that they were forty-five years old now and hadn't managed to have any children of their own.

All the same, he had to admit that she had a point. He knew he was a little out of his depth here, dealing with babies in rocketships, and he was feeling his way along as best he could. But it just didn't feel right, somehow. You don't spend half your life wishing for a baby and then have one arrive from nowhere like this. That kind of luck, he had learned, isn't something you should trust. "I just want to go slow with this," he said.

"That baby's going at his own speed. I managed to get some cow's milk into him, and it's only a matter of time before it makes its way out the other end." She handed him the list. "Now, we'll stay here in case anybody comes looking for him, and you go get what we need."

Jonathan put his cup down on the yellow kitchen table and picked up her list. He hadn't

really wanted more coffee anyway. "I suppose we do have to take care of him while he's here," he sighed. "I mean, we couldn't have just left him lay there in Ross' field, could we? It's winter, he might of froze to death."

Martha stood on tip-toes and kissed his forehead. "That's the man I married," she said.

Jonathan got his coat and hat. Outside the snow was still coming down in big flakes. He had his hand on the doorknob when he heard a car crunching new snow under its tires. "Now who do you suppose that could be?" he asked, not sure whether he was hoping to be proved right or not. He looked out the little pane of glass at the top of the wooden door. A gray sedan had pulled up and parked next to his truck, and a man in a blue suit got out. He didn't look much like a desperate father trying to find his lost boy.

Jonathan quickly hung his hat and coat back up, and opened the door just as the man started to knock. Martha shut the bedroom door. "Well, hello there," he said to the stranger. "What can we do for you?"

The man held up some kind of identification wallet and closed it quickly. "Good morning, Mr. Kent," he said with the impersonal friendliness of a good retail clerk. "I'm Joseph Walton from the Department of Agriculture. I was wondering if I might have a few words with you."

"Well ... of course. Come in."

Jonathan gestured to the table and they sat down. Martha began fixing a new pot of coffee. "Mr. Kent," the man continued, "did you or your wife or anyone else you know notice anything unusual last night?"

Jonathan looked over at Martha, who did not turn around. "Unusual?" he asked.

"Loud noises. Bright flashes of light. That sort of thing."

"Like a thunderstorm? We don't usually get those around here this time of year. It snowed like the dickens, but no, we didn't get any thunder and lightning."

Mr. Walton frowned, then returned to his cheerful expression and continued. "Not like a thunderstorm. Not exactly."

"When was this unusual thing supposed to have happened?"

He frowned again, looked up at the ceiling briefly, then resumed his eye contact and smiled again. "Somewhere around two hundred hours – two in the morning. That's our best guess."

"Oh, heavens," Jonathan laughed, "we were sound asleep by then. We go to bed with the chickens out here, and not much wakes us up." He picked up his rapidly cooling cup of coffee and sipped a little. "Of course you would know that," he added, "being from the Department of Agriculture and all. You must deal with farmers like us all the time."

In the bedroom the baby began to cry. Martha left the kitchen and then returned, bouncing the boy gently on her shoulder. Jonathan wished briefly that she had stayed in the

bedroom with him, but then figured that there was no point trying to hide the little guy, now that he had announced himself. His face was still scrunched up from crying, and his whole head was red, like a blush. He whimpered twice more, eyes closed, and then returned to sleeping.

“New baby?” Mr. Walton said socially.

“Well, ...” Jonathan began

“It’s my sister’s baby, from up around Centralia,” Martha answered. “She went into one of those depressions that women sometimes slide into when they’ve just given birth and their hormones are all out of whack. It just all seemed like too much for her, so we said we’d take care of little Clark for a week or two, until she got back on her feet.”

“That’s very sisterly of you,” Mr. Walton observed.

“Oh, we don’t mind,” Martha said.

Mr. Walton turned back in his chair to face Jonathan. “You haven’t seen any unusual small animals around this morning, have you?”

Jonathan shrugged, “What with the baby and all, I’m running a little behind. I haven’t even been out of the house yet. What kind of small animals are you looking for?”

“Last night,” he said, his voice slipping into a low, secretive tone, “a special crate of agricultural experiments was being shipped by air from Denver to Washington. When it landed, we discovered that a cargo door was open and several crates were missing. We think that one of them might have fallen near here.”

“You don’t say,” Jonathan commented, as if Mr. Walton had just announced that a change in the weather was coming. “And this crate contained small animals?”

“Possibly. I’m not at liberty to say exactly what was in the crate. It was an *experiment*, you see. We do a lot of secret experiments to ... to maintain America’s agricultural superiority.” He reached into his suit and took out a business card. “And so if you see any small animal that you don’t usually see, I want you to give me a call.”

Jonathan took the card and studied it. It gave an address and phone number in Washington, with no mention of a name or department. “So you’ve been breeding some kind of super-pig or something, and it got away?”

Mr. Walton looked very uncomfortable. “I’m afraid I can’t say. Just call us if you see anything strange.”

Jonathan got up and put the card on the telephone table. “I’ll certainly do that.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kent.” Mr. Walton got up to leave, but he stopped in the doorway. “One more thing. If you or Mrs. Kent or the baby get sick in the next few days, I want you to call and tell me that.”

Jonathan let that sink in for a second. *Time to play the dumb farmer*, he thought. “It’s nice

of you to be so concerned,” he said.

Neither of the Kents spoke again until the gray sedan was no longer even a road noise. “It’s the Army or something worse,” Martha whispered. “They’re looking for him.”

“Then they don’t see very well. He looked right at him.” Jonathan thought for a few seconds. “I don’t think they know what they’re looking for.”

Martha lifted the sleeping baby from her shoulder and kissed his forehead. “They’re not going to get you, little guy.”

“But they’ll figure it out if we suddenly have a mystery baby.” He thought some more. “I think maybe you and the baby should go pay a little visit to your mother for a week or two, until we can get our stories straight and explain where he comes from. In the meantime I think I’ll go get these supplies from the convenience store up on the highway. It’ll take a little longer, but if I buy them from Glen he’ll want to know what’s going on, and I don’t think I want to tell him just yet.”

Martha held the baby on one shoulder and reached out to hug Jonathan with the other arm. “I didn’t think you were nearly this devious when I married you,” she said. Her voice wavered in the way that it did when her eyes were starting to tear up.

“I wasn’t,” he admitted. “Complaining?”

She couldn’t talk now, but shook her head against his shoulder.

Jonathan disengaged himself and went to get his hat and coat again. “By the way,” he asked. “Clark?”

Martha looked embarrassed. “Well I couldn’t very well claim that he was my sister’s baby and not know his name, now could I?”

Jonathan put his hand on the doorknob. “I guess not,” he said.

July 25, 10 A.S.

When Eric Randall rose to speak, it became clear who were the pilgrims and who were the tourists. The tourists applauded politely, but the faithful erupted in loud celebration. They stood, yelled, stamped their feet, and waved their arms over their heads.

Randall was a tall man with red hair and a bushy red beard that made him look like a Viking chieftain. He had been thin when he founded the Church of the Kryptonian back in 1 S, but in middle age he had become barrel-chested. He had a deep, booming voice that could have filled the room without amplification.

“Look up!” he roared.

“*Look up!*” the faithful responded.

But as he began to speak, his message seemed like an anticlimax after his raucous welcome. He seemed worried and uncertain, agitated in some way that he could neither ignore nor openly express.

“He was surprised by what that Carter woman did,” Lois deduced. “He hasn’t figured out what to do about it yet.”

Randall took the tack that Lois had guessed from the first speaker’s remarks: The manner and location of Kal-El’s arrival had been revealed to him many years before. Often, he claimed, he had come incognito (“Very incognito,” Lois commented.) to Smallville and sat star-gazing in the field where Kal-El had first come to Earth. He implied but did not directly state that the recent speculation about Smallville was the result of a leak from the Church’s inner circle, and he never referred to *The Kansas Angel* or its author by name. He also said nothing about Julia Carter or her message or the heresy of Social Kryptonism.

As he approached his conclusion, however, he began to warm up. His tone of voice got into sync with the content of his text, and he began making eye contact with an audience he almost certainly could not see over the floodlights. With great solemnity he walked out from behind the lectern and placed his hand on the veiled box.

“And to symbolize the significance of this shrine,” the Prophet intoned, “I bring from the Mother Church in Metropolis this great relic: a piece of true and holy planet, the birthplace of Kal-El and all the gods, Krypton.”

He whisked the veil aside to reveal a glass case containing a gleaming, polished green rock.

“Is that what I think it is?” Lana whispered in shock.

“Kryptonite? It could be. It looks like it. Lord knows I’ve seen enough of it over the years.” Lois looked around the room, as Randall made his benediction and invited the uncommitted to come forward to dedicate themselves to Kal-El. Most of the crowd, committed and uncommitted alike, came forward to examine the specimen and receive blessings from Randall, while a few began a counter-current toward the exits. “I think I want to get out of here before any of the inner circle recognize me. The prophesy about me and Jon is an inner-circle secret, and I’d like to help them keep it. We can talk once we’re in the car.”

Lois affected nonchalance and silently joined the narrow stream of people flowing toward the door. It seemed strange to Lana that there could be so many people here that she did not know. She scanned the crowd looking for Julia Carter, but found no one familiar until she made eye contact with Susan Miller, who was standing at the balcony railing looking down. Susan smiled and started to wave, then shifted her eyes to Lois. Her jaw dropped in awe, and she began swimming through the crowd.

“Run for it,” Lana said. “You’ve been spotted.”

Lana seldom got a chance to see Lois display any of the skills that had made her one of the top reporters in Metropolis, but now she guessed that breaking quickly through a crowd must be one of them. Lana tried to slide into Lois’ slipstream, but still could barely keep her in sight. Lois started to run when she reached the door, and Lana decided she

had better do likewise when she made it that far. The SUV was started and in gear by the time Lana got there, with Susan Miller still standing just outside the doorway, looking in all directions.

“We’ve got to tell Clark,” Lois said as they zoomed away. “He’s the only one who could tell whether that rock is genuine just by looking at it. Kryptonite isn’t all that valuable any more, but it’s still pretty rare. Randall wouldn’t be the first religious leader to fake an icon.”

“Shouldn’t we keep Clark as far away from it as we can?”

Lois shook her head. “It’s not Clark I’m worried about. I don’t know if anything could hurt Clark now. But think about what we know: Clark’s vulnerability to kryptonite has been decreasing as his powers increase. He was never exposed to it until he was in his 20s.”

“Jon and Laura!” Lana gasped.

Lois nodded. She looked grimly determined – cold and fierce, not panicked. *The fortress is under attack, Lana thought. The drawbridge is up and the windows are shuttered. Somewhere behind those stone walls she’s boiling oil to pour down on the invaders.*

“If they’ve inherited the weakness,” Lois said analytically, “it’s probably worse than it ever was for Clark, because they don’t have the powers to counteract it yet. We need to know whether that rock is authentic, and if it is we need to make sure that Jon and Laura stay far, far away from this shrine or any of the cult members who live here.”

Lana had nothing to add to that plan. There were times when she envied Lois’ mind, with its scalpel-like sharpness and laser focus. Her own mind seemed so cluttered by comparison. Yes, she was thinking about the potential danger to the children, but she couldn’t keep it from wandering to the other issues that this morning’s events had raised.

“Do you think that kryptonite could really be what they say it is, a piece of Krypton?”

“Don’t be silly,” Lois scoffed. “It’s got to come from a similar reaction somewhere closer. Think about the distances involved between here and Krypton. Even if there was time for a meteor to make the trip – which I doubt – imagine how precise the original angle would have to be to send it to Earth. The odds against anything bigger than a piece of dust making it here are astronomical.”

“So, does Clark have any idea where it does come from?”

“Not a clue.”

And then there was Julia Carter to think about. How had she managed to say exactly what Lana had been thinking? Was she telepathic? Were they both plugged in to some external channel, which Lana misidentified as her own thoughts and Julia projected as a vision of Kal-El? Or was it just an obvious thing to think at that particular moment, and their synchronicity of no more significance than that of a crowd of people who all say “Ahhh”

on the Fourth of July when the fireworks start to go off? Lana didn't know what to think, and didn't even know who she could talk to about such questions. Clark? He had so much else on his mind these days.

"Did you ever wonder," she began cautiously as they pulled onto the gravel road to their separate houses, "whether some of these Kryptonists might be on to something?"

Lois laughed. "About as often as I think that Clark might be God. Why do you ask?"

Lana shrugged. "Oh, no reason." And she found herself wishing, not for the first time, that Laura would hurry up and become an adult.

Earth date unknown

The android watched the planetary explosion with a sense that could only be called satisfaction. His makers had programmed him to have a goal, and that goal had led to a working definition of *good* and *bad*. Anything that brought the completion of his program closer was *good*, and anything that delayed or threatened to prevent completion was *bad*. The explosion, a bright flash of green against the background of the red sun, was very good indeed. If further nuances of goodness and badness had been the least bit useful in carrying out his program, he might have gone so far as to call it *beautiful*.

His ship's shields had held against the wave-front of radiation that the explosion had spawned. He had calculated that they would. Not that it mattered. Perishing in the explosion would have added very little badness to the situation. Thoroughness required verification of the lack of survivors, and that requirement in turn required reprocessing the immense log of sensor data that had been downloaded into the ship's computers prior to the explosion. But when the verification was complete, he would finish his program by flying his ship into the red star.

Completion is the ultimate goodness.

Processing vast stores of data, even for one such as he, takes time. As he waited he watched the planet-shards drift in their myriad directions, generally outward from the center of the explosion. The debris field was an ever-expanding sphere. An inversion had taken place, as he had known would happen. The brown and gray shards from the planet's outer crust moved more slowly, so they were now near the center of the sphere, while the green, radioactive shards from the planet's core – the source of the explosion – moved at a significant fraction of the speed of light, and now formed the sphere's outer shell.

FAILURE TO VERIFY.

The android's estimate of the badness of the situation increased sharply. He extended a connector from a fingertip and interfaced with the computer directly. Quickly he discovered the source of the badness: A translight probe had left the planet mere hours before the explosion.

Could it have been occupied? Not by an adult of the species. Possibly an infant.
Probability: .015.

Infants of the species were far from self-sufficient. If an infant did escape on the translight probe, it could not survive unless it reached inhabited planets before exhausting its life support. Even if the infant were in stasis, the life support needed was not zero, and that bounded the region of consideration. Number of occupied planets within the region: 1,128. Probability that a probe thus occupied and thus configured could reach one of these planets: .873.

Probability that the inhabitants would support the infant into self-sufficiency: varied according to planet. Equivalent probability factor: .129.

The species was mortal, with a normal lifespan of approximately 120 years, and reproduced sexually. If the infant failed to find compatible beings, extinction would merely be delayed. Probability of reproductive compatibility with inhabitants of the refuge planet: .0003.

Assuming compatibility, probability that the controlled DNA would survive, either in the form of a self-sustaining colony or assimilation into the indigenous population: .012.

Probability of mission failure, absent further action: .000000006081.

Not zero.

The android felt a pervasive sense of badness. And then another, even worse thought occurred to him.

Among the 1,129 inhabited planets within the area of interest, the number orbiting yellow stars: 109.

Completion would have to be indefinitely delayed. The current ship was not sufficient for a translight search-and-destroy operation. New construction must begin at once. In the meantime the translight probe would be lost. Each of the 1,129 planets would have to be examined for evidence of contamination, beginning with the 109 yellow-sunned planets.

Probes would be necessary. He began making plans to acquire material for 1,129 translight probes. The first 109 would need to be somewhat larger, and contain not only sensing equipment, but fragments of the radioactive core of the recent explosion. If an infant existed, and if it arrived on a yellow-sunned planet, perhaps the natives would kill it in time, if given the means.

And if they failed, then other plans would have to be made.

The program must be completed.