

*I'm more than a bird,
More than a plane,
More than some pretty face beside a train.
-- Five For Fighting, Superman*

6. Angels

Flying is everything you imagined it would be.

All the rest of it, you think you might give back if you knew who to give it to.

The heat vision would go first – when your looks really can kill, you live under a wearisome discipline. Hyperacute senses often tell you things you would rather not know. Strength and speed always promise more than they can deliver. They tempt you to intervene in things you should stay out of. Invulnerability separates. Humanity is a fragile club that the invulnerable can never join.

But flight ... how to explain it? Children jump for the sheer joy of being in the air. They would stay up longer if they could. In dreams they do. We all do. You leap along a dirt path or down a country lane. The bounds get longer and longer, almost moonlike, and you know you have to land, that it's the Law, but you say to yourself "Just another second. Just a foot or two farther. I'll come down then. Really I will." And so you skate just an inch or two above the hard ground, trying to get the last little bit out of your leap.

Then one day you just refuse. You say, "No. I'm not coming down. You can't make me." And you don't. You're flying.

It's like that. It really is.

All the rest of it you might give back. Some days, when you think it's all more trouble than it's worth, when you think you've done more harm than good, you say "Take it," without really knowing who you're really talking to. But then you add "except for the flying."

Surely, whoever they are, they would let you keep that much. If they are anything like us, they must know that no one would volunteer to stay Earthbound forever.

Ecuador: May 22, 1 P.S.

If Clark had not been so absorbed in studying a small, white flower that didn't seem to appear in any of the books he was carrying, the boa constrictor could never have gotten the drop on him. By the time he realized what was going on – that this wasn't just some vine or tree branch that had fallen on his shoulders – the snake had already coiled itself twice around his chest and begun to squeeze.

"Don't," he said to the snake ruefully, and then he waited for the inevitable.

It took about five minutes for the constrictor to wear itself out and slither away in puzzled defeat. Of course, Clark could have broken out of its grasp at any time, but that probably

would have injured the snake. A quick blast of heat vision might have scared it away, but he still didn't have confidence that he wouldn't overdo and cut the reptile in half. And he wasn't here to hurt things.

That was about the only definite conclusion he had come to about his life so far: He wasn't here to hurt things.

It had taken Clark a long time to come to terms with his powers. After that day when he had saved Lana, they had vanished again for a while – years, maybe. It was hard to be sure exactly when they came back. In retrospect, he must have been using them all through high school, especially at sports. But at the time he hadn't thought about it as super-speed or super-strength or flight or extended senses. He just saw things and knew things and did what he needed to do. And if other kids couldn't do the same things he did, well, that was *strange*. He felt surprisingly mixed about it. Everybody else seemed to think it would be great to be a star – and in a lot of ways it was – but in a lot of other ways it interfered. Clark found that he didn't really enjoy having everybody looking at him and talking about him and counting on him. It meant that he couldn't just play, couldn't just be one of the guys.

He didn't remember any single moment when he decided not to go all out. It just happened. It was a habit he got into, like slouching so that he wouldn't look so tall, or wearing baggy clothes that didn't show off his muscles. In basketball games, he jumped high enough to get his shot off, and concentrated hard enough to make about half of them. He never intentionally missed, he just didn't use that extra bit of focus that would have guaranteed success. In football he ran fast enough to be where the play diagram said he was supposed to be, and if the opposing team got a good grip on him, he went down – most of the time. Near the end of a game, when everything was on the line, he tried harder. Smallville High won a lot of games in the last minute, on long touchdown runs or blindingly fast drives to the basket.

The fans loved his last-second heroics, but it drove his coaches nuts. “Why aren't you that good all the time?” they all asked. The football coach confronted him in practice a couple days after a game-ending 85-yard punt return that beat Maryville. “Their Jackson boy runs a 4.3 forty-yard dash. Every college in the country is after him. And you just ran away from him on that play. But when I time you here in practice, you run 4.5 or 4.6. Even 4.7 sometimes. You're not even the fastest guy on the team most days.”

He had no answer, not for the coach and not for himself. He just held back. He couldn't explain why. And so for a long time Clark didn't really know how fast he was, or how strong, or that he could really fly and not just jump as high as he needed to. He knew the limits of human abilities, and he had no reason to think they didn't apply to him.

Except for that day with Lana.

Lana had been unconscious during the most amazing part, so she didn't know anything more than the fact that he had saved her from drowning. His Mom changed the subject every time he tried to talk about it, and his Dad would listen but didn't know what to say.

Occasionally with Lana he would talk about it as if it were a fantasy: What if you could fly? What if you could see through things? But she wasn't really interested. She was starting to get more serious about writing poetry, writing about emotions and human situations. She wasn't interested in "science-fictiony stuff" like Clark's what-if questions.

And so, after a month or two, he stopped mentioning that day to anyone. Before long he noticed that a strange thing happens to a secret you never talk about, one that seems to be safely in the past and doesn't require you to think up new lies and deceptions every few days: It goes away. Memories that don't connect to the present wither like plants that can't reach the sunlight. So when amazed teammates reacted to a slam dunk with "You can fly, man", he never took it seriously. He never said, "Of course I can fly. I've done it before."

He also stopped reading comic books after that day. The burned *Doctor Midnite* wound up in a box under his bed with the other comics, and he never opened it. He felt funny whenever he thought about the comic book heroes, so he didn't. He told Pete that they were getting too old for that kind of thing, and Pete had agreed with him.

There was one day in his senior year when he didn't hold back. That was the day when little Jackie Connelly, the smart kid nobody liked, decided he was tired of the stream of abuses that bigger, stronger boys subjected him to. Clark never knew what started it, or why Jackie picked that day to stand up for himself, but by the time he and Lana arrived in the cafeteria Paul Miller had Jackie down on the ground with a bloody nose. Paul was twisting Jackie's arm behind his back at a dangerous angle, and the smaller boy was gritting his teeth and refusing to say whatever words of surrender Paul wanted to hear.

Clark had never liked Paul. It wasn't just from that day in kindergarten when Clark had needed Lana to rescue him. It wasn't even anything personal, really. Paul hadn't tried to do anything to Clark for years. But it was like kindergarten had never really ended for Paul. Life in his world was all about who was bigger than who, and who could make who do what. He had a nasty laugh, one that expressed the relish he felt in causing someone else to suffer. Clark hated living in the kindergarten world, so he avoided Paul whenever he could.

Later that evening, as Clark and his parents were waiting outside the ICU to find out whether or not Paul would live, he couldn't explain why he had intervened. No one expected it of him. Jackie was no big friend of his, and Paul had probably practiced this particular brand of torture often enough that he would not have broken Jackie's arm. But it had all happened so fast. Clark broke Paul's grip on Jackie's arm and threw him off. He hadn't meant to throw Paul that hard. He hadn't known he *could* throw Paul that hard. But to Clark's horror, Paul flew backwards through the air until his back landed hard against a wall. Three ribs broke – Clark had *seen* them break, though he couldn't explain how – and one punctured a lung just a few inches from the heart. When the ambulance came to take him away, the paramedics moved with a special urgency.

Clark had expected to be punished. Suspended, expelled, kicked off all the teams – he

wasn't sure what they would do to him, and he was prepared to accept the worst when Principal Crandall called him into his office. But the worst didn't happen, and in some strange way that was even worse yet. Clark had trouble reconstructing the conversation for his parents, but the gist of it was that he wouldn't be punished at all. Everyone was just going to pretend this never happened. And the reason – as best Clark could put it together from the vague things Crandall had said – was that Clark was a football star and Paul was a nobody who was in trouble all the time anyway. Crandall didn't want Clark to miss Friday's game against Davis, and so it was simplest just to write this off as an unfortunate accident.

"He knows you're a good boy," Martha reassured him as they waited. "He knows you won't do anything like this again."

"I'm never going to kill anybody," Clark vowed.

"Of course you won't," Martha said comfortingly. "I'm sure Paul will be just fine."

"I mean it," he continued. "Never. Not in war. Not in a fight. Not anywhere."

"I know," Jonathan said sympathetically. "I killed a guy close up during the war, close enough that I saw him die. I never want to do that again."

"Not even an animal," Clark continued. "Not a rabbit or a squirrel in the woods. Not a mole in the garden or mouse in the barn. I won't even swat a mosquito unless it's about to bite somebody."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Martha repeated.

True to her prediction, Paul suffered no permanent effects other than a lifelong aversion to Clark. In a week he was back in school, moving slowly so as not to disturb his heavily bandaged ribs. Jackie took advantage of the situation to push him down on the sidewalk one day after school, but even that had done no lasting damage.

The white flower was still puzzling Clark. He had been all over this rain forest during the past two days and hadn't seen anything like it before. It definitely was not in the books. He took out his camera and photographed it from several angles. Then he removed a single white petal and put it into a plastic sample bag. If he could find a few more of these flowers somewhere he'd take a whole plant, but he wasn't going to risk killing the last one.

Since graduating from college the previous spring, Clark had been having a lot of trouble deciding what to do with his life. Some people are blessed with one big talent – a great voice or a green thumb or the ability to visualize higher mathematics – so it's perfectly obvious what they should do with their lives. But Clark had too many talents, and it wasn't clear at all what he should do with them. One of his ideas, the one he was trying out this week, was high-risk botany. He could go places too dangerous for anyone else, and see things no one else could see. On Tuesday he had been having a look around the Mariana Trench, and had found several life forms whose photographs he would be unable

to publish until he could think of a reasonable story to explain how he got them. That was when he had decided to investigate the rain forest.

This kind of exploring was fun in its way. But there were so many other things he could do. Astronaut – wouldn't NASA love to have one who could make it up to orbit on his own or get home by himself if something went wrong? Test pilot – if the plane didn't work, he could just shut it down and maybe even haul it back if it wasn't too big. Fireman – he could walk into burning buildings and carry people out, and if the floor gave way under him, so what? Journalist was a possibility – he had been a reporter on the student newspaper at Wichita State, and the faculty adviser there was an old friend of some big editor in Metropolis. Or construction – he could probably build entire buildings by himself in a day or two if he really tried.

The problem with all these ideas was that none of them were better than the others. Some of them might not even be good if you looked at the bigger picture. Like: if he built buildings by himself, what would happen to the construction workers?

It's not enough.

Clark didn't know where thoughts like that came from, but he wished they'd stop. *Nothing* was enough – that was the whole problem in a nutshell. As far as he knew his powers were unique – at least he never heard of anybody else having them – so he couldn't help thinking that they ought to play some unique role. He shouldn't just do the work of ten men or a hundred men. He ought to be doing something that *no one* could have done without him.

But what?

He had already rejected several of the more obvious career choices, like soldier. Sometimes on television he would see a dictator who ought to be stopped or a war that was killing innocent people by the thousands and he would think: *I should do something*. But the vow he had made while the doctors were working on Paul Miller still held. He wouldn't kill – not for his country, not for anybody. “Killing some people to save others, that's not for you to decide,” Martha had said once. “And it's not our place to decide for you. None of us are God.”

The other obvious career, spying, was too much like soldiering. Telling other people who to kill or where to drop the bombs was no big improvement on doing the killing and bombing himself. And Jonathan was suspicious of governments. Whenever the possibility of working for the government came up, he reminded Clark of the government man who had visited them the morning after the rocket landed, and the other government men who had made the rocket vanish as if it had never existed. “We don't know what they know about you, or what they'd want to do with you if they found you.”

And so it continued going round and round in his head: What he could do, what he couldn't do, and the voice in his head that kept telling him to aim higher.

“I don't know where your abilities come from or why you have them,” Jonathan had said

once, not long before the heart attack that forced him to stop doing any of the strenuous work around the farm, “but I can’t believe that there isn’t some reason for it, some way that you’re supposed to make the world better.”

One thing he had realized already by the end of high school was that he could not have a career in sports. He had seen that the night after the Division III state championship game in Lawrence. He didn’t hold back that day. He scored four touchdowns in the first half, and could have had run for more if Jarvis City hadn’t been using a ball-control offense. No one could touch him. He moved effortlessly, changing directions at full speed as if Newton’s theories about momentum didn’t apply to him. On one play he jumped over a would-be tackler, leaving him too astounded even to give chase. After two third-quarter touchdowns, the Coach took him out of the game to avoid running up the score. He spent the last quarter-and-a-half on the sidelines waving a towel and yelling like a maniac for his teammates.

The celebration after the game had been like a dream, full of cheering students and college scouts with promises that their formal offers would arrive as soon as the rules allowed. Clark was thinking about going someplace warm and glamorous, maybe UCLA or Stanford. Nobody from Smallville High had ever done anything like that.

Jonathan drove Clark home in his truck. For the first hour of the drive Clark talked nonstop about the moves he had made and what people had said about them. Somebody had showed him a home video of the guy he had jumped over. “I couldn’t believe how stupid he looked,” he said.

For another half hour there was silence in the truck. Clark had run out of words and Jonathan didn’t say anything. It was after midnight, so at first Clark thought his father was just tired. But when they were a few minutes from home Clark asked, “Is something wrong?”

“What could be wrong?” Jonathan asked in a tone of voice that made Clark realize that something must be very wrong. “You scored six touchdowns and won the state championship almost single-handed. What could be wrong?”

Clark thought for a while. When they were pulling up to the house he said, “I don’t know. I played a good game. I thought you’d be proud.”

Jonathan sighed. “Oh, Clark, I’m always proud of you. Nobody’s prouder of their son than I am.” But he didn’t sound proud. “I just wonder: Is this really what it’s for?”

“What what is for?”

“Your gifts. The things you can do. Is it really just so that you can be a star and make people look stupid trying to catch you?”

Clark wasn’t sure how to answer. They got out of the truck but didn’t go into the house. The lights were on inside. Martha had undoubtedly been listening on the radio and was waiting up for them.

“Other people don’t know how to watch you the way I do,” Jonathan continued. “So they don’t see what you’re really doing. They say, ‘Isn’t that unbelievable?’ But they don’t get it. What you do really *is* unbelievable. They see it, but they don’t believe what they see. They think you’re just doing what any good football player does.”

“And I’m not?”

Jonathan shook his head. “No, son. You’re not.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t.” Jonathan paced around a little, the way he did when he was trying to figure out best way to maneuver machinery into the barn. “Clark, would you do something for me?”

“Sure, Dad. But it’s kind of late. Maybe we should be getting inside. What do you want me to do?”

“Jump over the house.”

Clark couldn’t believe his father was serious. But he looked serious. Clark wondered if this was one of those lesson-teaching things, where he was supposed to learn that he was human like anybody else. “Dad, I know I can’t jump over the house.”

“Try. Go back there past the oak, get a running start and jump as high as you can. Try to get over the house. If you can’t, you can’t. You won’t hurt yourself.”

It hadn’t occurred to Clark that he might hurt himself. “This is silly,” he said, but he walked back to the spot where Jonathan had pointed. “Why do you want me to do this?”

“You’ll see. Just try to do it. Try hard.”

As he looked at the house, Clark realized that he didn’t know what he could reasonably expect to happen. If the house were only one story, he could certainly get his hands over the eaves, maybe high enough to pull himself the rest of the way up onto the roof. The windowsill of his second-floor bedroom wasn’t much higher than a basketball rim; maybe he could grab that.

“Look at the spine of the roof. Try to get over it,” Jonathan instructed.

Clark raised his eyes and started to run. The strides worked out so that he jumped off his left foot. He kept his eyes focused on the spine and felt himself moving upward, higher than the bedroom window, higher than the eave. He had to bend his knees to avoid hitting his feet on the roof spine, and then he had to stick his legs out to avoid tripping on the opposite eave. He realized he was headed directly for a bush, but at the last second his jump lengthened just enough to leave him tumbling in the grass beyond it.

Jonathan jogged around the house to meet him. Clark’s heart was pounding. “How did I do that? What did I do?”

“Try the barn,” Jonathan suggested.

“Dad, that’s ridiculous.”

“Try.”

Clark got up and ran towards the barn, taking off on his right foot this time. He cleared it easily, landing in the stubble of the harvested corn. From there he tried a standing jump, and came down a few feet from his father.

“What just happened?” he asked.

“What I’ve been suspecting for a while now. Remember a few years ago, that day with Lana when you thought you flew? I think you did fly. And you’ve been flying again for the last few months. I’ve seen you do it. You jump and somehow manage to change directions before you land.”

“That’s not possible,” Clark protested. Jonathan said nothing while Clark’s mind caught up to what had just happened. “I guess none of this is possible, is it?”

“And that’s why you don’t consciously try it, because you know it’s not possible. And I don’t know how it’s possible even now. But I watched you come over that barn, and you only looked like you were jumping. You were flying. It wouldn’t surprise me if you didn’t have to come down at all.”

Clark sat down on the grass and tried to take it all in. “What does it mean?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Jonathan answered. “But my guess is that it’s good for more than just scoring touchdowns.”

After that night there had been no question of playing tailback for UCLA, or even rejoining the Smallville High basketball team when its season started. Jonathan had taken the heat for it. He told Clark to say that his father had forbidden him to play basketball, and Jonathan told all the coaches and other team boosters that it was a family matter he didn’t want to talk about. The team finished 13-17, which Clark regretted. By the end of the season he could barely stand to attend the games. But he couldn’t think of any good alternative. There was no way he could play basketball knowing that he could fly. Either he could only pretend to play, or it wouldn’t really be a basketball game any more.

Now that they knew to look for strange events rather than explain them away, Clark and Jonathan discovered his other powers in short order: He could lift a tractor, read road signs miles away, and see through walls. He could light candles by looking at them. When they discovered that pins couldn’t prick his skin, they tried razor blades and nails and even hatchets. Jonathan drew the line at experimenting with guns, but he suspected bullets would not harm his son either. “It’s not just you,” Jonathan observed after Clark held his arm in a fire for several minutes without harm. “It’s anything close to your skin. Your sleeve didn’t get scorched either.” He thought for a moment, then had Clark stand behind him and grab hold of his arm. Wearing his son like an exoskeleton, Jonathan reached his hand out to the flame. “Hell!” he said second later, pulling his hand away. “Well, it was worth a try.”

“Whatever it is can’t extend too far from my skin,” Clark observed. “Otherwise you couldn’t cut my hair.”

“It’s a good thing your beard doesn’t grow,” Jonathan added after taking his burned finger out of his mouth, “or we’d never get you shaved.”

A rain-forest mosquito buzzed into Clark’s ear, and he brushed it away without killing it. The bugs, of course, never learned. No matter how many stingers they bent or pincers they broke on his skin, they kept trying. He had learned to live with them, though it still bothered him when they got too close to his eyes or tried to fly into his nose or ears. *I always wondered why Starman wore goggles.*

And then he noticed something else behind the buzzing. Someone was talking. The voice was too far away for him to make out the words, but it sounded nothing at all like the ordinary jungle noises. He concentrated on filtering out all the competing noises until the voice was clear.

Someone was calling for help.

The jungle canopy above him was solid green, but he concentrated until he saw through it. Above it was a layer of cloud and fog, but his vision pierced through it. The voice was coming from a mountain that poked tentatively out of the jungle, like an iceberg almost swamped by a tall green wave. The mountaintop was an outcropping of rock, and on the very top of the outcropping sat a man wrapped in an Indian blanket. He sat as erect as the meditating yogis Clark had visited in Nepal and looked very old. He had stopped calling for help. Clark could not figure out why he had called to begin with. There appeared to be no dangerous animals nearby or any people at all. His seat on the mountaintop looked perfectly secure.

Maybe he’s having a heart attack. Maybe he’s sick.

He wished his vision was sharper and more penetrating. He couldn’t tell if the Indian was breathing or see what was going on inside his body. He did a quick check of the area to see if anyone was near enough to observe him, and then rose up through the jungle.

The top of the canopy was full of birds and butterflies, and Clark made a mental note to come back to it. It was an area that an ordinary explorer would find difficult to observe without disturbance, and so there was probably much to be learned there. The cloud layer was a mere 15-20 feet above the trees and thick enough to hide inside if he didn’t go too fast. It would cover him until he was a few hundred feet below the Indian, and then he could approach by hiking from there. The Indian still did not appear to be in any immediate danger, so there was no sense in giving him a heart attack by flying right up to him.

It was at college that Clark had begun to make peace with his powers. At first they had just seemed like a burden. He knew it was irrational to blame them for ruining his sports career when they had made his success possible to begin with, but rationality had never had much to do with blame anyway. And it was frustrating that there didn’t seem to be

any good way to use his powers while keeping them a secret. (That had been the subject of a number of discussions with his parents, and with Lana after he told her. Jonathan put forward the view that it wasn't safe to reveal his powers as long as they knew so little about the experiment that had produced them, who had done it, and why. That view had carried the day, and even though Clark often wished he could tell everything to everyone, the prospect of spending the rest of his life as a lab specimen restrained him.) Course work became much easier after he discovered that he could read at incredible speeds, and being able to fly home at a moment's notice had allowed him to continue doing the heavy work around the farm, especially after Jonathan's heart attack. But the real value of his powers didn't become clear to him until the Simon kidnapping case.

Jerry Simon was a ten-year-old boy who had vanished on his way home from school. Clark didn't cover the case for the university newspaper, but the woman who did talked to him about how hard the story was for her. "I just wish I could do something," she said. And for the first time since his boyhood fantasies of Starman, he thought seriously about what he could do. The woman had a recording of the boy's voice, and Clark listened to it until he was sure he would recognize the voice if he heard it again. Then he spent his evenings and off-hours wandering the streets listening as hard as he could. It took two days to find the boy, who was being held by a man who kept him locked in the basement. Clark waited until the man went out and the boy was asleep, then flew in at high speed, opened the door by force, and flew the boy out.

Clark hadn't expected the boy to wake up in the air, but he did. He hadn't been frightened at all, but had sleepily asked, "Are you an angel?"

"Yes," Clark had lied, figuring it was the easiest course. "But you aren't dead. Just go back to sleep and you'll be safe now." He left the boy sleeping on his parents' porch and rang their doorbell, but flew away before they could answer.

"Maybe you should do things like that all the time," Lana had suggested when he told her the story.

Like Starman, Clark thought, and then laughed at himself. "Boys aren't kidnapped every day," he answered.

"They are somewhere. In New York. In Metropolis, Los Angeles, big places like that."

"Do you think I should move someplace big?"

She took his hand and held it without saying much. Then she said "I don't know" very sadly.

While he was getting his degree and working on the student newspaper, Clark trained himself in other ways as well. He trained himself to listen for calls for help. And he learned all the ways he could use his powers without being detected, to save people without claiming credit for himself. It felt good. When he was pulling someone out of a crushed automobile or snuffing out a fire before it hit reached the propane tanks – it was the only time when the pressure inside him let up, when he felt secure in the knowledge

that he was doing the right thing.

Someday, he knew, he would probably have to choose between saving people and staying in the shadows. He didn't like to think about that.

As he got closer to the mountain, Clark revised his estimate of the Indian's age down to fifty or maybe even younger. His face was lined but something in his posture suggested a younger man. Clark found a trail that led up the mountain, then picked a spot out of the Indian's sight and landed there.

He climbed up a rock that put him in the Indian's line of sight. "Hello," he called. He wasn't sure what language the Indians around her spoke, but the call for help had been in English. "Is everything all right up there? Do you need help?"

The Indian jumped to his feet in surprise, then staggered and swayed before finding Clark with his eyes. There was something wrong with his pupils, Clark noticed. He wondered if the man was on drugs.

"I'm doing just fine," he said at last. Something about his speech sounded strange to Clark, but it took a few seconds for him to identify it: a British accent. This Ecuadoran tribesman, sitting wrapped in traditional blankets at the top of a mountain, sounded just like an educated Englishman. *Weird*.

Clark bounded up the path anyway. The man may claim to be all right, but he was out here by himself and had called for help. When Clark reached the top he saw that the man sat inside a chalk circle that had been drawn on the rock. Symbols were drawn at various points around the circle. From his reading Clark recognized most of them as magical symbols, but they came from a mishmash of traditions: Drawings of local animals, Chinese characters, words in Sanscrit, and a few Renaissance symbols that he might expect to see in a production of *Faust* or *The Tempest*. Clark could make no sense of it, but it caused him no trepidation. He didn't believe in magic.

"You called for help," he said. "Are you all right now?"

The Indian stared at him as if he were angry, or as if he were the one with x-ray vision. "Stop pretending," he said firmly. "I know what you are."

Clark stammered several half-words in response, then fought to compose himself. "What do you think I am?" he asked.

"You are one of the Powerful Ones. You came in answer to my call."

"That's what I said. I said I heard you call for help."

"You are the Child of the Mother," said the Indian. "The Hero. The One Who Saves From Danger. That is your nature."

"Oh," Clark said.

"I'm sure we don't have much time, so I don't want to waste it. I called you here to talk about Destiny."

“Oh,” Clark said.

September 4, 10 A.S.

The great river wriggled like a huge green (*blue maybe? brown?*) snake beneath Jon as he followed its slaloming course deeper and deeper into the jungle. The sunlight glinted in the water ahead of him – *no, it wouldn't do that because it's afternoon and the Amazon mostly flows east. I'd have to look over my shoulder to see the glint.* He stayed level with the treetops that made a canyon around the water. The clouds were patchy and very three-dimensional. When he watched from the ground the clouds had always seemed like a flat ceiling, and even after he started flying in airplanes with Mom, Jon had always thought of the clouds as a layer to be pierced so that you could fly in the clear, sunny skies above. But now he knew them as a landscape of their own, full of individual members that could be any shape or altitude. Some were long and thin and hung low enough to brush the top of the jungle. You could mistake them for smoke from a brushfire if you didn't look too closely. Others were tall, stretching up and out like vaporous mountain ranges. There were layers upon layers of clouds, entire passageways that were clear and yet sheltered from the ground below. He darted in and out of them, always making sure to be covered when he passed a boat or a settlement. Once when a patch of clear sky passed over a barge (*would there be barges out here? maybe just a flotilla of canoes or something*) he had ducked into the jungle itself, setting a tribe of little monkeys (*lemurs? or were those something else?*) screeching and chattering about his intrusion. But that didn't matter. No one would understand what they were saying, except maybe a group of natives who lived so deep in the jungle that no one had even found them yet. Maybe they would perk up their ears and say, “Listen to the little fellows. They're telling us about – “

“Jon Kent!”

Ms. Niehaus stood over his desk. She was a reed-thin middle-aged woman who was not very tall, but some trick of perspective made her seem to tower above him.

“Earth to Jon Kent! Perhaps you'd like to add a comment to the current discussion.”

Jon looked quickly down at his notebook. At the top of a page he had written very neatly:

World Problems
6th period
Ms. Niehaus

Underneath this, a few lines had been scrawled quickly.

Issues: global significance, American perspective.
American p.o.v. = power
Power to make things better or just help ourselves?

In the margins he had drawn a couple trees, and some lines overhead like they used in the comics to represent something going past too fast to see.

“Umm,” he said. “No. I don't really have anything to add right now.”

She turned away from him and walked back toward the front of the classroom. Jon had

thought he could escape notice by sitting this far back in the room, but it was such a small room. The class only had 12 students.

“Well, it is unfortunate that you don’t have anything to add. Classroom participation is a large part of the grade in this class, so for your sake I hope you’ll have more to say in the future. Perhaps you’d stay with us better if we talked about something more interesting to you, like end sweeps or nickel defenses?”

“Uh, no ma’am,” Jon said, trying to sound as respectful as he could. “That stuff can be boring sometimes too.”

The class laughed, and then Jon realized what he had implied. Ms. Niehaus let the laughter roll until it was finished. She stood by the front blackboard with her lips pulled inward, making a reverse pucker. “Well, then,” she said. “Mr. Kent, maybe you could remind the other students what we have been talking about so that we can find out if any of them have a comment.”

Jon remembered something about a list of global issues, but he hadn’t written them down. He’d gotten as far as deforestation, and that had touched off his daydream.

“We’d been talking about how the rain forest is getting cut down, and all the species that are losing their places to live.”

Jon could see Leslie looking back from the front row with a pained, disappointed expression. Everyone else faced the front, as if by looking at him they could catch some of the disapproval he was building up.

“We did mention that,” Ms. Niehaus allowed, “ten minutes ago. Would anyone like to bring Mr. Kent up to date? Someone in *this* time zone?”

Three hands shot up. She called on Leslie, who answered with a brief, precise summary that went completely out of Jon’s head as soon as she was done saying it. *Superhearing, yes. Supermemory, no.*

The class had twenty more minutes to run, and then the weekend would start. It hadn’t been a good day, or a good week for that matter. The first day of school had been Wednesday, and each day had seemed like more of a slow torture than the last. He wondered if maybe his mind was speeding up, so that everything else seemed slow by comparison. It made a certain amount of sense. There was no way that Dad could fly thousands of miles an hour if his mind hadn’t speeded up. He’d run into things all the time otherwise. And the way he could clean up the whole kitchen in a second or two if he wanted. He couldn’t do that if his mind weren’t fast, if he weren’t able to make a lot of small decisions in almost no time. Jon wondered how many words per minute his father could read, and if his own reading speed had gone up since his powers started to manifest. He hadn’t noticed it, if it had. But then he usually wasn’t trying to go fast when he read. Mostly he was trying to pass time, not speed it up. If he was reading something good, he wanted it to last. So how would he know if he could read fast?

That's stupid. If I can think so fast, why isn't all this school stuff easy?

"Mr. Kent? Are you still with us?"

He looked around in desperation. None of the writing on the blackboard was new. He looked at Leslie, who had her back to him and was writing something in her notebook. Without thinking, he looked through her back and out the other side. The top page of her notebook had a date and time on top, but it wasn't a page of class notes, it was a diary. "I can't get a handle on Jon" she was writing, "I hope I haven't misjudged him. I thought he cared about things and wasn't as shallow as the other kids." He turned quickly away and looked from desk to desk until he found an up-to-the-minute set of notes.

"We were listing possible conflicts, places where wars could break out: the Middle East, the Balkans, India and Pakistan, sub-Saharan Africa."

Leslie closed her notebook quickly and put her pen down. "Very good, Mr. Kent," Ms. Niehaus said with some surprise.

I bet I couldn't do that again, he thought.

The hour mercifully ended without further stress or embarrassment. Jon wanted to be out of the building as fast as he could, but he wasn't eager to be milling in the hall with the crowd. So he gathered up his things slowly and waited for a clear shot to the door, thinking all the while about flying out a window at the speed of sound.

Can't do it. Can't even let people see me run. If I could run I could play football.

Leslie was next to him when he got to the hall. She had been at the door talking to Ms. Niehaus, but somehow that conversation ended at precisely the moment he went by.

"Going to your locker?" she asked.

He nodded. What else did you do at the end of the school day?

"You're next to the stairwell on the fourth floor, right?"

"How do you know that?"

With the hand that wasn't carrying books she pushed her too-big glasses off the end of her nose. The glasses, Jon observed, weren't at all like his Dad's. They had real curvature and distorted the shape of her face behind them.

"I just ... I notice things like that. I'm up on the fourth floor too."

He gestured with his cane. "I have to take the elevator," he said. "Maybe I'll see you up there some time."

Four people with heavy footsteps were coming up fast behind them. "Hey, Jon, going to the game tonight?" He turned to see four members of the football team in their workout jerseys. Normally sixth period was the start of practice, Jon remembered, but on game days they had it free.

“Coulda used you last week.” They surrounded him, nudging Leslie out of the way.

“Yeah, Jon, it coulda been you getting knocked on your butt instead of Lenny here. You’d go for that, wouldn’t you Lenny?”

“If you guys could block, it’d be the other guys getting knocked on their butts,” Lenny Miller said. The other guys had been joking, but Lenny seemed angry. Jon thought Lenny seemed angry most of the time, but it didn’t seem to bother anybody else.

“Maybe today will be better,” Jon said. “It’s Centralia. We beat them last year.”

“Beat them because you had an 74-yard kickoff return with thirty seconds left, you mean.”

Lenny rolled his eyes. “Let’s get going. We can’t wait up for the gimp here.” He pushed ahead and the rest followed. Then Leslie was standing next to him again.

“I don’t like them,” she said.

And you get to say exactly what you think all the time, don’t you?

Jon shrugged. “They’re OK, I guess. Sometimes.”

Leslie walked past the stairwell with him and stopped in front of the elevator. It took forever for the doors to open, and Jon was aware of people noticing them standing there. For just one floor it was quicker to go up the stairs, even at his limping pace. But first-to-fourth still required an elevator if he was going to sell the illusion of injury.

“Any idea what you’re going to want to do your project on?” Leslie asked as they stepped into the elevator. Jon looked around and wondered if anyone saw her get in with him. It was strange to be in the elevator with someone else.

“Project?”

“World Problems.” The car lurched into motion and a motor hummed laboriously. “You really weren’t paying attention, were you?”

She sounded surprised and maybe a little disappointed. Jon felt like he had done something wrong. For a moment he imagined stopping her in her tracks by saying, “You did misjudge me. I am as shallow as everybody else. I never said I wasn’t.” But that was exactly the kind of thing he couldn’t say.

“I guess not,” he said.

“That list of problem areas. The point was that we’re supposed to pick one and team up with somebody to write a report for the end of the year. It’s going to be 25% of the final grade.”

“End of the year? That’s a long way off.”

“We’re supposed to have a topic and an outline this term. It’s 25% of the fall term grade.”

The end of fall term also seemed far away to Jon, but he decided not to tell Leslie that.

She probably already has next year's courses picked, he thought. She probably knows how many children she'll have and what their names will be. "I'd better look them over then," he said. Involuntarily his x-ray vision kicked in, as it so often did these days. He glanced up through the ceiling to the elevator's ancient machinery on the roof and the surprisingly thin cable that supported the car. *I think I was happier not seeing that.* "Do you know what you're going to pick?"

"I'm not sure. They all look so interesting. But I need to think about whether I want to find my own issue, something that's not on the list at all."

"We can do that?"

"Well, she didn't say we could. But that's what a class like this is all about, really: Finding your passion, finding something that hits you so hard that you want to go out and change the world."

Jon tried to imagine what that would feel like and came up blank. *Joke, he thought.* "Lenny got hit hard last game, but I don't think it made him want to change the world. I think he just wants to hit somebody back."

To Jon's great surprise Leslie laughed. He tried to remember whether a girl had ever laughed at something he had said or done intentionally. A lot of times Darla and her friends had laughed because of something he did, but never because he had wanted them to.

The car jerked to a stop and after several seconds the doors slowly opened. Already the hall was noticeably emptier than it had been when they left the first floor.

"All the really great things that people do happen when something just bursts out of them," she said as they stepped out of the car. "It's not because somebody gave them an assignment and they jumped through all the right hoops. It's because they found something deep inside themselves and brought it out." She seemed a little embarrassed to have spoken with so much animation. "At least that's what I think."

"Well," Jon said without a lot of confidence, "I guess I'll read the list of topics and see if something tries to burst out of me." A scene out of a horror movie popped into his mind.

"Yeah," she said, starting to sidle off in the direction of her locker rather than his. "So will I."

Jon hobbled to his locker and then back to the rickety elevator for another trip. He limped over to bus 83 and got two seats to himself. So many kids were staying for the game that the bus drove away almost empty. He looked out the window at nothing in particular. His vision was erratic today, so sometimes he saw into distant houses and sometimes he didn't. Nothing was all that interesting: people watching TV or sorting their mail or just looking aimlessly out the window as if they could see him as well as he could see them. Nobody seemed to be doing anything great or having anything burst out of them.

The bus only went as far as the end of the gravel road. He stood at the side of the road and

watched it drive off, because there was no way he was going to use the cane on the gravel and he didn't want anyone to see. *If we're going to do this right, they should come get me in the car.* He decided to tell Mom that, if she was home.

When the coast was clear, he set off at a speed that would leave Olympic sprinters in the dust. He planned to keep that pace all the way up to his room, but he didn't make it.

It was the smell of chocolate that stopped him. He could almost see it drifting out of Aunt Lana's kitchen like a cloud of some otherworldly color. She was inside standing by the stove, not mixing a powder like Jon's Mom did, but melting bars of chocolate in a sauce pan. In an instant he was standing outside the screen door. He opened it slowly so as not to scare her and said her name as he came in.

"There you are," Lana said. Two mugs and spoons were already set out on the kitchen table.

"You knew I was coming?"

She tasted her mixture, then added one more splash of milk and kept stirring. "You always come down here at the end of the first week of school."

"I do?"

"Five years running."

Jon had never thought of himself as being predictable. *But maybe I've misjudged me. Maybe I'm shallower than I thought.* "What do I say?"

"Different things. Last year you were excited that they were moving you up to the varsity football team, but you were worried that something would go wrong. Either you wouldn't have time to study or Lois would make you stop or something else would happen. I think you were just worried because you liked it so much." She looked Jon up and down and scrunched her face as if she were thinking hard. "But today ... I'd say you're more confused than worried."

Aunt Lana was spooky sometimes, Jon thought. *Maybe there's more than one kind of super-power. Some people can see through your clothes, and other people can see through you.* He sat down at the yellow-topped kitchen table, at one of the chairs that had a mug in front of it. The chair next to the stove was always Lana's.

"How do people know what they're going to do with their lives?" It just seemed to jump out of him. He hadn't even realized he was thinking about it.

"Do you think they do?" Lana tasted her mixture again and nodded, then turned the flame down to Low.

"Like how did Mom know she wanted to be a reporter? How did you decide to be a poet?"

She took his mug and ladled hot chocolate into it. Then she glanced at the cabinet, but Jon was up and down with the marshmallows before she could make a move in that

direction.

“Some things you don’t decide,” she said. “You just are. I never decided I was a poet. I just noticed I was writing a lot of poetry.” Jon didn’t respond right away. There was an expression Aunt Lana got when she wasn’t done talking, but the words were arranging themselves in her head like train cars. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “It’ll happen. You’ll be listening to somebody saying something you’ve heard a thousand times before, and then one day for no particular reason you’ll take it personally. It’ll be like: ‘That’s happening in *my* world. I’ve got to do something about it.’ You’ll see.”

“Is that what happened to you? What did you take personally?”

Lana shrugged and raised both hands as if to tell Jon to look around. “The prairie. The small town. One day it hit me that there was a way of life out here, and that somebody needed to write about it before it all turned into malls and highways.”

Jon looked through the walls out at the prairie. It looked big and flat and empty the way it always did. If somebody told him to write about it, he couldn’t imagine what he would say.

“I bet Mom decided,” Jon said. He couldn’t picture something as important as a career just happening to his mother without her having some kind of say-so. “And Dad ... his powers were just *there* one day. They welled up inside him and burst out and then the whole Superman thing happened. Nobody knew what he was supposed to do, so whatever he did was just him.” He thought about saving the world and all the people who thought his father was a god. “I bet that was easier.”

Lana filled her own mug and sat down at the table. A small amount of chocolate continued heating in the pot. “Have you talked to him about it?”

“Not really. He doesn’t talk much.”

Lana nodded. “I can’t remember the last time he sat here,” she said with some sadness. “This was his house for the longest time.”

“I knew that.” It drove Jon nuts when grown-ups told him something he’d known since he was three. Aunt Lana usually didn’t, but he supposed even she wasn’t immune.

“I think if you asked him, he’d tell you that figuring out what to do with his powers was hard for him too. And he’s still working on it. That’s why he’s going to Metropolis tomorrow, I think.”

“I thought it had something to do with his book.”

“And the book has something to do with figuring out what the whole Superman thing was about, so that he can get on with his life.”

Jon had never thought about his father like that. “Get on where?” he asked.

“To the next stage, whatever it is. The two of you aren’t that different, you know. Your roles are different – father, son, and all that – but as people you have a lot in common.”

Jon thought about the room in the basement. He thought about the pictures on Laura's wall. Then he thought about the comet and what it meant. "I don't think I'm ready for that," he said. "I think I want him to be the father and me to be the son and we can figure the rest out some other time."

Lana smiled and looked like she wanted to laugh. "So what brought all this on? You didn't get assigned a *What I'm Going To Be When I Grow Up* essay or something, did you?"

"No. Not really. Not exactly."

"What, then?"

Jon dunked the marshmallows in the chocolate with a spoon. He dunked the same marshmallow over and over, watching the brown liquid roll off its sides as if it were a small white barrel floating in a muddy sea. "It's just ... there's this girl in my World Problems class."

"There usually is," Lana commented.

"Is what?" Jon had lost the thread of the conversation.

"A girl."

Jon shook his head vigorously. "No, no," he protested. "That's not it. She's not, like, the girl friend type. You know."

"Not drop-dead gorgeous like the last one."

"Right. Well ..." It sounded so shallow when Aunt Lana said it – as if she thought he had some choice in the matter. But that wasn't how it worked. You just looked at someone and something inside either said *girl friend* or it didn't. It probably wasn't fair or anything, but it wasn't his fault. He was surprised Aunt Lana didn't remember. Or maybe it was different for girls. He decided to push on with his point. "She's like so sure of everything. Everything that comes up, she wants to be on the side of the angels. She wants to end hunger and save the rain forest and stop war and on and on and on."

Lana blew on her chocolate. "And you don't?"

Jon dunked the marshmallow a little too hard. It rebounded a couple inches above the cup and several splatters of chocolate went flying, but he managed to catch them all on his spoon before they could hit the table. As soon as he had caught them, he realized that he had used his powers. *I hope I don't forget and do something like that at the cafeteria*, he thought. "Well, yeah, I mean I want good stuff to happen too. But she really thinks about this stuff. It's important to her."

Lana took a couple of sips. She nodded and looked upward to the left the way she often did when she was thinking. "So she makes you uncomfortable because you think she'd know exactly what to do with your powers, but you don't."

Jon hadn't thought about it that way. "Maybe. I guess so. She'd probably be out there

righting wrongs and catching bad guys and making sure that Good beats Evil.”

“It’s been tried, you know. You should ask your father about it.”

“She should, not me. I just want to have a life. I want to make some friends and pass my classes and meet somebody I can go out with. I don’t ...” His voice trailed off. He wasn’t sure how he wanted to finish that sentence. “And ... and what can I do anyway? I can fly a little and I’m fast and strong. But what good is that? And they won’t let me do anything. Even if there was something I was supposed to be doing they wouldn’t let me do it.”

Jon could hear his voice getting higher and sounding more like a whine. He hadn’t expected that and didn’t like it. He didn’t even know he was thinking about this, and now here he was saying it out loud. He hated being the last one to know what was on his mind.

“What don’t you get to do?”

“*Anything.*” Jon let go of the mug because he felt how fragile it was, how easily it could break in his hands. And then his words came out in a stream. “I can fly, but where can I go? He only lets me practice outside when I’m with him, and we only go out on nights without a moon so no one will see us. And we stay right around here. He won’t let me go to the Fortress with him, and he never wants to go anywhere I want to go. We could see the mountains or go to South America or sneak into a city or all kinds of stuff. And he never lets me. I’ve never flown more than a few miles from home. I’ve never been out of Kansas on my own.”

Lana looked genuinely surprised. And that made no sense to Jon at all, because she knew what the rules were.

“You mean ...” Lana’s eyes were all over the place. She looked down into her cup, then into his eyes, then away at the place where the horizon would be if not for the walls. “You mean you’ve never just shot up into the air to see how high you can go? Or chased some geese back to Canada? Or swam with the whales down deep in the ocean?”

“I can’t do those things,” Jon protested. “You know the rules.”

“Sure,” she said. “But ... but they’re *rules*. They’re not laws of physics or something. You’re a teen-ager. Teen-agers break rules. It’s what you do.”

Jon didn’t know what he was feeling. Maybe he was mad. It was like Aunt Lana was judging him because he wasn’t doing the things that his parents would judge him for if he did. And that didn’t seem fair at all. Or maybe he was ashamed. Because she was right, wasn’t she? What kind of boy his age meekly went along with whatever his parents demanded? Laura already had more spirit than he did. It had been her idea for him to fly in front of Uncle Jimmy and claim to have made the rescue. She was always arguing with Mom and pushing the boundaries in one way or another. *She should have the powers, not me.*

“Dad broke the rules?”

Lana smiled and briefly seemed to drift off into a memory, but then pulled herself back to the present. “Like I said, he was a lot like you. So he didn’t break many and he needed a nudge sometimes. But sure, he broke some rules.”

“Mom?”

Now Lana laughed out loud. “Your mom ... I didn’t know Lois then, of course, but my guess is she broke so many rules that people quit making them for her.”

The rest of the conversation went by without fully registering in Jon’s brain. When he left he walked down the gravel road at a human pace, carrying his cane but not using it. And at the same time he felt guilty about doing it, ashamed that he was letting himself be so completely controlled.

Between the rules that are supposed to control me and the forces that are supposed to be bursting out of me to change the world, where is there room for me in my life? It was like the rules were the air above and the forces were the ocean below. And somewhere in between there was a thin film of *Jon* floating on the surface. Any minute now the wind might pick up and the waves might get choppy and he might disperse into nothing.

After coming in the door he flew up to his room, dropped his bookbag and cane, retrieved an apple from the kitchen, and crossed the atrium to where Laura was sprawled on a couch. The television was on but she had turned onto her stomach and did not appear to be watching it.

“Show off,” she commented wearily.

“Isn’t this when you practice your gymnastics?”

“Headache.” She rolled onto her side so that she wouldn’t have to watch him out of the corners of her eyes. “You don’t get headaches, do you?”

Laura seemed to get plenty of them these days, which was something he had overheard his parents discussing. They had seemed worried about her, but they’d been talking on the other side of the house and he hadn’t wanted to admit that he was listening. Jon tried to remember if he had ever had a headache or not. Staring too long at a solar eclipse gave him eyestrain once, he remembered, but he wasn’t sure whether that counted. It was always so hard for him to figure out whether his experiences were normal. They were normal *for him*, and that was about all he could say. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Then you don’t. You’d know if you did.” She looked up at the ceiling and then closed her eyes. “It figures,” she sighed. “You get powers, I get headaches.”

“Maybe it’s a female thing. Like, hormone changes or something.” She raised an eyelid and gave him a look that said she didn’t want to discuss it. “You want me to get you an aspirin?”

She rolled onto her other side, facing the back of the sofa. “Never mind.”

“If you’re not going to watch this, can you turn it to SportsCenter? It’s 37.”

Laura rolled back and sighed and pushed some buttons on the remote. The TV changed to channel 73. She grumbled something and threw the remote in his general direction. "Fix it yourself."

Channel 73 appeared to be some kind of travel network, or maybe one of the educational ones that Jon usually skipped over. It was showing an aerial shot that must have been taken from a helicopter following the path of a big river passing through a jungle. "At the center of this controversy are the tribes of the upper Amazon, primitive peoples who understand little about the forces converging on them, and wish only to be left alone." The narrating voice belonged to some famous actor Jon was sure he knew but couldn't quite place. He decided to watch for a few more seconds and figure it out.

He ended up watching the whole show. Afterward he flew upstairs to his room and looked at the network's web site. He got lost chasing links from one site to another and didn't come out until Lois called him for dinner.

The Kansas Angel

A new slant on the longstanding Smallville UFO controversy emerged only three years ago with the publication of the book *The Kansas Angel* by the respected investigative journalist Jennifer Stuart. Stuart's book begins with the virtually identical stories told by two missing boys from rural Kansas who were kidnapped within six months of each other, and then returned home unharmed within two weeks. Each claimed to have been found by a stranger who picked the boy up and flew him to a point in his own neighborhood, from which he walked home. These events occurred 19 years after the Smallville UFO and four years before Superman's first appearance in Metropolis.

Several years passed before anyone noticed the similarities between the boys' accounts, largely because both were dismissed as dreams or fantasies in that earlier age when everyone knew that men could not fly unaided.³⁰

These two stories were connected ten years after the fact by a traveling gospel preacher named Jacob Murray, whose angel-based theology appealed to each of the now teen-aged boys for obvious reasons. Murray was excited when he heard the first boy's story, but no more so than he had been by a dozen or more equally inspiring stories that his converts had told him. However, when he heard the second boy's story only three weeks later - agreeing right down to the Kansas City Royals hat worn by the rescuer - Murray believed he was on the trail of something extraordinary. He tracked down the first boy and convinced the two to become regulars in his tent show, telling their stories to all who would listen.

And so the legend of the Kansas Angel was born. Over time a large number of local legends attached themselves to the Kansas Angel, who was never seen except occasionally by children at night, but who was responsible for all possible forms of life-saving good luck: guns that misfired rather than shoot someone dead, cars that put on a sudden burst of incredible speed to avoid tornadoes or trains, planes that landed safely in spite of mechanical difficulties that should have destroyed them, and so on.

³⁰ Neither police report mentions the claim that the rescuer flew.

The Kansas Angel might have remained in the netherworld of modern rural folklore if Stuart's book had not made two key contributions: First, she applied the objectivity of a trained journalist to the deeds attributed to the Angel and weeded out those which were purely apocryphal, had perfectly reasonable explanations, or (like straight flushes in poker) are unlikely events which are nonetheless bound to happen to a few people from time to time.

When these stories were sifted out of the legend, the ones remaining took on a definite pattern: The overwhelming majority of them occurred during a five-year period (18-23 years after the Smallville UFO, ending a month before Superman's appearance in Metropolis) and within 200 miles of each other (and at most 150 miles from the UFO crash site). They became more rare during the S years, and stopped entirely after Superman's death. Moreover, none of these events were either microscopic or macroscopic in scale: no miraculous healings, control of large-scale weather systems, or cessations of earthquakes. All the remaining interventions could have been performed by a human-sized being who was strong, fast, and could fly.

Smallville reconsidered

Stuart's second contribution was to connect the dots that today seem so obvious: the Smallville UFO, the Kansas Angel, and Superman. Superman had long been suspected to hale from the Midwest, both because of some subtle nuances in his speech patterns and from the straight-arrow values which are so closely associated with the stereotypic Midwesterner. But no one before Stuart had been able to make such a plausibly precise conjecture about where and when Superman had grown up.

In Stuart's retelling of the Smallville UFO story, the "rocketship" seen by the Ross family is none other than Jor-El's faster-than-light probe launcher, and the glass egg is the infant life-support module in which his son Kal-El escaped the destruction of Krypton. The pair of eyes that so startled Jack Ross did not belong to a little green man, but to a full-sized Kryptonian baby.

We can hardly blame Jack Ross, or any of the interpreters who followed him, for assuming that the glass egg was opened from within, by a tiny passenger or passengers who then escaped into the countryside, possibly waylaying Mark Kittle in the process. But once you assume that the passenger was a baby who looked human in every detail, another theory suggests itself: Sometime after Jack and Roy Ross fled in terror, but before Jack returned with Sheriff Jackson in the morning, someone else found the spacecraft. The craft had cooled by then, and the glass egg either opened itself or was easily opened.

Finding the egg open and a healthy (and probably quite frightened) baby inside, the craft's second set of discoverers must have jumped to a conclusion just as obvious (and as mistaken) as the one that had fooled Jack Ross: This innocent child was the object of an extraordinarily callous scientific experiment. Someone had blasted a baby into orbit, for God-knew-what purpose. Far from looking like an alien invader, little Kal-El appeared to be a victim in need of rescue.

The "government" agents who descended on the Ross field and disappeared just as abruptly could only have exacerbated such suspicions. Someone

was after this child, and he needed to be hidden and raised in secret.³¹

What Kansas taught Superman

From a biographer's point of view, the best aspect of Stuart's theory is what it explains about Superman's character.

Every part of the world has its saints and sinners, but certain virtues are easier to learn in some places than in others. In the Kansas farm country, people are rare enough that they aren't replaceable, yet plentiful enough that you can't ignore them. In Alaska you can vanish into the wilderness, and in New York you can vanish into the crowd. In the farm country you can't vanish at all. Whether you like it or not - and whether it likes you or not - you are part of the community. It is easy to learn to value the individual, because people are not interchangeable. If you alienate your best friend, you will not easily find another. If a shopkeeper and a customer have an argument, they had better patch it up, because they will have to continue to trade with each other. It makes sense to work on relationships of all sorts rather than discard them, because people are scarce.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the world of children. I have seen basketball courts in Metropolis where five-man teams of players wait several hours for a chance to challenge the court's current champions. In Smallville it was a rare and fortunate day when we could play five-on-five. Keeping a game together meant playing with the fat kids and the short kids and somebody's little brother. And not just playing with them, keeping them happy enough that they didn't get bored or frustrated and go home. If the best player wanted to take all the shots, well then he could play all the positions, too - alone. In the farm country, in the small towns, games are not made by hoops and balls; games are made by other children, and you need all of them you can get.

Throughout his career, Superman refused to kill. He could have killed anyone he wanted with complete impunity. No one need ever have known. A quick, accurate blast of heat vision from a distance could cause a fatal stroke, or a nudge at super-speed could throw a person out in front of traffic, and unless a high-speed camera happened to be trained on him at the time, no one would see. He could have killed openly those who attacked him or threatened others. In more than one hostage situation, the simplest solution would have been for Superman to kill the perpetrator before he could harm anyone else. (Police snipers would have done so, had they been able to get a clear shot.) But from Superman's point of view this was not a solution at all; the problem was to get *everyone* out of the situation alive, including the person who caused it. To Superman every life, no matter how evil or twisted, was valuable. And every death diminished the world in some irreparable way. Life was not a commodity; trading one for three or even one for a thousand was never a good deal.

³¹ An obvious alternative theory is that the government *did* find the child, perhaps taking him from the people who found him or recovering him from an orphanage. I have mentioned this possibility to several other people who knew Superman personally, and none of us believe it. As James Olsen put it: "How does the government raise a child to turn out like Superman?"

I also find it highly improbable that any government would design a mission like Superman's, rather than making him a spy or a soldier. We could imagine that Superman rebelled against his assigned mission after he acquired his powers, but I can find no evidence to support this theory. We have entered the realm of speculative fiction rather than journalism.

But more striking even than his respect for life was his unwillingness to lord it over the mere humans. In many ways his life would have been simpler if he had a temperament more like that other Metropolis celebrity, Lex Luthor. Superman's life might have been considerably easier if his goal had been to be richer, more powerful, and more famous than anyone else; to own everything and name it after himself; to be better and smarter and stronger than everyone – and to make sure that everyone knew it.

Superman and Luthor were both abandoned children.³² If Superman had grown up (as Luthor apparently did) in the slums of Metropolis, where you wait for your chance to take the court and then hold it as long as you can against all comers, he might have been different. But in the farm country, a game only lasts as long as someone is willing to be the worst player on the court. If all of his shots get blocked and all of his dribbles are stolen, he will go home. And then someone else will have to be the worst. And then someone else and someone else again, until the best player is alone with the ball.

Superman never wanted to find himself alone with the ball. If you don't understand that much about him, very little else makes sense.

September 4, 10 A.S.

Clark looked at the words he had typed and decided that he liked them. He had never put it that way to himself before, but it felt right. He remembered what he had disliked most about being Superman, especially in the later years. It was the way that people looked at him – not his friends, not his enemies, but just ordinary people. They looked at him as if he were something totally other, something that made their own actions irrelevant. He remembered how puzzling and wrong it had felt when he first started noticing it. A man would be gathering up his courage to take a stand against his mugger, and then shrink back into passive victimhood when he saw the red cape flapping overhead. Eventually even cops would pull back when Superman appeared. “What can I do?” their body language seemed to say. “I'm just human.”

The mailbox icon began flashing on his screen. There was a single one-line message from an anonymous remaining gateway.

I'm finding out things you should know.

Clark sighed. Most people, if they thought they had found out something you should know, would just tell you. But you could always count on certain people to make a production out of it.

“Phone,” Clark said. The Fortress modified itself to produce a telephone on the desk. He picked up the receiver and dialed a twenty-four digit number from memory.

There are government agencies too secret to have names. But they do find it convenient to have a handful of phone numbers – 24-digit ones that never get dialed by mistake. The

³² Luthor's childhood is also a matter of some speculation. The public record is contradictory and Luthor himself has told different stories at different times. I am working from the conclusions in Jennifer Stuart's other famous biography *Lex Luthor: The Man Upstairs*.

code that routes those numbers is buried so deep in the telephone system's software that no one ever finds it. It's viral; when a new phone company joins the global network, its computers immediately become infected with the routing instructions for the 24-digit numbers. Decades ago, one hundred such telephone numbers had been created by an irreproducible random process, but when it came time to distribute them, only 99 could be found. Clark dialed the hundredth number.

It was answered immediately. "Go." The voice on the other end was electronically distorted to the point that not even a computer could recognize it. And that was how Clark could be sure that he was talking to Bruce Wayne.

"I got your message. What do you want to tell me?"

"Are you in the North?" Talking to Bruce on the telephone was like playing one of those party games where you have to answer every question with a question, or not use any adjectives, or avoid saying *yes* or *no*. In Bruce's case, the game was to converse without saying anything that would be meaningful to an eavesdropper. Even if you were conversing on a line that the government itself thinks doesn't exist.

"Yes."

"You know I don't like it when you call from there. I don't trust your communications."

This was an old argument that Clark had conveniently forgotten. "But it's the most advanced system on the planet."

"I never trust technology I don't understand. We should do this the old-fashioned way. You could be here in minutes."

This was another old argument. Bruce's cave was deep underground, but the ground it was under was Gotham City, a place which (in Clark's experience) contained more misery per square mile than spot on Earth that was not currently experiencing either a war or a famine. The Batcave may have been a refuge to Bruce, but to Clark it was a torture chamber. "You know I can't."

"I only know that you won't."

"What about the place we met last time?" It was a hillside about a hundred miles from Gotham. Bruce had flown a helicopter there. Some of the cries and gunshots of Gotham had still been audible, but they were muted like a television program in another room.

"Repetition is bad security. I don't like to have patterns."

"It's been two years. I don't think anybody's been waiting that long for us to come back."

"Paranoia is a virtue in my business."

Clark wished that he believed Bruce was joking, but if Bruce had a sense of humor at all it was too subtle for Clark to appreciate. When he wasn't aggravated with Bruce, Clark was worried about his old friend or colleague or whatever Bruce was. From the beginning it had been clear that Bruce lived in a different world from Clark, a world that was much

colder, lonelier, and filled with enemies. Clark supposed that was only natural given the way that Bruce had lost his parents. And Clark had always known that he could not judge Batman by Superman's standards. Bruce's life was on the line daily. He could not announce himself and wait calmly until the criminals got tired of shooting at him, as Superman so often had. To be effective, Batman had to strike from the shadows and incapacitate his foes before they could mount a deadly response. Clark found a lot of Batman's methods distasteful, and he often wondered if in the long run they caused more problems than they solved, but he understood.

In the last few years, however, Bruce had become even more isolated, his behavior even more extreme. He had never, since Clark had known him, had family or even friends he could trust with his secrets. (That, in fact, was what worried Clark most: the thought that he himself might be Bruce's best friend.) But since the death of the last of the Robins, he had worked without allies as well. In many ways, Clark realized in retrospect, the Robins had humanized Bruce. They had given him someone to teach, someone to look out for, someone to think about besides himself and his enemies and their victims. Clark had always argued against placing teen-agers in harm's way, but even he was starting to wish that Bruce (if he wouldn't retire, which was the best solution Clark could think of) would take another apprentice.

Clark had to admit one thing about Bruce's elaborate precautions: they worked. After almost thirty years of continuous vigilante activity, the Batman of Gotham City was still considered a myth by most educated, respectable people. Only supermarket tabloids and cops on the street took him seriously. Liberal journalists (including some working for low-circulation weeklies that survived on the generosity of that famous liberal philanthropist Bruce Wayne) believed that the Gotham Police Department started and promoted the Batman myth as a cover for rogue cops working outside the law. Among the criminal class of Gotham he was a bogeyman, a night terror. Nothing was impossible for the Batman: he could turn invisible; he could change his face to look like anyone; he was eight feet tall; he had real bat wings and could fly. "You should never have let them find out so much about you," Bruce, the experienced hero, had said in their first conversation. "If you really want to strike fear into your enemies' hearts, you need to be mysterious."

"But I don't want people to be afraid of me," Clark had answered, and the conversation had ended shortly thereafter.

How to meet him now? Clark tried to think of a scenario that would satisfy both of them. "How about you just get in your plane and fly out over the Atlantic. I'll find you."

There was silence on the line while Bruce considered possible flaws.

"Are you sure? I've improved the plane's stealthiness."

Bruce never seemed to take account of the increase in Clark's powers after the solar disaster, a fact which annoyed Clark for reasons he was unable to explain. Post-Icarus, Clark could recognize individual sparrows from orbit. No amount of stealth technology could make the slightest difference. "Trust me. I'll find you."

The line went dead, which Clark interpreted as agreement.

He allowed Bruce a 20-minute head start before leaving the Fortress through the icy lake. He escaped the atmosphere as quickly as possible without creating sonic booms, then flew southward with his back to the Earth until the star configuration told him he was three hundred miles off the coast of Gotham City. Then he turned to look downward.

The radar beacons of the many airports on the Eastern seaboard swept through the sky like the beams of lighthouses. Airplanes lit up when the radar hit them, flashing briefly in a color outside the human spectrum. Clark had to wait through two sweeps of Gotham Airport's radar before he spotted a small, fast plane that did not flash when the beam hit it. It was flying low, barely a hundred feet off the water.

Bruce seemed genuinely surprised when Clark rapped on the window. He was wearing his old uniform, the dark one intended for vanishing in shadows, not the newer, armored one he had built to compensate for his diminishing combat skills. At 53, Bruce was still an impressive physical specimen. A lifetime of relentless physical training had given him the arteries of a 25-year-old, and muscles that were as strong and supple as a gymnast's. But even a Batman could not cheat the years completely. He bore the scars of numerous old wounds. Underneath the dark cowl his face was lined and his hair was thinning. All his major joints showed signs of inflammation. *He must ache when he gets up in the morning*, Clark thought.

A portal opened in the bottom of the plane, and soon Clark was sitting behind Bruce, in the co-pilot seat where a series of young proteges had sat. The first three Robins had flown the coop, one after the other, as each reached an age where the prospect of a wife and children became more attractive than a lifetime enlistment in Bruce's war on crime. Clark did not know whether they ever called or visited, but Bruce never spoke their names. The last Robin had died in an explosion seven years ago, and lifelong servant Alfred had succumbed to cancer six months later. Wayne Manor was now a prototype of WayneTech's automated house. Bruce lived there alone with his machines. Clark often wondered what would become of Bruce down the line. Would he still trying to fight his war when he was 80? Or would he engineer a hero's death for himself before then?

"You never told me about your book," Bruce said without greeting. He always spoke with a gravelly voice when he was in uniform, even when he was talking to someone who knew his secrets. Clark sometimes wondered if split personality was also considered a virtue in Bruce's business.

"You never asked."

"Did you seek the project out, or did it come to you?"

"It was Jimmy Olsen's idea. He wants to restart his photo career with a book of Superman pictures."

Bruce grunted skeptically. "None of Galaxy's usual project editors is involved. The person you deal with is just a name. I haven't been able to trace where your

communications actually go, but I lose track of them much higher up the corporate structure than a simple book project would justify.”

Clark found this puzzling, but not alarming. “Maybe Morgan Edge is taking a personal interest. He had a love/hate relationship with Superman.”

Bruce seemed uninterested in this theory. “Someone at LexCorp has been studying Clark Kent, and not trying all that hard to cover his tracks. It started shortly after the book project. Web searches, credit checks, hacking into your phone records – the usual private-eye type inquiries. It’s a broad search, not focused on any particular period or episode in your life. There’s a lot to find.”

Clark heard the unspoken reproach in Bruce’s voice: *You should have been more careful.* Clark could think of no reason for LexCorp to investigate him now, good or bad. He knew better than to ask how Bruce had discovered these things. “I can’t see what that would have to do with the book, but I’ll be extra careful not to give any clues that I was Superman. I doubt that’s what they’re after, but I wouldn’t want someone to discover it by mistake, either.”

“Don’t make assumptions. You don’t know what they’re after,” Bruce said. “The Church of the Kryptonian opened a new monastery in Smallville at just about the same time. It may be a base from which to keep you under surveillance.”

Bruce’s inclination to imagine ominous possibilities and to suspect connections between disparate events had also increased with time. “I know about the Church. So far they haven’t done anything more suspicious than trying to convert the tourists. But where are you going with this? Galaxy, LexCorp, the Kryptonists – who’s the enemy here? Are you saying they’re all part of one big conspiracy against me?”

“In my experience there are always larger patterns, larger forces working behind the scenes. And I’ve never known them to work for good. I haven’t come to any conclusions about this particular pattern. But I’ve found enough unusual activity around you to warrant caution. And further study.”

Clark shrugged, a gesture that was probably invisible to his pilot. “Well, thanks, I guess.”

“You aren’t going to look into this?”

“I suppose I will, up to a point. But I’m just a husband and a father these days. Paranoia *isn’t* a virtue in that business.”

“You don’t have a choice. You are a nexus of power; evil will find you whether you seek it out or not. And your children. ... have you considered that they may be the focus, not you?”

Another thing about Bruce: he was uncanny at pushing the right buttons. A global conspiracy against himself was something Clark could think rationally about. A global conspiracy against Jon or Laura was something else entirely. Clark could feel the muscles in his chest tense up. Somehow Bruce always made him feel like a teen-ager who hadn’t

been thinking out the consequences of his actions. “No,” he admitted, “I haven’t considered that. Do you think it’s true?”

“I just know that they are your weak link. Anyone who suspected who and what you are would be foolish to attack you directly. And if the children are developing powers of their own, the temptation to manipulate them would be irresistible to certain individuals and organizations. You know from your own career that there are many people who would like to have a Kryptonian doing their bidding.”

“Laura may not develop powers at all. We still don’t know.”

“But Jon is? He’s keeping the secret well. How is he taking the restrictions you must be putting on him? Any rebelliousness? He must be starting to realize that the Kryptonists would make him a god. Luthor could make him rich. He could become famous just by doing a few tricks. I can’t imagine that your discipline is that fearsome. That’s a lot of temptation for a boy.”

“He’s a good boy. You’d like him. And I’ve begun training him to use his powers responsibly.”

“Like you do,” Bruce said in his Batman monotone. The accusation, if there was one, was implicit.

“I do my best not to make things worse,” Clark said in a similar monotone.

“But you could make them so much better. You must know that.”

“I *don’t* know that. I tried for years to make the world better, and how much better did it get? How much better is Gotham?”

“I think of you sitting in that basement in Kansas doing nothing,” Bruce said, his voice starting to rise, “and it seems like such a waste.”

“And you could do so much better.”

Bruce didn’t answer.

“I’ll tell you exactly what you would do if you had my powers: You’d rule the world. You wouldn’t set out to do it, but you wouldn’t be able to stop yourself. No one would live his life well enough to suit you, so you’d have to intervene.”

After a few seconds Bruce spoke again in his monotone. “This is pointless. I’ve told you what you need to know.”

“Then I guess we can both go back underground.”

Clark got out of the copilot seat. The portal opened again.

“Clark?” Bruce said just as Clark was set to exit the plane. He turned back to face Clark for the first time, and spoke in his Bruce Wayne voice, his human voice. Clark stopped, poised in the air above the portal. “I ... I know it’s your life, and you have to live it the way you see fit. No one should have to be a hero if that’s not what’s in them. But ...”

Clark wondered if Bruce would go on to acknowledge that he had been a hero, that he had been one for 12 years, that he had risked death to save the world. He wondered if Bruce would say that the waste was in keeping that hero inside him rather than letting it out into the world. “But Jon and Laura. Don’t waste them too. Let them know they have options. Let them make their own choices.”

“I will,” he promised. For just a moment it seemed as if they really were old friends, old comrades. “Jon’s still a boy, but he’s growing up. When he’s old enough, you can make the case to him yourself. I promise.”

“Your children ... the powers they may come to have ... the good they could do ... you must know that they’re the most precious resource on Earth.”

“Every parent thinks his children are precious beyond measure,” Clark said.

“But yours really are,” Bruce said in a voice that was full of loss and loneliness and – Clark had to replay it many times in his memory to be absolutely certain – envy.

“Good-bye Bruce. Take care of yourself,” he said. Then he boomeranged down the portal and back up into space.

Bruce Wayne envied him – not just his powers, his life.

I never knew that.

September 5, 10 A.S.

It was still dark when Jon woke up from dreams that he could only remember in fragments. He remembered a river flowing through the rain forest. He remembered flying in daylight through entire landscapes of clouds. And Aunt Lana – no it was Leslie – incredulously asking “Do you always follow the rules?”

As he came more fully awake, Jon realized that his parents were already up and about. They were downstairs talking in the tone of voice that they often used in the morning or late at night when the kids were in bed. Only in the past week or so had Jon started hearing it. He wasn’t sure how to let them know.

“Maybe the city won’t be quite so crowded on Saturday,” Clark said softly.

“You can do this,” Lois responded at the same volume. “I know it won’t be easy, whether it’s Saturday or not. But I’m proud of you for trying. And it’s just a day. You’re not even going to stay overnight this time. Tonight you’ll be home. You can sleep downstairs in your office if you want.”

Clark’s reply was just a beat late, and Jon imagined his father had punctuated his words with a look. But he refused to turn his head and see if his x-ray vision was working. *That would be spying*, he thought. *This is just overhearing*. And then he wondered if it made any difference really. Maybe anything you found out about somebody was spying, if they didn’t tell you themselves.

“That’s how you talk to Jon and Laura,” he said.

Lois' response was also a beat late. "If you don't start aging soon I'm going to start *looking* like your mother, too."

Don't look.

He heard a kiss, and wondered if it had been a forehead or nose kiss, or a real lip-to-lip job. Or even ...

Don't look.

"Nothing against my mother, but I don't think she *ever* looked like you." Another kiss. This one sounded lip-to-lip, though Jon hadn't yet made a study of what the different types of kisses sounded like. "Still, you're right. I should start learning how to add some gray hairs or wrinkles. I don't want to give people reasons to look at me too hard."

"There have *always* been reasons to look at you hard."

"I don't remember you believing that when you first met me – at least when you met me as Clark. You didn't think twice about me then."

"Of course I did." Lois laughed, loud enough that Jon might have heard it with normal hearing. "I thought: 'It's a shame that cute new guy is such a hick.' Cat Grant and I had a long conversation about you. I'm surprised you didn't hear it."

"I must have been getting somebody's cat out of a tree or something. Are you ready?"

"Just a couple minutes."

Jon heard a jingling of keys and a purse snapping shut. The plan, Jon remembered, was for his father to do this the way a normal person would. Mom would drive to the airport in Wichita, and then Dad would take ordinary flights. Jon had overheard the conversation about that too. Dad was being extra careful because of a warning he had gotten from some spooky friend in Gotham. (If Jon didn't know better, he would have thought that his father's friend was some real-life version of the Batman of Gotham. The worst thing about overhearing, he was beginning to understand, was not being able to ask questions.)

"So who are you seeing?"

"Not many people. With all the travel time I'm not there that long. I'm having lunch with Jimmy and we're going to pick out which photos to use. And I'm interviewing Eric Randall."

Another gap. Jon imagined the way that Mom could roll her eyes. "The Prophet himself, huh? I can see why you're not looking forward to it. Why didn't you schedule somebody fun, like that model you were supposed to be spying on?"

"Ellen Brighton?"

"I forgot the name, but I knew you wouldn't." Jon could hear the smile in her voice. He hadn't realized before that a smile was hearable.

"That's why I didn't schedule her. Maybe *you* should interview her. She's a waitress now."

There's a magazine piece there if it's done right. Little-person-looks-back-at-her-role-in-big-events, that sort of thing."

"And I'll bet she still looks great, even if she is as old as I am."

"Don't start. You look fabulous."

Jon heard a clatter of dishes. It was a quick, sharp clatter rather than a long rolling one. That meant Dad had cleared the table.

"So what tack are you planning to take with Randall?"

"Haven't made up my mind yet."

"I suppose 'Stop taking my name in vain' is out of the question, then?"

Clark chuckled without much amusement. "I ask myself why I didn't do something about him at the very beginning, and I honestly don't know. Now ... well, what can I do? If I'm just a reporter I'm no threat to him. And if I reappear as Superman, he just gets to proclaim the long-awaited Day of Return."

"Not to mention that you're right back in the same soup you were in ten years ago," Lois sighed. "OK. I'm ready now. Get set for the slowest Smallville-to-Metropolis trip you've ever made."

The front door opened and closed, and Jon heard their footsteps in the gravel. Clark was really working at being human, letting his full weight hit the ground in each step. The doors of the SUV opened and a bag landed in the back seat. Jon wondered what was in the bag: Had Dad taken his flying clothes? Or at least a mask in case he needed not to be recognized doing something superhuman? Or was he counting on being able to spend a day in Metropolis without using his powers at all? Jon couldn't guess.

"You want me to drive?" Clark asked. "The fog won't bother me."

Fog?

"I'll manage," Lois answered. "Just bail me out if I'm about to kill myself."

"I always do."

The engine started and the SUV began crunching its way towards the blacktop.

How far away do they have to be before Dad gets out of earshot? How far can he see if he really wants to?

Jon didn't want to think about why he was asking these questions. He lay perfectly rigid on the bed, as if moving a single muscle would give him momentum in a direction he was trying not to go. But his eyes drifted to the side and looked out the translucent wall of his bedroom. It was dark out there. The clock by his bed said 3:30. It would be dark for hours. And if it was foggy ...

He wasn't sure how he found himself standing by the wall, looking out into the fog. Aunt

Lana might drop by around daylight, but by then it wouldn't even be that suspicious for him to be off somewhere. He could leave out a cereal bowl, make it look like he had just gotten up early and gone walking or bike riding or something.

In his mind he could still hear her saying, "You're a teen-ager. Teen-agers break rules."

Except for the shallow ones. They follow the all rules and then they complain about how nobody lets them do anything. Really they're scared to do stuff. The rules are just an excuse.

The rules were there for his protection, he knew. The last thing he needed were a bunch of tabloid people around looking through a microscope at everything he did. Or Kryptonists trying to worship him. Or Human Defense League types wanting to kill him. (*I'm their worst nightmare: proof that super-powered aliens can reproduce on Earth.*) He knew that it made sense to keep his secret as long as he could.

But did it make sense to be so careful that he never used his powers at all? Never got any advantage out of them? Jon didn't want to have *He could have flown, but he didn't* on his gravestone.

And Dad flew. He wasn't flying today for some reason, but he made a lot of trips up to the Fortress or out into space. The point wasn't not to fly. The point was not to be seen flying. To be careful.

Fog.

The world on the other side of the translucent wall was like one of those diagrams that you could see two ways: a vase or two faces, a cube coming out of the page or going into the page. To his human vision the fog was thick as chowder. Nothing was visible – not the road, not the trees, nothing. But he had intermittent mastery of a second sight, one for which the fog was a mere annoyance, like the hiss on a pair of cheap headphones. He could look down the gravel road to the highway, then over to the mall in one direction or town in the other. His parents' SUV was long out of his sight and hearing. He knew that didn't mean he was out of *their* sight and hearing, though. If they were looking, if they were paying attention.

Dad has a lot of his mind today.

Jon felt guilty about that. He wasn't sure why going to Metropolis was so hard for his father, but he knew that it was. That was why he hadn't been back in more than nine years. Today was an especially bad day to make trouble. It was a bad day precisely because it was a good day. He was slipping out of his parents' radar today because they trusted him to understand that they had more important issues to worry about.

There's a responsible way to do this.

He could wait for his parents to come home and then go to them directly. He could say, "Mom and Dad, I think I'm old enough and responsible enough now that you should trust me more. I want to be able to fly solo, to do some exploring on my own, to find out about

my powers by trying to use them. I know I still need to stay away from big cities and other places where people might see me, but I think we could come up with some reasonable rules that would still let me have some freedom.”

And they would say – what? “I don’t know, honey. Maybe we can talk about this again after your birthday.” Or they’d tie it something. He could fly solo after he brought home perfect grades or kept his room neat for a month or spun straw into gold.

Stalling. Me, them, we’re all just stalling.

Already he had clothes on, not the black ones he wore to fly with his father on moonless nights, but white sweats that he hoped would look more like clouds. It felt dangerous to have them on. His heart was beating loud and fast. Some large part of him wanted to stall, wanted to put aside the opportunities of the moment and consign all these terrifying possibilities to some more reasonable future. Stalling could become a way of life, he knew. It was ultimately unsatisfying perhaps, but oh-so-comfortable. To fantasize about doing great things someday, but never today. To tell yourself that you’ll fly tomorrow, fly after you get your homework done, fly after this TV show is over.

Now.

Laura stirred but didn’t wake up. He levitated down to the kitchen and saw the note that Mom had left for them, but decided not to read it. He opened the back door as quietly as he could, then floated out barely an inch above the gravel. The rules were already broken: He was outside, he was flying.

Can I stop now? Can I go back to bed?

No!

The fog was cool against his hands and face. He rose as slowly as a Hollywood saint ascending to heaven. The house was lost to his human sight after only twenty feet. A lone car on the highway was the only noise he could hear. He wasn’t sure how far he had gone when he broke out of the fog into a gap between cloud layers. It was a dreamy no-man’s-land, dimly lit by the luminance of the cloud layer above. His father had called these gaps to Jon’s attention, and told him they could be long sheltered highways through the air. But they had never stopped to play in one.

He tried to see if he could lift vapor out of the fog layer and up towards the upper clouds. He tried spinning with his arms extended like an ice skater, but he only succeeded in making a spiral set of waves in the fog. By darting up and down at high speed like the needle of a sewing machine he could pull vapor up from below or down from above in his wake, but not enough to cause them to meet. And anything he pulled up or down quickly returned to its own level.

Temperature. That’s what’s doing it. I’d need heat vision to reshape the clouds and make it last.

When he tired of playing, he rose into the upper cloud layer. It felt no different from the

fog, but got brighter and brighter as he rose. When he came out the top of the clouds he was in a white landscape illuminated by the rays of the full moon sinking into the west. The sky above was clear but not as crowded with stars as he had expected. The bright moonlight gave the sky a solid appearance. He could almost make himself believe that he was looking at daylight through dark lenses.

Jon wondered if he could or should go home now, but the internal answer was unequivocal: *You haven't gone anywhere yet.*

Where to go, then?

To the east the white landscape ended in a dark coastline. That, he reasoned, would be the clear skies that had been over Smallville the previous evening. He could go that way, but only at the speed of the prevailing winds that pushed his cloud cover. (With that thought, he looked down through the clouds and noticed that he had already drifted a few miles east, past Smallville.) To the west was an entire continent of cloud, piling itself up to make a mountain range of vapor.

West, then, he thought. Colorado. Bring back a Rocky Mountain snowball as a souvenir.

Ecuador: May 22, 1 P.S.

The Andean valley below had vanished beneath a blanket of clouds. They were white on top and seemed to have the texture of the kind of cotton that tops off aspirin bottles or makes up the fake beards of cheap Santa Claus costumes. In places the blanket got a little threadbare and the gray underside showed through.

It was probably a depressing day back in the village, the Shaman thought. Dark, humid, close.

Up here the sun was shining and it would be warm soon, but not hot. There were taller mountains, of course, whose tops were snow-covered even now – mountains that would have been a real ordeal to endure, much less to climb. As a younger man he probably would have chosen one of them for this ritual, but over the years he had learned that the Higher Powers weren't impressed by that kind of showing off. He had been to Tibet and learned the technique that allowed lamas to sit soaking wet in the snow without getting cold, but it was just a trick once you knew it, like sword-swallowing or juggling. Why would a superior being care about such carnival stunts? All in all, he figured, it was pretty hard to impress the Higher Powers. They were, after all, *higher*. And how high could they be if such human-scale achievements as climbing mountains and shivering through high-altitude nights impressed them?

No, he knew, the trappings of magick were intended to impress his own unconscious, not the Powers. He had picked this mountain with that in mind. It was at the far southeastern edge of its range, so all the taller mountains were on one side. If he sat facing the southeast, as he was now, none of them were visible. Given his field of vision, he seemed to be sitting at the Top of the World, on the Great Mountain at the Center of the World. That was where the ritual needed to take place. He had come up the previous afternoon,

bringing food and water and the down sleeping bag that he had mail-ordered from Norway. He wasn't sure how long this was going to take, and wanted to have a lot of daylight to work with.

This is a bad idea.

When he thought about it, that almost went without saying. Over the years Shaman had come to the conclusion that ritual was almost always a bad idea. Not that he had anything against people who always have a cup of warm milk before bedtime, or who insist on putting everything just so before leaving the shop in the evening. Those weren't rituals at all to his way of thinking, they were just habits. And habits were neither good nor bad, they were just the way people were made. Habits were the rails under the engine of life. They made the trip much smoother, though they did cause the scenery to go by a bit too quickly, at least for Shaman's taste. (Shaman had a pretty good idea where the train was headed and didn't see much need to hurry.)

He also had nothing against coronations, funerals, and other such happenings. Except for a few occasions that historians should have noted but mostly didn't, these weren't rituals either; they were just ceremonies. Like most Englishmen born in the glory days of the Empire, Shaman loved a good ceremony. Tribal life would have been horribly boring (or, to be honest, even more horribly boring) if not for the ceremonies.

But ritual, as he had learned it from the Light Bearers (with some additional commentary from Stavros) was a different matter altogether. Ritual was all about inviting the Powers over for tea so that you could remind them of your plans and the helpful roles they could play. The Light Bearers had been quite keen on ritual, with that naive optimism that came so easily to Westerners in the late nineteenth century. The founders of the Order had lacked the perspective that two world wars and a dozen-or-so attempted genocides give a person, so Shaman was inclined to cut them some slack. But long experience had led him to two rather discouraging conclusions: First, that the Powers have plans of their own and will carry them out when they get around to it; and second, that whatever passes for a mind in Powerland is sufficiently alien to humans that our plans make no more sense to them than theirs make to us. To his way of thinking, the question that so many theologians and philosophers found central – whether the gods love us or hate us – was more-or-less irrelevant. The Powers simply didn't *grok* human life, so it was probably just as well that they didn't spend more of their time trying to help us.

Then why am I up here?

It was a puzzle, to be sure. Here he was, sitting in a passably good lotus position in front of a ritual fire, surrounded by a circle he had drawn onto the rock, a circle which contained numerous other scratchings of geometric and magickal significance. He had fasted for three days, eaten a particularly efficacious local herb, recited a few appropriate formulas, and done several meditations to sweep his mind as nearly clean as it ever got.

This can't be a good idea.

But the truth was that Shaman was getting desperate, and was fed up with waiting for a signal. Yehnu had turned into a homegrown shaman of considerable ability, so his presence in the village was no longer necessary. In fact, more and more often these days he felt that he was getting in the way, disrupting events that would flow more smoothly without him. And if the tribe didn't need him, why was he here? Not for his own purposes – that seemed more and more clear all the time, as Shaman's biological clock ticked more audibly with each passing day. He didn't know how long he had before he died or became too senile to train a successor, but it couldn't be more than a few decades, if that. And his successor, whoever he might be, was not in this jungle. Shaman was almost certain of that by now. Nor did he feel confident placing his faith in the two or three visitors who might pass through during the time he had left.

Which meant he had to go somewhere else. But where?

Logically, it meant going back to a center of civilization, someplace where he could happen into a large number of people until a suitable one showed up. Stavros had found him in London, after all, not on the steppes of central Russia or the Australian Outback. But *which* center of civilization? Shaman was used to having hunches about this kind of thing. Whims. Random breezes to fill his sails. But not now, not when he thought about leaving the jungle. "What about Paris?" he would ask himself. "Or Tokyo? Los Angeles? Calcutta?" And he would feel nothing.

That was why he was here on this mountain, laying out the metaphorical crumpets-and-marmalade and hoping the Powers would drop by.

He wanted ... well, he knew that getting a definite set of instructions was way, way off the scale of the possible. But a hint, a nudge, a clue that he could misinterpret enough to at least get himself moving. That wasn't too much to ask, was it?

Don't answer that.

Because, even if reminding the Powers of your own plans was a bad idea, he was beginning to wonder if maybe the Powers occasionally needed to be reminded of *their own* plans. Or at least of the human weaknesses – like old age and death, just to name two – that could conceivably throw a wrench into their machinery. Their notion of time was bound to be completely different, so they might need to have a human send a wake-up call every now and then, something to make sure that their mortal allies didn't wind up like a head of lettuce that somebody left in the back of the refrigerator for later.

Or maybe they don't exist any more. Maybe they lost some pan-dimensional struggle that The Times forgot to cover.

And that, he was forced to admit after all the other dust and cobwebs had been swept off of his motivations, was *really* why he was here. In truth he had issued this invitation not to hear what the Powers might have to say to him, but just to see if anybody would show up. This particular bad idea had come from the same place as Orpheus' brainstorm to turn around and see if Hades hadn't just been having a joke with him: Doubt. Maybe he'd sit

up here and watch the usual psychic light show for a while, then forget all this nonsense, pack up his things, and go find a nice retirement cottage by the seashore a couple miles up the coast from Brighton. He'd have more than a few crazy stories to tell any youngsters whose frisbees happened to fly into his yard, but they'd know that old people were like that – you smile and listen a little and hope that they give you your toy back without making too much of a fuss.

And then the light show started.

Beneath him the clouds began to swirl and dance. Lightning in multiple colors dotted and dashed from cloud to cloud like some kind of meteorological telegraph system. *I should be reading the code*, he thought, but it was beyond him. And then he thought, *I should be sure to remember where I got these herbs*.

Above, the sky was cut by trails of green and orange light. They shimmered and moved back and forth, occasionally crossing each other. *Aurora equatoriales*, he thought before remembering that there was no such thing. The trails began to bend one around the other, forming a green circle and then an orange circle around it. In the center of the green circle an orange ball appeared, and outside the outermost orange circle was an even larger green one.

And then the Shaman realized that he was sitting under an enormous bullseye.

Bad. Bad. Bad.

He heard an earsplitting crack and the entire world dissolved in fire.

When the Shaman regained consciousness he was lying on his back, his right ear to the ground. He had a terrible headache, and was dimly aware of having had dreams that he couldn't remember. When he remembered what he had come for, he felt a flash of panic. What if his vision were over already? What if those dreams were the Powers' answer to his request, and he had already forgotten them?

The ground underneath him seemed unusually flat, and unusually soft for rock. Something prickly was touching his ear, and when he reached up with his hand, he felt something that was stringy like short grass, but stiff like plastic. When he opened his eyes, it seemed to be night already, and yet there was a great deal of light coming from somewhere. He felt a small thump on his forehead, and then a dimpled white ball rolled in front of his right eye.

“Impressive view, wouldn't you say?” said a voice. It was male, it spoke English, and the accent was American.

At least I didn't miss the whole trip, Shaman thought.

It always hurt to sit up in situations like this, but he decided he had no choice. Holding the top of his head to keep it from falling off, he pushed himself upright with his other

hand. The pain was everything he had expected, and for a moment the edges of his field of vision turned cloudy and purple. Then the clouds receded.

Shaman was sitting on a putting green. A few feet away from him stood a man. His back was turned and he held a putter on his shoulder. He was looking over a wall that came up to his waist. His head was perfectly bald.

Shaman supposed he ought to be grateful to get a human vision. The old-time mystics had seen the Powers in those bizarre half-animal shapes that are still visible on the walls of caves all over the world. But that had been in the days when animals still meant something to people. In Shaman's visions the Powers had a habit of showing up as celebrities, often rather disconcerting ones. Elvis Presley one time, the Pope another. Famous dictators had made appearances in his visions, as had cartoon characters, athletes, and scientists. He had stopped trying to make sense of it. The Powers had no form of their own, he figured, so they borrowed one from his unconscious. Who knew how they chose?

Struggling to his feet produced an intensification of the headache and another bout of purple clouds. When his vision cleared he almost fell over again from his inability to orient himself. Lights were all around him and he seemed to be hanging in the air. He stumbled forward a few steps and rested his weight against the wall. Looking down, he shouted and jumped back, then carefully approached the wall again and peered over. Below him was a sheer drop of at least a thousand feet.

Finally Shaman understood: he was on top of a skyscraper in an American city. "What city is this? Is it even real? Is this where I need to go to find my successor?"

"It is my city," the Power said. He was dressed in the kind of suit that rich men wore to formal occasions, and he held a heavy glass with an amber liquid in it. Shaman felt as if he ought to know who this was, but he couldn't make the connection. Probably some American tycoon he had seen in a magazine.

"It's the tallest building in the city. Everyone told me I was foolish to build it. The age of the skyscraper was over, they said. Real estate, location, even physical space itself didn't really matter any more in the new age of information. But I understood something else: In an age of information, *nothing* is more important than a symbol. And this tower, this isn't just a big shard of crystal. It isn't just office space. It isn't just a prestigious address. This tower is the Great Mountain at the Center of the World. Everyone who looks at it knows that, on some level so deep in their unconscious that they'll never exorcise it. And they know who lives here.

"And that's why I didn't waste the top of it on some foolish observation deck or revolving restaurant. I put my home here. Everyone knows where Lex Luthor lives. They can see it from anywhere in the city. They just have to look up."

Some sort of sky god, the Shaman guessed. Someone of vision and intelligence, but proud and jealous. He wondered if the Powers were mocking his own pride, his own sense of uniqueness. Maybe it didn't really matter so much if his lineage died out. But then, why

tell him that this new age does not make everything obsolete?

“I assumed – I had hoped – that you came to give me insight into my question.”

The tycoon/deity dismissed this notion with a wave of his hand. “I came because I came. I have my own purposes. The world – even the world as you know it – does not revolve around you. Sometimes you are served, and sometimes you must serve others.”

That was unusually direct for a Power, Shaman observed. Or at least unusually coherent. Often in his visions the Powers said the kind of things that dream characters say, things that were either too profound for him to understand, or else just random nonsense.

“Michaelangelo is a turtle,” a Power had said to him once. “Raphael, Donatello, Leonardo – they are all turtles.” Shaman had thought about this statement off and on for years, but had never made sense of it.

Then Shaman noticed that there was something strange about the man’s eyes. They were cat eyes, and when he smiled he displayed his cat teeth. “You are the Adversary,” Shaman said.

“I am what I am,” said the Power. “You may give me a name, but I only wear it if it pleases me.” His arm swept out over the city’s glittering vista. Shaman tried to recognize it, but couldn’t. The tall buildings around – none so tall as this one – were too new. It amazing how many new buildings there were, all looking like glass stalagmites. If he had ever seen this city before it must have looked completely different. He found it hard to believe that a major city could transform so completely in such a short time. Or maybe this was the city as it would be someday, years hence. He studied the geography. A river came through the center of the city. It emptied into a bay, and beyond the bay he could sense the deep darkness of an ocean. But what river? What bay? What ocean?

“This is man’s world now,” said the Adversary. “There are no gods in it, no Powers such as those you serve. And yet behind each of those tiny windows there is a tiny man, a man too small to influence his fate. He longs for something greater he can believe in, something higher he can worship.”

I worried that the Powers were dead, Shaman thought. But when a Power tells you that there are no Powers, do you believe him?

“But if there are no gods ...”

“Then there must be higher men. Super men. Do you understand?”

“No,” said Shaman. “I don’t understand.”

With catlike quickness, the Adversary grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted him into the air. He held Shaman out over the abyss, over the street below. Now he could see the tower beneath them, looking as smooth and glistening as one continuous sheet of glass. “Look down there,” the Adversary ordered. “Look at that drop and tell me who would save you if I let you go. Would your Powers save you? Would a god? Who?”

No Power had ever threatened Shaman so directly. And none, he was sure, would lift a finger to save him if he fell. They weren't like that. They didn't plunge into events. They didn't intervene directly to save their servants. Maybe they couldn't. And gods ... he believed in gods, of course. He had seen tribal gods in many countries. Gods of jungles, gods of deserts, gods of mountains. Even the agricultural grasslands and prairies had gods of a sort, though they seldom did much. But was there a god of this great city? A god of skyscrapers and expressways and airports? Shaman doubted it.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Then find out," said the Adversary as he let go.

Shaman lost interest in his headache as the bottom seemed to fall out of his stomach. The wind rushed past his face faster and faster. "I'm sitting on a mountain in South America," he said out loud. "It's a vision. You can't die from falling in a vision." But something in his mind said: *Oh yes you can.*

"Help!" he yelled. He didn't know why he yelled it. If he was still on the mountain he didn't need saving, and if he was falling from a skyscraper there was nothing anyone could do. If he was going to die, he wanted to do it with more dignity. "Help! Help! HELP!"

Then he heard the flapping of cloth in the breeze and felt strong hands grasp his arms. He hadn't realized that his eyes had been closed tight, but he opened them now expecting to see the jungle valley spread out below.

He was still in the air, still in the great city. He was much lower now and still falling, but falling more slowly all the time. "Don't worry," said a confident voice behind him. "I've got you."

He turned to look at his rescuer, but a red piece of cloth blew in front of his eyes. The man had was holding him like a baby now and they were barely falling at all. They touched the ground and the man set him on the hard sidewalk. The red cloth moved away from Shaman's eyes.

And he was sitting on the mountain.

The sun had moved closer to the center of the sky, and it was warmer now. The fog in the valley below was beginning to dissipate. Shaman moved his hands along the ground like a man searching for something in the dark, but actually he just wanted to reassure himself that it really was rock, just the like the rock he had sat down on before the vision started. The sky was just the sky now; it was blue, not green or orange. He took several deep breaths and let himself enjoy the feeling of air in his lungs. *Thank God that's over*, he thought. *I may not know what it means, but at least I survived it.*

"Hello," called a voice from below. "Is everything all right up there? Do you need help?" It was a young man's voice, speaking English with an American accent.

Shaman jumped to his feet too quickly and nearly passed out as the blood rushed down

from his brain. When his vision cleared his heart was pounding and he was staring down the trail that he had climbed to get here. His fight-or-flight systems were trying to engage, but the hangover from the herb and the vision were not letting it happen.

He tried to calm himself. It was unusual to run into someone out here, but not impossible. And the voice did not sound threatening. In fact, even though it wasn't as deep or as confident, it sounded a little like the voice of the rescuer in his vision.

In his mind he cursed by the name of a particularly unpleasant local parasite. *It's not over*. Visions did that sometimes, he knew, just like dreams. You thought you'd come out of it, and then you discovered that waking up snug in your bed was just another part of the dream.

Shaman kept looking down the mountain until he saw a tall young man with dark hair and thick black glasses. The man looked like Hollywood's idea of a tropical explorer: dressed entirely in khaki, handsome, and perfectly fresh. There were no stains on his clothing and his hair was neither sweaty nor mussed. He did not carry nearly enough gear for someone so far from civilization.

"I'm doing just fine," Shaman answered.

The young man seemed to take this as an invitation. He bounded up the trail as if he had been resting for hours and didn't have far to go. Shaman crossed his eyes and tried to focus on the man's aura. It was radiant and yellow, as if he were surrounded by a nimbus of sunlight. It was the kind of aura that catalyzed power, that drew it in from other dimensions. *Not human*, he judged. *Definitely not human*. He knew what that meant. This was another visitation, and he was in for another one of those cryptic conversations that he'd spend several weeks interpreting and still not have any confidence that he'd gotten it right.

Shaman began to feel frustrated, and then angry, which he knew was dangerous. Or at least he had always assumed it was dangerous. He'd never actually blown his stack at a Power. In fact he'd never done more than be snide with them in a subtle Victorian manner to which they seemed oblivious. He took a few more deep breaths and tried to calm himself.

The Power reached the mountaintop even faster than he had expected. "You called for help," it said. "Are you all right now?"

In all his interactions with the Powers over the decades, Shaman had never heard one sound so solicitous. It was as if the Power were actually concerned about him and his well-being. The voice was comforting, and the body language was open and compassionate.

And that was almost more than Shaman could stand. "Stop pretending," he said firmly. "I know what you are."

The Power seemed honestly surprised, and for a moment Shaman wondered if he could

be wrong. “What do you think I am?” it asked.

Shaman unfocused his eyes again and was nearly blinded by the yellow sunlight in the Power’s aura. “You are one of the Powerful Ones. You came in answer to my call.”

“That’s what I said. I said I heard you call for help.”

Shaman considered that response, and looked at the youthful, handsome face, at the strong arms, the square chin. The Power’s identity couldn’t have been more obvious if he had manifested with his wings and sword. “You are the Child of the Mother,” he guessed. “The Hero. The One Who Saves From Danger. That is your nature.”

“Oh,” the Power answered.

“I’m sure we don’t have much time, so I don’t want to waste it. I called you here to talk about Destiny.”

“Oh.”

Shaman studied the Power. For a Hero he was not being particularly helpful. But Shaman was almost certain he had named the Power correctly. The Powers had a way of balancing each other. When the Adversary manifested, the Hero was likely to be nearby, and vice versa. Perhaps the Hero was just waiting for Shaman to take the lead. Perhaps he was not allowed to Shaman him more than he could guess.

“I had a vision. We were in a city. It was an American city, old by American standards, but new as well. I stood on the city’s tallest tower, built by its wealthiest man. Below us was a river. What city did I see?”

“All the big eastern cities are on rivers,” the Hero said.

“It is a great city. The river goes down to a bay and then to the ocean.”

“There’s the Hudson in New York, the St. Michael in Metropolis, the – “

Of course! Shaman thought. *The St. Michael.* Saint Michael the Archangel was one of the Hero’s major manifestations in Western lore. It wasn’t exactly a logical connection, but these things seldom had logical connections.

“Metropolis,” he said, surprising himself by how certain he sounded. “Metropolis is the city. That’s the place to go.”

Shaman looked up at the sun and estimated how much time it would take him to get back to the village. He could make it, he decided, but only if he started right away. By the next morning he could be packed and on the road to America. He brushed away his circle and gathered up his things.

“Are you still here?” he asked the Power with some surprise. “Shouldn’t you have vanished or flown away or something when I erased the circle?”

The Power looked sheepish, as if this were his first day on the job and he were still learning the ropes. He shrugged and rose slowly until he hovered about ten feet overhead.

And then with a thunderclap he was gone.

“Well,” Shaman said to himself, looking at the spot in the air where the Power had been. “I’d say that settles any lingering doubts about who he was.”

In less than a minute he had his belongings on his back and was on his way down the mountain. “I’ve never seen a Power wear glasses before though,” he said to himself. “I wonder what that was all about.”

September 5, 10 A.S.

Saturday morning was gray and uninviting, but Lenny Miller woke up early anyway. Dozens of times. He was so tired that he felt like he was wearing ankle-weights around every joint in his body, and he could manage to get just comfortable enough lying on his back to fall asleep. But once asleep he would try to roll over, and then came the stabbing pain in his breastbone, in the spot where the Centralia middle linebacker liked to put his helmet. Eventually Lenny decided sleep was a bad idea and got up.

He opened his door as quietly as he could and checked that his parents’ door was still closed. Maybe Dad would sleep in today, he hoped, and he could be out of the house without having to make up any kind of story about where he was going. After grabbing some clothes, he crept down the stairs as best he could, stopping occasionally to gather up courage to face the pain that shot across his lower back whenever he stepped down. He closed his eyes in a brief celebration when he reached the bottom of the stairs, then headed for the downstairs bathroom.

Once inside, he slipped off the t-shirt and sweatpants that he slept in and examined his wounds in the mirror. The big one was the bruise in the center of his chest. It was dark purple and about the size of a fist, just the way Lenny had imagined it. His face was unmarked, but there was another bruise – smaller and already turning brown, the color of healing – on the side of his right buttock. His right ankle was swelling a little, but didn’t look serious. The welts on his shoulder blade ... they didn’t count because they weren’t from football.

Pain makes some people whimper and others yell. Lenny preferred to get silently angry. And he knew just exactly who he wanted to be angry with: the line. Basically it was the same bunch of guys who had let Jon Kent set records the previous year, except that they were all a year bigger and smarter now. But the holes they had opened up for Kent in last year’s Centralia game (when he had 125 yards, a fact Lenny had looked up and now wished he hadn’t) weren’t there Friday night. At most three or four runs went the way the play was designed. On all the rest of them he was dodging and improvising just to get out of the backfield. Until the fourth quarter, that is, when the Comets got so far behind that they ditched the running game and Josh tried to pass every down.

Josh ... he was mad at Josh too. Josh hadn’t passed any better than Lenny had run, but instead of putting the blame where it belonged – on the line – Josh had all but said it was Lenny’s fault, that he couldn’t get a pass off because Centralia didn’t respect Smallville’s

running game the way they did last year.

Last year. The season was only two games old, but he was already starting to hate hearing about last year. It was a kind of code. Instead of saying to his face that they wished Kent was still playing tailback, guys said vague things about *last year*. Even the Coach. In his postgame interview on the radio he said, “We just don’t have the same come-from-behind attitude that we had last year.” Half the time Lenny wished Kent *would* come back. Then he’d at least have a person to compete with and not just a memory of last year. People’s memories of Kent had nothing to do with reality anymore. Lenny could turn into Superman, and still everybody would be talking about what Kent did last year.

Elusive. That was another word he hated. It was more of that Smallville UFO crap. Lenny was a power runner, not some skinny guy hiding behind the linemen. Nobody had told him to be *elusive* before Kent showed up; they told him to knock people on their butts. But now if Lenny got nailed by some linebacker who wandered into the backfield untouched, it was his own damn fault because he wasn’t *elusive* enough. Nobody looked at the line and wondered why they quit blocking the day Kent refused to go into rehab.

Certainly not Dad. “You’ll never amount to anything if you keep making excuses,” he had said last night for probably the zillionth time. It had to be his favorite line. Either that or “Mary, why didn’t we ever have a son?” He liked that one too. It made him smile.

Lenny threw a towel at the mirror and then cursed because it made noise. Getting up early gave him the chance to get out of here without running into anybody, without using his excuse at all. He had planned to say that Doc Sorenson asked him to come by so that he could make sure he hadn’t cracked a rib. Dad would give him hell about being such a pansy about a little bruise. “Hell,” he’d say, for maybe only the fiftieth or sixtieth time, “I damn near died when I was your age, but I didn’t cry about it the way you carry on.” He’d probably even give a poke right in the center of the bruise, just to prove it was no big deal.

And he’d be right: it was no big deal. Lenny was pretty sure nothing was broken in there, and the rest was just pain. He could deal with pain. He’d had lots of practice.

He got dressed as quickly and quietly as he could. There were some noises upstairs now. He didn’t have much time if he wanted to just be gone and not to have to lie. Should he go upstairs and get the postcard? He had hidden it as a bookmark in a skinny book he kept under his mattress. He didn’t really need it; he knew what it said. Getting it would be an unnecessary risk. And yet he wanted it. It was a stupid thing, but he wanted it.

“Too bad,” he whispered to himself. That was another one of Dad’s favorite phrases. It had its uses.

He found the keys to his truck in the key bowl in the kitchen. A door opened upstairs and he heard footsteps that were too heavy to be Mom’s. He raced to the back door in sock-footed silence. It was getting easier to move now, he barely had to grit his teeth even. The door didn’t squeak when he opened it. It never did because he oiled it himself,

regularly. He wondered if anybody noticed.

“Lenny?” Dad bellowed. “Is that you down there?”

He let the door go shut without latching, picked up a pair of tennis shoes from the garage, and jogged out to his truck. If anybody asked, he’d say he never heard, that he was out the door before his father said anything. Nobody ever caught you in a lie like that. It didn’t depend on anybody else backing you up.

He started the truck and got it rolling without putting on his shoes. The fog looked like the kind that would burn off in an hour or two, but for now it was thick and dreamlike. He knew he should turn on his lights, but he liked being invisible.

Now what?

This was as far as his planning had gone, if you wanted to call it planning. (Dad wouldn’t. “What did you think was going to happen?” he always asked when something went wrong. But he never waited for an answer. “You didn’t think, did you? You just went out and did something.”) The truck’s clock said 7:25. He had no idea when they got started down at the Cult. Maybe it was one of those sleep-deprivation things, where they hauled people out of bed before sunrise to do prayers and stuff. Maybe it would be fine to drop by now. Or maybe they wouldn’t be up yet and that would be better, because he could sneak in somehow without being noticed.

He wished he had brought the postcard. Maybe there were clues in it somewhere, clues that he wouldn’t notice until he got there. Sue was like that; she was sneaky. That’s how she had gotten away with as much as she did.

It was sneaky the way she had gotten the postcard to him. She hadn’t mailed it. Maybe she couldn’t, or maybe she knew she’d never get it past Mom and Dad. He had been putting something in his locker when somebody behind him said, “Look up, Lenny.” And he had turned around ready to brain somebody, because he was sick to death of that joke. But it had been Karen Kelly, Jack’s little sister. She was the one who always wore a silver S on a chain around her neck. She thought it made her radical or something. “Got something for you,” she said, and slipped the postcard into his hand. Then she took off.

It was a Cult postcard. The picture on the front was of that big new church they had built over by the museum, and it said *The Shrine of the Arrival* underneath the picture. Maybe it was the only thing she could send. Maybe they didn’t give her any real paper. Cults were like that, he knew. They kept people away from their families and wouldn’t let them send any messages out, other than the usual stuff about how wonderful it all was and how you ought to join them too. This card had some of that in it, but Lenny figured that was the only way Sue could get it out. You had to read between the lines with Sue. That’s how she had always been. She didn’t say that she wanted him to do something for her, but it was there. You had to be her brother to see it.

Look up, Lenny!

I don’t know if you got any of the letters I sent from Metropolis.

I figure Dad throws them out. But I'm back in Smallville now. You can see me any time you want. Just come to the building on front of the card and ask for the Archon. That's me, if you can believe it.

Kal-El lives! (And so do I. I miss you.)

Sue

Sue was tricky, always had been. Mom and Dad had gone nuts trying to keep her grounded back in the days after the abortion. Escaping from a cult was harder than getting away from your parents, but Lenny could read between the lines enough to see that she was working on it. She had gotten them to trust her enough to send her away from the big church in Metropolis where they had eyes everywhere. And now she was back in Smallville, where she had allies. Or at least one ally – a big, bad football-player of an ally. *Sue may not understand that*, he thought. She might still be thinking of him as the 6-year-old he had been when she left home. She might not be thinking clearly enough to know that he could recruit a few buddies and mount a rescue.

But he guessed that was what this visit was about. It was so that they could compare notes and see what resources they had. And so that Lenny could see what kind of defenses the church had and make a guess about how many heads he had to knock together and how many guys he needed to do it. *Reconnaissance*, that was what the special forces types called it.

He went to the highway and drove past the church as slowly as he could without making it obvious that he was studying it. He was surprised how little time it took to get there. In the last few months he had really started to think that this part of town was far away, because they didn't go there any more. Even the mall was pretty much off-limits. (He had been there a few times with the guys, but Dad didn't have to know that.) Nothing was said, exactly, but the message was clear all the same: Nobody was going to just happen by the Cult building and see Sue on the sidewalk or something. Nobody was going to see her at all.

Well, Lenny was going to see her. He was going to talk to her too, and figure out how to get her free. He wasn't sure what would happen then, whether they would square things with Dad somehow or go off and get an apartment together themselves or what. Maybe Mom would even help, though Lenny had resolved to keep her out of it as long as he could. You could never tell with Mom. Sometimes she'd fall right into line with Dad and sometimes she'd help you work around him. He knew she had found the picture of Sue he kept in his underwear drawer. But it stayed there and Dad never mentioned it, so he probably didn't know. Maybe she'd want to help Sue.

"Keep her out of it," he said out loud. "Keep her safe."

That was the thing: He didn't want her help if it would put her on the wrong side of Dad. Pain was just pain, but watching Dad get going on Mom was the worst. Lenny knew he would snap if he had to watch that many more times in his life. If Lenny had learned anything from his whole messed-up family, it was that you had to protect the women in

your life. You weren't any kind of a man at all if you couldn't do that.

So he'd get Sue out. That was the first thing. The rest of it he'd figure out later. That was another thing he'd learned. If you waited until you had an answer for everything, you'd never get started. Some things you just had to do, and if they made new problems you just had to figure you'd straighten them out later.

Where to park was the immediate problem. The church's lot was almost empty at this hour, and the fog wasn't heavy enough to hide in. Leaving the truck there would be like sending up a flare. Everybody who passed by and knew him would know where he was. If he parked on the back side of the mall the truck would be hidden both from the church and from the road, but the walk from there to the church was too open. Finally he decided on the museum lot. There was a section in back that you couldn't see from the highway, and nothing more than a fence to hop to get you into the church property.

After he parked and put his shoes on and walked to the fence he realized the downside of his plan. Hopping the fence meant grabbing the top bar with his hands and vaulting over, putting stress on all the wrong chest muscles. He gritted his teeth and did it, and took some satisfaction from not crying out.

He took a moment to stand behind a tree near the fence and study the church complex. The showy structure that faced the highway had to be the church itself. It would probably be open, but Lenny felt disoriented just looking at it. Churches were built to have that effect on people, he figured. You wander around dazed until one of the faithful finds you. A lower building stretching out behind the church looked like a dormitory. It had a door at the end, but Lenny's intuition told him it would be locked. You couldn't run a decent cult if you left the back door open.

The most promising entrance was the one at the back of the cathedral building, not far from the corridor that connected it to the dorm. It was a normal-sized door with a sign next to it that Lenny couldn't make out from here. Probably it led to the church offices. That was what Sue had said to do, after all: walk in and ask for the archon, whatever an archon was. It made sense. The initial approach should be completely above-board, and then he could figure out how to break their security for Sue's escape later.

The door was unlocked and led to a hallway. There was a lighted office whose windows overlooked the doorway, but no one appeared to be there. Lenny stood in the doorway for a few seconds to get his bearings. If he had ever been inside the main hall (where Eric Randall had spoken) Lenny would have appreciated how toned down the back portion of the cathedral building was. The rooms were on a relatively human scale, with ceilings a mere twelve feet from the floor. The walls were translucent, backlit, and faceted in the Pop Krypton style, but the faceting was mostly for texture and the overall shape of the rooms was more-or-less rectangular. Other than paintings and display cases, the walls were lit with solid colors. The aetherial background music was set to a very low volume.

The overall effect was peaceful and meditative, but when Lenny noticed himself involuntarily relaxing he snapped to an increased state of alertness. That was how they

got you, he knew. You relaxed and felt comfortable, and then they'd offer you a soda and put something in it so that you felt wonderful. And you'd keep coming back until they got you addicted to something. That's how all the cults worked, he had heard. But he'd be OK as long as he didn't give into it.

Lenny had expected to be challenged before he got this far. The way to the archon's office led past the Hall of Relics, which was mostly a bunch of empty display cases. But he stopped in front of one of them. In it was a green rock about the size of two fists. Enough light was trained on it that it seemed to glow. Or maybe it did glow; Lenny wasn't sure. The plaque underneath proclaimed it to be a fragment of the Holy Planet – kryptonite, in other words.

Lenny had never seen kryptonite before. Back in the S-years it had been illegal, and after the AS-years started nobody cared. Lenny wasn't sure why he was so fascinated by this strange rock. He had been about eight when Superman died. At the time it had been a big deal to him, but since then Superman had been stored away somewhere in his mind's attic with dragons and pirates and all the other things he had believed in when he was a kid. Seeing an actual piece of kryptonite now was a little like running into a couple of paunchy, middle-aged guys and finding out that they were the Hardy Boys, and that all that stuff in the books had really happened.

Lenny snapped himself out of it again. Whoever had designed this place had been really good, he realized. It just hypnotized you. People who wandered in here without a mission probably went straight into a trance. They might not even need to use the drugs.

“Lenny?”

He turned around just in time to have some woman hug him. Her hair was short and blond and the top of her head came up to his chin. He stiffened up and pushed her back. She was wearing a white robe with a gold S-shield embroidered on its chest.

“Sue?”

She laughed at him, and then he was sure. “Of course it's me, you big dummy. What? Did you think it was one of your girlfriends?”

“What did they do to your hair?” It just jumped out of him. He had expected her to look like the picture in his drawer. She was so pretty then. Her blond hair came down past her shoulders and her face was so smooth and clear. A couple of Lenny's girlfriends had had hair like that. And Darla, that girl who used to hang around with Kent. Now Sue's hair was cut short like a boy's. It looked like she was in the Marines or something. It made him angry at the people who had done this to her.

She smiled, and it was the same smile that was in the picture, the one he remembered. “I cut it myself. You don't like it.”

“Your hair was so beautiful.”

“It was part of my old identity. My whole life revolved around being pretty for boys. But I

don't need to do that any more. I've taken vows. I belong to Him."

Lenny got a sick feeling in his stomach. "Him?"

"To Kal-El. The media calls him Superman."

Lenny got a picture in his mind of his sister making out with Superman. But he rejected it; it wasn't happening. "But he's dead, isn't he?"

She smiled again, but it looked phony this time. "You didn't read any of the things I sent you, did you?"

"I think Dad burned them."

"I thought he might. I'll give you more. I hope you'll give it a chance, that you'll try to understand what my life is about now."

Lenny studied her face. Then he looked up at the ceiling and over at the walls. *All this damn glass. There's no telling where they might have put cameras.* He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "We can't talk here, can we?"

Sue spoke at a normal volume. "We can talk anywhere you want. Do you want to come to my office? Or to my cell?"

"They keep you in a cell?"

She laughed. "That's just what we call it. A monastic's bedroom is called a cell. Come on. I'll show you."

Lenny followed her through several rooms whose purpose escaped him. Then they were in the connecting corridor he had seen from outside. The other building was indeed a dormitory. It still had translucent walls, but they were glass brick instead of one of those high-tech crystals from LexCorp. And they were covered with posters and slogans instead of projected colors and images. It had a big kitchen and a hallway with doors.

"This is where the monastics who work in the Shrine live. Right now there are only seven of us, but that's just while we're getting started. We hope to have more soon. The main dormitory has two dozen beds in it, and there are fifteen private cells. So if you want to sleep over sometime, we have plenty of room. I can't say much for our food, but it's healthy and we have plenty of it."

"Dad would love that. Me sleeping over here, I mean."

"He hasn't changed, has he? I was hoping that when I came back to Smallville he would accept that I have a new life now."

"Oh, he accepts that all right. He just doesn't want your new life to be part of his life. Or Mom's life or mine. He won't let us talk about you. He says, 'She made her choice.' And that's the end of it."

They were both silent as they walked past several closed doors. Then Sue opened a door just like the others. Inside was a room not much larger than a tool shed. It contained a bed

about the size of an army cot. Next to the bed was a folding chair and a desk that could have come from a high school. There was a pad of paper and a pen on the table, but otherwise the room was as neat as a new motel room. The walls were made of the same glass brick as the rest of the building. Lenny could tell that there were no lights on in the adjacent cells, but could see no details.

“Where’s your stuff?” Lenny remembered Sue’s room at home. It had always been full of things – clothes, photos of boyfriends, stuffed animals, stray pieces of paper, nicknacks from old vacations, cassette tapes, remnants of school projects, romance novels. It had stayed that way for almost two years after she ran away, and then one day Lenny had come home from school and for some reason decided to open the door to Sue’s room. All the stuff was gone. The bed was made and the desk was empty. The floor was swept. He never asked where Sue’s things had gone.

“I don’t need a lot of stuff now,” she answered. “My life is simple. I have my work and my meditations on Kal-El. I’m happy.”

Lenny sat down on the chair and looked at the pad of paper. It was blank; there were no messages she wanted him to see. This was all wrong. Nothing was going the way he had expected. He studied her face. The smile, the claim to be happy – it all rang false to him. Sue couldn’t be happy like this. Not with her hair cut off and nothing but a robe to wear and an empty room to sleep in. Not spending her time praying to an alien who was dead anyway. He looked around the room and thought about the spy movies he had seen. There would be bugs somewhere, and maybe cameras. Back in the fancy building for the public there was no telling what the walls hid, but a room like this would be different. He looked carefully at the glass bricks, but couldn’t find anything that looked cameralike. Maybe it was just audio back here. Maybe that was why she had led him back here and sat him down next to a pad of paper.

Lenny picked up the pad and began to write. Then he handed the pad to Sue.

I can help you escape. Mom and I can find some place for you to live. Dad doesn’t have to know. What do I have to do? Are there guards?

Sue sighed and looked sad. “You really don’t understand, do you? This isn’t a prison. I’m more free here than I’ve ever been in my life. What can I do to convince you of that?” Lenny didn’t answer, and then she said: “I know. Turn around.”

Lenny didn’t like it, turning his back on someone, especially not here. But he faced the door. Behind him he could hear her slide something from underneath the bed. He heard latches open and hinges creak. Clothes rustled, and he knew that she was changing. He tried not to think about her being naked. She was his sister and it was wrong to think about things like that. Then there were other clothing noises that had nothing to do with a robe – a zipper, a snap, and some other noises he couldn’t place. Then Sue announced that he could look again.

She was dressed like a normal person. She wore a pair of blue jeans and a checked shirt

tucked in at the waist. Her hair was still unusually short for a woman, but she had covered it with a baseball cap. The sandals she had worn with her robe didn't look like part of a costume any more. They were just sandals, like anybody might wear. "Come on," she said. "We're going out."

"Out?" Lenny asked in disbelief. "Out where?"

"Out anywhere. Out to your car. You didn't walk here, did you?"

Sue walked into the hall without turning to see if Lenny was following. As they passed through the kitchen they met another woman in a robe like Sue's, but gray. "Archon," she said with some surprise. Lenny guessed it was something of shock to see Sue in regular clothes.

"Julie, I'll be going out with my brother. If I'm not back, lead the noon meditation for me."

The other woman dipped her head in an abbreviated bow. "Yes, archon."

Sue didn't return to the central building, but turned the other way and went out the back door that Lenny had been sure was locked. When they were in the parking lot she spread her arms. "Which one is yours?"

"Uh, none of them." Lenny stammered a little as he explained that he had parked in the museum lot and hopped the fence. Sue said nothing but looked as if she knew everything about it. And Lenny felt something that it was hard for him to sort out right away. It was shame. He felt ashamed of skulking around so that Dad wouldn't find out where he was.

Sue climbed the fence as if she did it every day. Lenny caught up to her on the other side and led her over to his truck. He hadn't noticed before how messy it was inside. He scooped his football playbook and several other objects that cluttered the passenger seat, and then tossed them into the back. The carpet and floor mats were still full of sand from a trip to the lake at the end of the summer.

When they were both inside and the doors were shut, Sue said, "Well, Lenny, you did it. We escaped. We're over the fence. We're in your truck. We can go wherever you want. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Lenny shook his head.

"And what about this truck? Is it bugged? Are there cameras? Can we talk here?"

He was embarrassed to the point of starting to get angry. "OK, OK," he said. "I'm sorry about all that. I was just worried about you, that's all."

Sue's voice got a little softer, but she wasn't done yet. "And where can you take me, Lenny? Can you take me home? Can we go see Mom?"

He thought about it. Home? No, home was out. Mom and Dad would both be up now, probably eating breakfast in the kitchen. If he called home maybe Mom would answer, and maybe they could work out somewhere to meet without Dad catching on. If Mom

would cooperate and if nothing went wrong. The longer he thought, the more things he imagined that could go wrong.

“No,” Lenny admitted. “I don’t think we can.”

Sue reached out to touch his right hand on the steering wheel. “Oh, Lenny,” she said. “Don’t you see? You can’t go anywhere with me, at least not anywhere that people might see us and tell Dad that you broke his rules. Right?”

Lenny had to admit that he hadn’t thought this far ahead. Getting Sue out of the reach of the Kryptonists had been the limit of his imagination. The possibility of doing normal things with her shopping or playing tennis or going out for breakfast had never occurred to him. He assumed she’d be hiding too.

“You mean you could do things like that? Go places? Be seen with me? Wouldn’t the higher-ups in the cult – in the church, I mean – wouldn’t they stop you somehow?”

Sue looked bewildered. “Stop me? Lenny, I’m an archon.”

“That’s what you said in the card.”

“You have no idea what that means, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“It means I’m like an archbishop. Nobody in Smallville – nobody this side of Metropolis even – outranks me. If I want to go out with my brother, I can. Believe me.”

Lenny didn’t know what to say. He had thought it was strange when the other woman at the church said “Yes, archon” so meekly. “But you live in a little cell,” he protested.

“I sleep in a little cell,” she answered. “I live ...” she gave a wave that took in the entire grounds “I live in a cathedral. There are billionaires who don’t have as beautiful a home as I do.”

Lenny had trouble wrapping his mind around the idea of Sue as an archbishop. Sue as the lord of the giant building he had thought was her prison. With people bowing to her and saying “Yes, archon.” *What would Dad think?* he wondered. *Does he know?* “I thought,” he said. But he couldn’t finish. He couldn’t say what he had thought.

Sue gently pulled his head over towards her and kissed his cheek. Lenny felt uncomfortable but didn’t struggle away from her. Lots of girls had kissed him on the mouth, and he could dimly remember Mom kissing him on the top of his head back when he was much younger. But no one kissed his cheek. “You thought you could rescue me,” she whispered in his ear. “You thought you could be my hero. It was sweet of you, Lenny. It really was. But I’m not the one who needs to be rescued, am I?”

This time he did pull away and straighten up. “What do you mean?” he asked sharply.

Sue looked surprised. She said nothing at first, but only looked at him. Her blue eyes seemed enormous, as if he were sitting in the front row of a theater looking up into the

eyes of a movie star. For an instant he wanted to be six years old again and drop his head onto her lap. *Too bad*, he said to that weak little part of himself.

“Just that I know what it’s like, what you’re going through. I spent years trying to jump through his hoops, trying to please him. And then I spent years trying to get away. It was hard for me. I didn’t have anyone to help me. I didn’t have any place to go. I just want you to know that you do. I have lots of room here. You can stay with me, whenever you decide you want to.”

Lenny hit the steering wheel and said nothing. “It’s not like that,” he protested. “I ... I ... I’m not like you were. I’m ... I’m not in trouble. I’m a football player. I’m going to graduate and get a scholarship. Dad ... sure he’s hard, but he loves me. He just wants me to ... to do well. To do my best.” Lenny hit the steering wheel again. He was staring straight ahead, not looking into the enormous blue eyes. “What do you expect me to do?” He was shouting now. “Shave my head and chant all day? Go down to the airport and beg for change? Go be slave labor someplace?” He was angry now, and he wanted to say something that would hurt. “That’s what you people do, isn’t it?”

Sue didn’t answer right away, and he knew that she must be looking at him, waiting for him to turn his head and be swallowed up by her eyes. *Not gonna happen*, he thought. He kept both hands on the wheel and looked intently at the speedometer.

“You can come see what we do whenever you want.” Her voice had the tone that female teachers used on him when they wanted him to calm down. He hated it. “And you can leave whenever you want. This isn’t about religion, Lenny. It’s about you. Some day I hope you’ll let me tell you how Kal-El saved me. But if you never find him the way I have, that’s OK too. I just want you to have a place to go. I would have given anything to know I had a place to go.”

She unlatched the door and got out of the truck. She moved slowly, waiting (Lenny was sure) to see if he would call her back. When the door closed he pushed the button that lowered the window.

“I’m not like you,” Lenny said. He glanced quickly to his right to make sure that she was listening, but did not make eye contact. “I don’t need to be saved. I’m saving myself. I’m playing football and I’m going to get a scholarship someplace far away from here. Nobody’s going to take that away from me. Not Kent. Not anybody.”

“Kent?” He didn’t look up, but her tone had changed. She seemed curious now.

“Wimpy little sophomore. Last year they played him instead of me. But he hurt his poor little leg in the summer and decided he’d rather quit than do rehab.”

“Jon Kent? But he can’t *really* be hurt, can he? I mean, he couldn’t be.”

Now he did turn and stare. Sue looked embarrassed, as if she had said more than she intended. “What?” Lenny asked in bewilderment.

“Nothing,” Sue said. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Forget I mentioned it.”

Lenny started the engine and backed out of the parking space.

“But come back sometime,” she called after him. “Talk to me.”

He shifted into drive and gunned the engine so that he laid rubber on the concrete. He was out of the museum lot in no time. Only after he was safely on the highway did he let himself look in the mirror.

Sue is a Jon Kent fan.

He pounded several times on the padded dash and yelled incoherent curses. His chest hurt when he did it, but the pain felt good. It was real. It was his.

She is such a Jon Kent fan that she doesn't even believe he can be injured. Like he's indestructible or something. Like he had better things to do than run rings around me, so he just made up his injury as an excuse.

It was the last straw. It was too much. “Somebody is going to pay for this,” he promised. “Somebody is going to pay.”

September 5, 10 A.S.

There was one direct flight per day from Wichita to Metropolis, and it left at 6 a.m. It was considerably more expensive than the later flights that connected through Chicago, but Galaxy was paying and money was the least of Clark's worries. He was steeling himself for a day in Metropolis and would have been willing to pay much, much more out of his own pocket to be spared passing through a second major city. An unexpected benefit of the time and cost was that the plane was only half full, and most of the people on it were businessmen. They were (for the most part) in good health and content to spend their time sleeping or reading or trying to work. One boy on board had leukemia, but Clark could also detect trace amounts of chemotherapy drugs in his system. *Somebody knows about it. They're dealing with it. They don't need me.*

Wichita Airport had been difficult, but again luck had been with him. He and Lois had waited together in the SUV until his flight was boarding. She held his hand and said meaningless but encouraging things that kept his mind off the needs and discomforts of the people around them. When he heard the first boarding announcement, she held on for just a few seconds longer. “Whatever happens,” she said, “whatever you do or don't do, whatever is going on at the end of the day – just come home. Make your flight. Be here on time. If you don't do anything more than go there and come back, it's been a good day.”

“I'll come home,” he said. He wished that he could think of something more noble and reassuring to say, but he couldn't. “I'll come home.”

Little of the surrounding activity had caught his attention as he walked quickly but humanly from the parking deck to the gate. Most airport businesses were not open yet and only a few flights were getting ready to leave. A husband and wife were arguing bitterly about who was responsible for leaving a suitcase behind, a mother slapped her daughter

hard in a bathroom, and a middle-aged man swore loudly at a young airline clerk who was not giving him a first-class upgrade.

Nothing unusual, nothing that calls for a Superman.

Once he was in the air, Clark was relieved to discover that sitting inside an airplane was not significantly worse than floating outside of one. The conversations inside were much clearer, of course, but the conversations of nearby planes were somewhat muted, which compensated a little. The pilots were bored. The passengers carried no concealed weapons. The ventilation system contained its usual rich mixture of bacteria and viruses, but nothing life-threatening was present in quantities that a normal immune system couldn't handle. The boy with leukemia wore a mask.

The plane was confining, of course. In an emergency he could probably slip out an exit so fast that the plane would not depressurize, but he had never performed that particular trick and wasn't eager to try. If he did it wrong, the interior shock wave might pop out a window on the other side, or rupture the eardrums of passengers in the exit rows. The fantasy of escaping to outer space and rejoining the flight just before landing was appealing, but irresponsible.

Declining a headset was a useless gesture; he heard all the channels through the other passengers headsets. The movie was introduced by a short Superman cartoon. In the cartoon Superman – Clark could not think of the two-dimensional figure on the screen as *I* – was trapped on a giant spherical spaceship called Warworld. The ship was filled with aliens of every possible physical type, and they were being paired against each other in gladiator-style battles for the entertainment of Warworld's population. Nothing remotely like this had ever happened. Superman himself was the only verifiable alien the Earth had ever seen, and yet in these pop-culture fantasies he was so often the defender of the Earth against other aliens – usually grotesque reptilian ones or soulless androids. Clark wondered what that meant, but decided to think about it some other time.

He dared not look out the window, or down through the bottom of the plane. Other passengers might see only clouds or matchbox cars or houses that looked like pieces from a Monopoly set, but Clark did not know what he might see – fires, floods, secret underground weapons labs, serial killers, toxic waste leaks, nuclear power plants close to meltdown – all unlikely, of course, but there were so many possibilities. *Somewhere* between Kansas and Metropolis *something* bad was happening. He had no doubt of that. Somewhere down there Humpty Dumpty was tottering. Superman could rebalance him with a mere touch, but once he fell the whole human race would be unable to make things right again. The world was full of Humpty Dumpties. You couldn't save them all, and once you starting trying you could never stop.

“Oh, man,” complained a fiftyish man on the aisle. The seat between them was empty and he was frantically emptying his pockets onto it. “My gum,” he said when he saw Clark looking at him. “My nicotine gum. I'm sure I brought some. There's no way I can survive a whole flight without it. You don't have any, do you?”

The man's face was sweating and his heart was pounding. His bloodstream contained ever-increasing amounts of the fight-or-flight secretions. The gum was in the overhead compartment, in a brown leather briefcase, but there was no way for Clark to justify knowing that.

"Maybe you put it in your briefcase," he suggested, as if it were just a guess.

"No," insisted the man. "It was in a pocket. I know it was in a pocket. I was in the hotel, clearing stuff off the table next to the bed, and I put the pack of gum in my pocket." He began searching again through pockets that he had already turned inside-out.

"I'll get you a stick of mine," Clark said. "Let me get out into the aisle."

The man, still breathing hard, tried to control himself while he stood up. "Thanks, man," he said. "I just knew you were a smoker. You gotta be one to know what it's like."

"Sure," Clark said. He reached into the overhead bin, analyzed the leather briefcase's combination lock, opened it, and removed a stick of gum, then took his own black computer bag down. "Here it is. You like Nic-No-More?"

"It's what I use myself." The man took the stick of gum and fumbled with the wrapping before popping it into his mouth. He closed his eyes and chewed, forgetting for a moment that he and Clark were still standing in the aisle. "Oh, thanks, man," he said when he opened his eyes. Already his heart rate was down and the endorphins were starting to circulate in his brain. He stood aside for Clark to get back into his seat, then sat down himself. "It's hell to be an addict," he said, his words still coming out in a rush. "That's what they told me when I was a kid, but did I listen? 'Just don't start,' they told me. 'It's a hell of a lot easier not to start than to quit later.' But hey, I was a teen-ager. I could do anything then. 'I can quit any time I want,' I told them. Hah! I can't quit. I try and I try, but I can't quit. But hey, you must know that. You've probably tried to quit too, haven't you? Everybody has."

"Sure," Clark said.

"But you can't. It's stronger than we are. There's no fighting it. So when I talk to my kids now, you know what I tell them? Sure you know. I tell them: 'Just don't start.' What else is there to say? Just don't start."

"That's right," Clark said, taking out his computer and turning it on. "There isn't anything else to say. Just don't start."

He opened the file with the most recent chapter and began to type. The man was sitting with his eyes closed blissfully. His slow, steady chewing was the only sign that he was conscious.

I helped, Clark thought. His whole day will be different because I was here and was able to help him. He smiled as he pictured this tiny wave of goodness spreading out across the world. Because his needs had been met and his panic averted, this man would be better to others today. And the others would be better to others. And in some small way the whole

world would be improved. Clark exhaled deeply and felt his own small wave of bliss.

And then came a seizure of panic, like in those dreams where the floor has vanished and you can't fly, but you haven't yet started to fall.

This is how it starts. This is always how it starts.

Kansas: June 12, 1 P. S.

Gravel clattered against the rusty bottom of her car as Lana drove down the road to the Kents. Her usual space next to Jonathan's pickup had a newish station wagon in it, so she kept going up the grass-and-dirt road that went over the hill. She bottomed out as she came over the top, and said a sincere but not very reverent prayer that she hadn't torn out the oil pan or something other vital component.

Mrs. Hildebrandt and her grandson Tommy were already standing outside her house. Tommy looked at the front step as if he wanted to sit there, but had already been told not to. His clothes were nicer and his hair was combed quite a bit neater than usual, and he didn't seem happy about it.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Lana said as she opened the car door. "I had a table that wouldn't leave. They just kept drinking coffee."

Mrs. Hildebrandt nodded and her mouth curled up in just enough of a smile to indicate that she was unimpressed but too gracious to pursue the matter. "I had never known this ... this house was back here," she said. "I had heard you were living out here now, but I assumed ..." Her voice trailed off as she realized that Lana may not have been flattered by her assumptions. "But Tommy insisted this was the place to come for his lesson."

"It's the original homestead," Lana explained. "No one had lived here since Jonathan's father built the new house, but the Kents fixed it up when I needed a place to stay." The truth was that Clark had completely rebuilt it in about forty-five minutes, including running a pipe from the well and digging a hole for the septic tank. She had needed to insist that he leave the interior painting to her.

Tommy was shifting his weight from one foot to another. With one hand he jingled the coins in his pocket while he carried his music book in the other. He was six. His mother Jennifer had been in Lana's high school class and his father, Mrs. Hildebrandt's son Tim, had been in the class ahead. They had married the weekend after Tim's graduation and Tommy had been born in the fall. Tim was now a partner in his father's agricultural machinery dealership and Jennifer was pregnant with their fourth child. The fact that Tommy took his piano lessons from Lana rather than from the more established Mrs. Halbach in town was, Lana supposed, an act of generosity on Jennifer's part, a favor to an old classmate.

"Can we start?" the boy asked.

"I only need a minute to change," Lana said. "I'm sorry to leave you standing out here, but there really is only the one room."

She hopped up the front step and through the unlocked door, shutting it behind her. Once inside she dumped her tip money into the underwear drawer, pulled her uniform over her head, and found a clean blouse and jeans to wear. Then she gathered up the papers on the table (a half-written poem she had stayed up too late working on) and opened windows for a cross-breeze. She hoped the stuffiness would blow away soon.

Clark wouldn't be tired now, she thought. He wouldn't want to snap at people. He wouldn't be wishing they would go away.

She opened the door and Tommy came in trailing his grandmother behind him. He stood next to the piano and banged some keys at random.

"My, this is rather small, isn't it?" Mrs. Hildebrandt commented. Her gaze swept the room like a radar beacon, taking in the sink, the bed, the piano, the table, the curtain that hid the toilet. All the furnishings had come from rummage sales and cast-offs. Lana had paid \$20 for the piano, which Clark (after finding a relevant book at the library) had managed to fix and tune in an afternoon. "And is Clark still living up at the house?"

Lana took the music book from Tommy, opened it to the appropriate page, and set it on the piano's music stand. "Clark is in Metropolis."

"That boy does get around, doesn't he? What is he doing there?"

"Finding a place to live. Looking for a job. The usual kind of things."

"In Metropolis," Mrs. Hildebrandt said, as if she were having trouble imagining that usual things happened in Metropolis. "And will you be joining him there after establishes himself?"

Lana considered what little she knew about Metropolis: the crowding, the dirt, the crime. "We still need to discuss that," she answered.

Tommy banged harder on the keys. Mrs. Hildebrandt looked down and shook her head. "Young men are so hard to pin down these days," she commiserated.

For a moment the exhaustion got to Lana and she felt as if she were watching everything from above: Tommy pounding at the piano, Mrs. Hildebrandt prying into her personal life, and herself standing in a stupor looking from one to the other. The situation had stability, it seemed as if it could freeze into a tableaux to be discovered by archeologists centuries hence.

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling her soul back into her body. "I'm afraid I can't offer you hospitality. We need both chairs to do the lesson. Jenny usually just drops Tommy off and comes back. I suppose I could even take him home myself."

Mrs. Hildebrandt looked out the screen door at Lana's car. "That won't be necessary," she assessed. "I'll just go back over the hill and visit with Martha until you're done."

Lana pasted a smile to her face. "I'm sure she'd enjoy that."

When his grandmother was gone, Tommy stopped hitting the keys and turned to look at

Lana. "I've been working really hard," he said earnestly. "I'm good at this."

"Then I'm looking forward to hearing you play," she responded.

Lana was torn between her inclination to give Tommy extra time because she had been late and her obligation to rescue Martha from Mrs. Hildebrandt as soon as possible. Thankfully, Lana observed that the boy had spoken the truth: he had been working hard and he did show signs of talent. She wasn't sure what she would have done if the lesson had been difficult. Tommy played the simple tune she had assigned him without missing a note, though he still had no sense of timing. Then he did the finger exercises she had told him to practice – with a few mistakes, but not nearly so many as the previous lesson. Lana picked out a somewhat more difficult song for him to play next week, and suggested (as a way of learning timing) that after he got the notes right he should try to sing along as he played. She played it through for him and sang, and then he tried to play it from sight, which was far beyond his powers.

"Now you play something," the boy urged.

Lana gave in and played *Surrey With the Fringe On Top* from memory. When she was done Tommy looked at her with his big green eyes and said, "You're really good."

You should hear Clark, she thought.

"Will I ever be as good as you?" Tommy asked, and she assured him that if he stayed with it and worked hard, he could be as good as he wanted to be. It was the kind of thing children needed to hear, and for all Lana knew it might even be true. She wished someone had said it to her.

They had run ten minutes over. Tommy gathered up his music book and they walked over the hill together.

"Why didn't you ever have children?" Tommy asked.

Lana replied that she wasn't married, but that she was only 23 and still had time.

"Mommy's going to have four soon. She's really big now."

Jonathan's truck was gone as they came up to the Kents' back door. Inside the house Martha was bustling about the way she did when she wanted visitors to realize that they didn't have to stay.

"– and the boy always seemed to have so much potential, too," Mrs. Hildebrandt was sympathizing.

"We still have hopes for Clark," Martha answered, not looking up as she cut a pie crust.

"A mother does," the older woman said approvingly.

Tommy stopped on the step, but Lana opened the screen door and nudged him inside. "All finished," she announced. Martha put her knife down and sighed. Mrs. Hildebrandt reached for her purse, giving Lana the brief hope that she would pay for the boy's lesson

without being prompted. But she was merely gathering her things in preparation for being on her way. Lana imagined two or three ways to ask, and decided she'd rather wait a week and deal with Jenny.

"You're supposed to pay her now," Tommy instructed.

Mrs. Hildebrandt cleared her throat and then asked Lana the rate. Tommy answered – correctly – and his grandmother responded with a throaty noise that was inarticulate but disdainful. One by one the bills were unfolded from a small coinpurse whose clasp snapped when it closed.

After the adults had said their formalities, the Hildebrandts exited. Tommy stopped again on the step and said, "Good-bye Miss Lang. I'll be back next week."

Martha went back to her pie and Lana collapsed into a kitchen chair. "I think someone has a crush on you," Martha said as the sound of the station wagon faded.

"Kids like me," Lana answered. She was beginning to allow herself to remember how tired she was. "I'm sorry to inflict that ... Well, I'm sorry you had to entertain Tommy's grandmother for me."

"Oh, don't you mind that. I don't know what Maggy would do with herself if she didn't have you and me to feel better than."

Lana smiled maliciously, and then did a double-take. She couldn't find any sign of malice in Martha. For her Mrs. Hildebrandt had come and gone like a cold spring shower or a brisk winter wind – a disagreeable event to be sure, but not worth taking personally or ruminating over. "People like her bother me," she confessed. "I can't help it. The worst of it is that in my own way I'm a success, but no one here sees it. I've had poems published in national magazines. University of Kansas Press is even going to publish a little book of my work. I'll probably never make any money to speak of, but most poets would kill to get that kind of recognition, especially at my age. And then somebody like Mrs. Hildebrandt looks at me and all they see is a waitress who teaches piano and still hasn't managed to get married. It's like everything I do well is a big secret."

"Imagine how Clark feels."

Lana sighed. "I do. I imagine it all the time." Lana closed her eyes and remembered the times when Clark could have been a hero if he had let anybody know what he did. Martha kept a scrapbook of them, clippings of minor stories that never became major because of some miraculous stroke of luck. No one ever needed to know what really happened, and Clark was content with that. *But if the Sun hides its light the Moon gets dark too*, she thought. It was an unworthy thought, a selfish thought, and she refused to say it out loud. Eventually she asked: "Do you ever think about what it would be like if everybody knew about Clark?"

Martha looked up towards the ceiling, and Lana could swear that she was having such a fantasy then and there. "No," she said after a few seconds. "People don't have to know

much about Clark to see he's a good boy. That's what's important to me. The rest of it ... I don't have any claim on that. I didn't teach him to fly. For me to be proud of his powers would be like being proud of finding money by the side of the road."

"Or inheriting the family business," Lana suggested. "Or marrying somebody rich."

Martha shrugged. She opened a jar of blueberries and poured them into a bowl.

"Speaking of Clark," she said, gesturing toward the center of the table where the day's mail lay, "you got a letter today."

"Did you get anything?"

"A postcard." The older woman added some sugar to the blueberries and started mashing them up. "Picture of that new LexCorp Tower. He went up as high as they let people go, right up under Mr. Luthor's penthouse."

"He's such a silly." Lana sorted through the letters until she found the one on which Clark had printed her name. Maybe it would change her mood, she hoped. "He can get the birds-eye view of the city any time he wants, but he'll go stand in line for three hours so he can do it with the tourists." She held the letter in her hands without opening it. "Why do you think he doesn't call any more?"

"Oh, that's my fault, I'd guess." Martha added a few more ingredients to the bowl and then poured the contents into the pie dish. "I told him he shouldn't run up such a big bill until he can afford to stop calling collect. I love to hear his voice, but he can fly someplace a lot cheaper than he can call home after he gets there. When I said it I just wanted him to make shorter calls, but you know how he is. He doesn't know how to do things halfway."

Except have a girl friend, Lana thought, and she immediately felt guilty for having thought it. Clark had always been wonderful to her. He did whatever she asked and responded to her smallest requests. Usually he over-responded – Martha was right about that. She remembered the time she mentioned liking daffodils, and then came home to find her little house almost overflowing with them. He must have collected half the unclaimed daffodils in the county. And he had been wonderful when her mother had disappeared, leaving Lana with nothing but overdue rent and bills that she thought had been paid months before. Not only had he reconstructed the homestead for her, but he had searched until he found her mother living in a homeless shelter in Wichita and so drunk she didn't recognize him. She hadn't been much better when Clark had taken Lana to her the next night. "You don't need me," her mother had said in one her more lucid moments. "Just leave me here to rot. You don't have to come back."

Lana had honored that request, but she suspected Clark had not. Clark had no experience with people who were broken and didn't want to be fixed. He didn't know how to perceive them or think about them. It was, she thought, a weakness in his upbringing.

Yes, Clark had always done whatever she asked, and provided whatever he thought would make her happy. And Jonathan and Martha treated her like ... She wanted to say

like a member of the family but it was a cliché, not an accurate characterization. They cared for her and looked out for her and wanted her to have a good life. They never raised their voices to her or blamed her for their own failings or pressured her to be something she wasn't. It was nothing at all like being a member of a family.

But what about the things I don't dare ask for? She felt guilty again, but the inner voice refused to be squelched. *Can I say: "Clark, I want you to stay here with me and stop trying to find your place in the world"? Can I say: "I want you to squander your talents and give up this idea that you must have them for a reason"? Can I say: "The world is big enough to take care of itself. It doesn't need you, but I do?"*

He would stay if she asked him. She didn't doubt for a minute that he would, and that was the worst of it. He would do it for Martha or for Jonathan too, but they were strong and they loved him and they would never ask. They didn't want to spend the rest of their lives wondering what Clark could have done out in the world. And they didn't want Clark to spend the rest of his life wondering either.

But what about me? What am I going to wonder?

She held the envelope without opening it. "Do you think he'll stay in Metropolis for long?" she asked Martha. "Or will it be just one more place that he passes through?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she said as she smoothed the pie's top layer of crust. "But that was an awfully strange story he told about the Indian on the mountaintop. The man came right out and said it: 'Metropolis is the city. That's the place to go.' It made a big impression on Clark."

"I hope he doesn't stay," Lana said. "I hate big cities."

"I never cared for them either, dear," Martha agreed.

The letter was written in Clark's flawless, penmanship-book cursive. The letter was full of news: He had found a small place to live. He had gotten a temporary job unloading trucks and was trying to be the second-best worker they had, so that the best worker wouldn't get jealous of him. Eventually he would have to find a long-term job if he wanted to stay, and the faculty adviser of his college newspaper had gotten him an interview with some big Metropolis editor. He was finding so many things to do, so many new experiences, so many people to help. And he wouldn't make it home this weekend because one of the guys at work needed someone to cover for him. But he'd be home the next weekend and he really hoped she could visit sometime soon, because he had so much to show her.

Lana thought of herself as a fast reader, but by the time she put the letter down the pie was in the oven and a cup of tea had somehow materialized on the kitchen table next to her hand. Martha was sitting at the head of the table with a matching cup of tea, clipping coupons out of the newspaper as if she were alone.

It's so hard to read between perfectly straight lines, Lana thought. And yet there was

something that she thought she knew. Lana held the letter out to Martha. “Would you look at this?” she asked.

Martha held up her hand, but it was to block the letter, not reach out for it. “Oh, I don’t want to pry into what goes on between the two of you.”

“I want you to. There’s something I want your opinion on.”

Martha accepted the letter and read it quickly. “Well, it doesn’t seem very complicated. He’s happy and he wants you to visit. Of course I’m disappointed that he won’t be home Saturday, but I’m glad he has a job and is making some friends. Was there some part you couldn’t make out?”

“No. He writes perfectly, like he does everything. But I’ve never heard Clark sound like this. Have you?”

“Like what?”

“So bouncy. Giddy, almost. It’s like ... like he’s in love.”

Martha shook her head violently. “Oh no no no. Clark has never – I mean ... I’m sure there isn’t another woman. Why else would he want you to visit?” She got up from the table and took her teacup over to the sink. As she stood with her back to the table, Lana listened to the words that she hadn’t said: *Clark has never fallen in love.*

“I don’t mean another woman. But it’s like, like he’s in love with some *thing*, with the city maybe. This is different than the other places he’s been.”

“Maybe it is,” Martha said as she washed the teacup, dried it, and returned it to the cabinet. “He’s been so many places. He ought to settle down somewhere soon.”

“I just don’t know what I’m going to do if this is it. I don’t know if I could live in a place like Metropolis. I’m a country poet. This is where my voice is.”

Martha came back to the table and stood by Lana’s chair. She put her hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. “I know,” she said. “And I can’t tell you what you should do. But there’s one thing I’ve had to make peace with over the last few years, and that’s that Clark has a gift. I ignored it for as long as I could, because it wasn’t anything I asked for. All I ever wanted was to have a son who would grow up and be a good man and marry a good woman and have my grandchildren. I never asked for spaceships and government agents and heat rays coming out of his eyes.” Her hand drifted up into Lana’s hair, holding it between her fingers. “But Jonathan was right. It’s a gift, the things he can do. Those kidnapped boys, the time the tractor rolled onto Rollie Simpkins. They’d be dead – all of them – but for Clark.”

“I know,” Lana whispered. *I’m a selfish girl*, she thought. *I always have been.*

“When he was a baby, I thought he was a gift for me. I really did – that’s the way I thought back then. Jonathan said, ‘Perfect boys don’t fall out of the sky.’ But I thought, ‘This one did.’ And I just left it at that. I wanted it to be just that simple.” Lana didn’t

look up, but she could hear Martha's voice starting to waver. In her mind's eye should could see the tears welling up in Martha's eyes but not falling. "But he's a gift for the world. Not for me. Not for us. He's meant for something. I have to believe that. I have to let him find his destiny, whatever it is."

"I know." The hand was on top of Lana's head now. It felt warm there and a strange sense of peacefulness seemed to radiate down from it.

With her other hand Martha picked up the letter and looked at it again. "Maybe you're wrong," she said without conviction. "I hope you're wrong. Mothers always hate to see their children fall in love."

"Why? My mother would probably be jealous, but you ..."

"No," she said, stroking the top of Lana's head. "I'm not jealous. I was never jealous of you, and I won't be jealous of a city either. But so often when your children fall in love they get their hearts broken. And that's very, very hard to watch."

Lana leaned her head against the older woman's hip. "I'm sure it is," she said.

Metropolis, September 5, 10 A.S.

The summer had been a hopeful time for Jim Olsen. Not that anything significant had changed. The camera shop was still struggling, though it somehow managed to struggle without getting any closer to dying. The first payment of the advance money for the Superman book had been smaller than he had hoped, but it was something, and it offered the possibility that it could turn into something more later.

He called Smallville about once a week now, ostensibly to talk to Clark about the book. But most of the time he found himself talking to Lois, and more and more often to Laura. Jim and Laura talked about cameras and TV shows and the books she was reading. He told her about things going on in the city, and she said she was working on her mother to take her along the next time Lois went to Metropolis. He told himself that he didn't call the Kents during school hours because he was needed at the shop then, but the truth was that something in him danced when he heard a voice in the background ask, "Is that Uncle Jimmy?"

He had not talked to Jon. He wanted to, but what did he have to say? He couldn't imagine what was happening to Jon now as he discovered and trained his powers, preparing for the day when he could start his own heroic career. Sometimes Jim hoped that Jon would ask him about his father, but surely Lois could tell him anything that Jim could, and so could Clark if he wanted to talk about it.

Jim had not told anyone what he knew about Jon. Clark probably wouldn't have believed it, but he hadn't even hinted to anyone that he knew a secret. Whenever he was tempted he looked down at the signal watch, he thought about Jon's future, and he heard Laura saying, "Uncle Jimmy can keep a secret."

But there probably wasn't a day that he didn't think about that secret. On days when there

were no customers or only impossible ones who wanted everything and were willing to pay nothing, on days when no one wanted to see a movie with him or return his calls, on days when he broke some gadget that he had bought during the heyday of his convention money and knew he couldn't afford to replace – on those days he sometimes walked out onto the sidewalk and looked up at the sky and thought: *Superman had a son*. It helped somehow. It was good that he couldn't tell anyone, because he'd never be able to explain how it made him feel.

Earlier this week Lois had called him. Clark was coming to Metropolis for a day to do some interviews for the book, and she wanted to know if Jim could meet with him.

“Great,” he had said. “We can go through some pictures together. It's easier than zapping them back and forth on computers. I'll bet he's looking forward to seeing all the old haunts.”

Lois' tone of voice had said more than her words, “It's not quite that simple. This is all going to be very ... *difficult* for Clark.” They had talked for some while about those difficulties and why she wanted a friend to be with him for a while in the middle of the day. Clark had called the next day and they arranged to meet by the Victory Fountain around noon and have lunch. He had sounded fine, if perhaps a little nervous. Jim had been sure that Lois was worried about nothing.

Now that he had seen Clark in Metropolis with his own two eyes, it was obvious to him that Clark was in much worse shape than Lois had led him to believe.

Physically, of course, he looked better than ever. The tan was like something from a tropical island. And he seemed ... taller, though Jim knew that was impossible. He had noticed it in Smallville too, but hadn't thought much about it. Here in Metropolis though, where he was used to seeing Clark, the change was striking. It took him several minutes to realize what the real difference was: Clark used to slouch, but he didn't any more. He stood up straight now, which made him tower over Jim much more than he ever did before.

Lois had warned him about the ... he didn't want to call them *mental problems*, because that made Clark sound like some kind of dangerous lunatic. And Jim could never think that about Clark. His imagination just didn't stretch that far. Clark was always the solid one, the guy you could count on to stay human when everybody else was running around chattering like crazed chimps. Sure, he had always had his quirks – like the way he could vanish in an instant if you looked away from him, even in a big crowd. And a lot of times when he came back from a vacation or an illness or something his story ... well, it was like he wasn't telling everything. But a lot of the guys Jim knew were like that. It was almost like a Guy Code or something. Everybody had a right to a secret life – a gambling habit, a girl friend on the side, a weird hobby or two. Like Superman having that fling with Lois. Jim hadn't known that, and he hadn't wanted to know. Real friends didn't poke into stuff like that. It was one of those things women never understood. They thought that if you were close you were supposed to know *everything*. But Jim figured

that sometimes what you really needed to know was which doors not to open, which rocks not to look under. Let a guy have his secret life. Or at least let him pretend to have one.

When you got past the physical – the tan, the unlined face, the good posture – Clark looked terrible. Maybe what he said was true: that he had an allergy, that something in the air kept making his eyes water and turned them bloodshot. But that didn't explain all the twitches, the way he would suddenly turn his head this way or that and stare off into the distance. Sometimes he would wince for no reason. Talking to Clark was like talking to someone who was watching a television show you couldn't see, a show full of car chases and gun battles and dramatic hospital scenes. It was unnerving.

Agoraphobia, Lois had called it on the phone. Clark got uncomfortable in places where there were a lot of people. He was fine by himself. He was fine in small groups most of the time. But he didn't deal well with crowds and cities. "Aren't there drugs for that?" he had asked, but Lois had just replied, "Drugs don't seem to do much for Clark." Jim remembered what Clark had said back when he had first proposed the book idea to him: "You don't know what you're asking." He was starting to.

Clark had been wiping his eyes when Jim first saw him sitting in the shadow of the statue of Lafayette. He had his back to the statue's base, in the deepest part of its shade. Like Lafayette, Clark was facing the fountain, the symbolic center of the city. As always, it was surrounded by tourists with cameras, most of them taking pictures at the worst possible angle to the light. Jim took a quick inventory of the types of cameras on display as he made his way over to the statue, something he did now almost everywhere he went.

Clark stood up when he spotted Jim. For just a moment, standing erect with his glasses in his hand, he hadn't looked like Clark at all. He had looked like ... someone else. Jim couldn't place who at first, but then it hit him: Matt Mann, the actor who had played Superman in the first two movies, the ones that had been hits. Jim made a mental note to mention that to Lois. He was sure it would make her laugh.

Jim wasn't sure why Clark had chosen this spot for their meeting. It seemed like a place any agoraphobic would want to avoid, and Clark did not seem happy to be there. He kept looking around as if seeing things that were invisible to Jim.

"Great fountain," Jim said, fishing for a response. When he didn't get one he continued. "They don't build fountains like that any more. Must be a lot of memories here."

Clark shook off whatever daydream had captured him. "You weren't here for the riot, were you?"

Jim had forgotten that this is where all that had happened. "Geez. I haven't thought about that in years. I think I was playing pool at Bibo's. The TV cut into the Regents' game with coverage. Eventually I started wondering why the place got so quiet."

"I was ..." Clark looked around as if unable to pick out a location. "There," he said, pointing quickly to some indeterminate spot. Then he pointed up Rousseau Street. "The

Kryptonists came from there. And the Human Defense League met them about ... there. And I – ” He stopped, took off his glasses and wiped his eyes again. “I watched while Superman hovered over the fountain and tried to talk some sense into people.”

“I remember,” Jim said. “When the K-guns hit him he dropped right into the water, didn’t he?”

“Right there. They’ve fixed it by now, of course, but for a long time you could see the exact spot. And then I ... well, I couldn’t do much about it. He just lay there in the water until after the tear gas cleared everybody out.”

“I’m sure he didn’t blame you for it. I mean, there was a riot going on. What were you supposed to do?”

Clark shrugged, but didn’t look comforted. “It was probably the low spot in Superman’s career.”

“Either that or the thing over in eastern Europe,” Jim said off-handedly, and Clark winced again. “If you believe he really did it. They were right about the same time.”

“That ... I don’t know what to do with that,” Clark said. “I’ll have to cover it in the book somehow. But this – it’s probably the most famous picture of Superman there is. The one of him lying unconscious in the fountain.”

Jim shrugged. He knew exactly the picture Clark was talking about. Everyone did. It had made the cover of all the major news magazines. *How the Mightiest Fell*.

“Hey, don’t look at me. I was at Bibb’s. Somebody else got that one. I tried to be everywhere Superman was, but there was no way. You’d have to *be* Superman. Like Peter Parker taking pictures of Spiderman or something.”

Clark gave Jim the Look, the penetrating one. And then Jim got the point. “You want to use somebody else’s picture, don’t you?”

“Just that one and a couple of others from key moments. Like the funeral procession. You didn’t cover that either, right?”

That was another famous picture, one that everyone would recognize. Somebody had gotten it with a telephoto lens from halfway up the LexCorp Tower. It showed a line of people stretching for more than a mile.

“No,” Jim said. He hadn’t gone to the funeral. Lois had tried to convince him to come, but Jim hadn’t wanted to hear it. Going to the funeral would have meant admitting that Superman wasn’t coming back. Jim didn’t leave his apartment that day. He didn’t turn on the TV. He didn’t even open the blinds. Late that night he switched on the news, half expecting to hear that Superman had dramatically interrupted his own funeral. Superman had been doing stuff like that for a dozen years. Every time you thought they had him down – bang! there he was bigger than ever. Jim kept the radio on long enough to listen for a tone of excitement or surprise in the newsman’s voice. And then he switched it off

again.

“We don’t need to decide right now,” Clark said. “But think about it. The project editor thought it would make a better book.” Jim looked down at the pavement. “By the way,” Clark continued in a brighter tone of voice. “Have you ever met the project editor?”

Jim shook his head. “He’s just a name to me. I get email sometimes.”

“Me too,” Clark said.

They started walking away from the park, down Lafayette Street towards the Planet. Several times Clark twitched or cocked his head as if he were listening to something. Sometimes he started to turn quickly, but then stopped himself and continued walking. Jim did his best to ignore this behavior. It was difficult, because part of him wanted to get angry with Clark, to say, “Would you just walk down the street like a normal person and stop embarrassing me like this? And what’s all this about including other people’s photos in my book?” But whenever his anger would rise to the point where it threatened to come out of his mouth, Jim would notice just how anxious and sad Clark seemed. It was a strange combination, one that Jim couldn’t ever remember feeling himself. Lots of times he had oscillated between anxiety and sadness, but he had never had them both at once.

They went to the Diner, which hadn’t been a diner for several years now. It was down the block from the Planet and had been a regular hangout for newspaper people. Now it had gentrified like the rest of the neighborhood. The counter was gone and the booths no longer had taped-over cracks in their upholstery. Most of the customers wore expensive suits that made Clark’s blue off-the-rack number look pauperish, and the shirt-and-tie that Jim wore to sell cameras was just barely inside the pale. Clark had made the reservations, and Jim assumed that his expense account would pick up the check.

“Not like the old days, is it?” Jim said.

After they ordered, Jim took at stack of photos out of his bag. He had sorted them by date and by quality. He and Clark went through them one-by-one, first to recall what was happening in the picture, and then to discuss whether that particular photo belonged in the book. For the most part they agreed, but Clark was unimpressed with two of Jim’s favorites. He suspected that Clark vetoed one because Lois looked bad in it, but the other Jim had no explanation for. Clark himself wasn’t in any of the pictures, but when Jim mentioned that fact he said only, “Neither are you.” It was the only joke Clark attempted the entire time they were together.

Occasionally a photo would cause Clark to drift away into whatever mental world had claimed him as its citizen. One time he came back with a monologue: “Have you ever imagined what Metropolis must have been like for him? Hearing and seeing so much – it must have been like a war zone. People were dying around him all the time. In a city this size, dozens of people die even on a good day. A hundred or two isn’t that unusual. If you can hear all those heartbeats and see into all those rooms ...”

Jim put down the forkful of fish he had been about to eat. “Maybe it wasn’t that bad. It

never seemed to get him down. Anyway, I don't think he could hear and see *everything*. I mean, he was getting more powerful towards the end, but even then I don't think – ”

“Why just this morning not fifty feet from the fountain, a homeless woman died. She had tuberculosis and she just laid down on the ground and died. She could have been saved if anyone had called an ambulance, but no one noticed. No one cared. She was just a homeless old woman and nobody wanted to know why she was lying on the ground.”

“Clark? How do you know about this?”

Clark stammered for a moment, then said that he had talked to a policeman at the park.

“I don't want you to take this the wrong way,” Jim commented. “But I really think you need to lighten up. It's a city and things go wrong here, but you can't take it all so personally. You didn't know that woman. You weren't one of the people who could have saved her.”

Clark closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. When he looked at Jim again his expression had changed. He looked almost like the old Clark. “You're right,” he said. “Let's get back to the photos.”

For the rest of the meal Clark concentrated on the here-and-now. He did not stare into space or react to incursions from the netherworld. He made small talk and asked about the camera business. Jim inquired about Jon, how his training was going and when he would start his own career.

“We can't talk about that here,” Clark said. He sounded abrupt and a bit harsh. Jim had a difficult time not feeling disrespected. “Probably the less you know the better.”

I would never do anything to hurt that boy, Jim thought. Or his sister or any of them. He's the only reason I have hope for the world. Listening to that thought, he felt himself transported out of his petty reactions to Clark. It was a thought that was scary in its depth and its implications. “Just make sure he knows,” Jim said earnestly, “that if there's anything I can do he just has to ask. I owe so much to his father, it's the least I can do.”

“I'll tell him,” Clark said.

When the check came Clark paid and kept the receipt. Jim decided he was better off not knowing how much of Galaxy's money he had just consumed. “I never heard of an author getting this kind of expense account,” Jim commented.

“Me either,” Clark said. “There's a lot about this book that doesn't add up. But I think it's important to do it. I'll let you know if I figure it all out.”

“Ditto,” Jim said.

The camera shop was in the opposite direction from Clark's interview, but they walked a block together to the subway. Clark continued to keep himself under control, so much so that Jim could almost imagine that the last ten years had never happened. Almost. Clark was still too tall and too tan, and Jim felt tired in a way that he never had when he was ten

years younger.

Rousseau Street Station probably looked completely different to Clark, Jim thought. Like the other stations that serviced the city's upscale center, it had been modernized at great expense. As they rode the long escalator down to the ticket windows, Clark's eyes looked up to mosaic above. It had been commissioned by one of the early investors in LexCorp, and portrayed the history of the city from the French settlers at the bottom to the crystals that represented the Crystalline Boom at the top. Seeing it on the way down was like going backward in time. Near the top was a scene of an indistinct caped figure carrying some kind of plane on his back.

After the mosaic ended the station below became visible. It was spotless, with none of the seediness that had characterized the old downtown stations. Incongruously, a homeless man sat on a blanket near the bottom of the escalator. He wore a tattered army jacket and a stocking cap, and had dark tangled hair and a scraggly gray beard. Four shopping bags marked the corners of his territory.

"I thought they got rid of all these guys," Jim said.

"And put them where?" Clark asked. After a pause he added, "That can't be him."

"Who?" Jim asked.

"Give me a quarter," the man demanded. He was standing directly in front of Jim, having moved faster than he would have thought possible for such a decrepit looking man. Jim could smell the fumes of sweat and dirt and alcohol that surrounded him, plus a sour smell that long years in Metropolis had taught Jim to associate with malnutrition. His eyes were so piercing that Jim could not look at them. He said nothing and side-stepped.

"Give me a quarter," the man repeated. Jim had gone four or five steps before he realized that Clark was no longer with him. He turned and saw the homeless man standing chest-to-chest with Clark, their eyes locked on each other. Clark was half a foot taller and far more muscular, but the man confronted him fiercely. *He can't have forgotten how to deal with bums*, Jim thought, and turned to try to help.

Clark was doing everything wrong. He took the beggar's outstretched hand and examined his fingertips. "You're Benjamin Boston," he said.

Jim tugged at Clark's sleeve with no effect. "Let's go, Clark. You've got an interview."

"No I'm not," the man said flatly, as if Clark had just announced that it was raining, or made some other observably false statement.

"You can't possibly know this guy. You haven't been to Metropolis in years."

"You're Benjamin Boston," Clark repeated. "I interviewed you fifteen years ago for *The Daily Planet*. Maybe you remember me. I'm Clark Kent."

The man looked amused, the way parents look at a boy who announces that he is Zorro or King Arthur or Superman. "Sure you are," he said condescendingly.

To Jim's amazement, Clark started to reach for his wallet, as if he intended to pull out a driver's license or some other paper that would validate his identity. Jim looked the beggar up and down. He didn't seem dangerous, but then the dangerous ones never did. *Everybody* knew that you didn't flash a wallet in front of people who had no money. You couldn't forget stuff like that, even if you had spent the last decade in the middle of Kansas.

And this man, whoever he was, was not Benjamin Boston. Jim was certain of that, and the fact that Clark seemed equally certain that he was Boston worried Jim more than anything else he had seen out of Clark. *He's got to be hallucinating*, Jim thought. *What was Lois thinking, letting him come to Metropolis by himself?*

Benjamin Boston had been the most famous of the new-age gurus, the kind who had been equally at home in counterculture coffee houses and corporate boardrooms. His confident, toothy grin had been staring out of bookstore display windows for twenty years or more. Jim struggled for a moment to remember Boston's catch-phrase, but then it came to him: New Dharma. *Finding the New Dharma, The New Dharma of Love, The New Dharma Executive, The New Dharma Parent, The New Dharma Investor* – there seemed to be no subject that people would not pay for his opinion on. He had been a regular on talk shows, did a lecture tour of university campuses, offered executive workshops at thousands of dollars a head.

And now Clark believed he was camped out on a blanket with four shopping bags, demanding quarters from pedestrians.

It was true that Jim could not remember when he had last seen Boston on television. It could have been as long as five years before, but he wasn't sure. Five years could be a long time, Jim knew. But not that long.

Clark also seemed to be searching for a reasonable explanation. "This is some kind of a stunt, isn't it?" he asked. "You're researching a book, or proving a point, or trying to teach something to ... to somebody. To people like me, maybe."

The man laughed. He sounded surprisingly mirthful, but Jim found the incongruity of that mirth creepy. The Joker had a mirthful laugh too, the kind that made you want to join in unless you knew what he was laughing at. "Is that what this Benjamin Boston of yours would do? Is he given to 'stunts', as you put it?" The panhandler's tone of voice had changed. Now he sounded like a therapist helping a patient explore a delusion. "And what about this Clark Kent? Is he real, or is he just a stunt too?"

Don't answer, Jim thought. *Just walk away*. But he could only stand there helplessly as Clark said, "I ... I'm as real as anyone else, I guess."

The man Clark insisted on calling Boston nodded in satisfaction, as if his point had been granted. "Precisely. Now give me a quarter and be on your way. Don't you have things to do?"

"He does," Jim insisted. "He really does."

“But ...” Clark hesitated, “but you need food. You need a place to stay.”

“I need a quarter,” Boston insisted. “You have one. I need it.”

“I want to help you.”

Boston squinted and frowned as he examined Clark’s face. *I hope he doesn’t claim to remember Clark now*, Jim thought.

“Is it that *you* want to help *me*?” Boston asked like a lawyer leading a witness. “Or does *Clark Kent* want to help *Benjamin Boston*. Who’s writing this story? Hmmm?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Clearly not,” Boston said dismissively. He snorted with condescension. “Oh very well then. Be Clark Kent, if you insist on it. I refuse to be Benjamin Boston for you, but I will tell you what happened to him if you give me a quarter.”

Jim fumbled in his pocket until he came up with a quarter, which he pushed into Clark’s hand. “We don’t need to know,” he said. “But just give him this and he’ll leave us alone.”

“I’ll buy you lunch,” Clark said, “and you can tell me there.”

“I don’t want lunch. I want a quarter. Do you want to know what happened to him or not?”

Clark reached into his pocket and came out with a bill. “Here’s ten dollars.”

“That’s not a quarter.”

Clark returned the ten to his pocket and handed over Jim’s quarter. “OK,” he said. “What happened to him?”

“To whom?”

“Benjamin Boston. If you aren’t Benjamin Boston, then what happened to him?”

The man drew very close to Clark. He spoke conspiratorially, yet loud enough that Jim had no trouble hearing. “You’ve got to promise you won’t tell. If you do, I won’t be able to sell the secret to anyone else. You’ll ruin my livelihood, if you tell. It’s like software: I’m not selling you the secret for a quarter. It’s still my secret. It won’t ever be your secret. I’m just licensing the secret to you, to use inside your own brain. You can’t transfer it to anybody else’s brain. Makes your license invalid if you do.” Then he turned his head as if he were speaking for Jim’s benefit as well as Clark’s. “Got that?”

“No problem,” Clark said.

Jim had stopped trying to intervene. Neither Clark nor the homeless man seemed to recognize his existence.

“OK, then. Here’s the secret: There never was a Benjamin Boston.”

“That can’t be right,” Clark protested. He sounded calmer and less confused, as if he were

catching on to the conversation's strange rules. "I spoke to him myself. I read his books."

"And I sat on Santa's lap every Christmas Eve for five years!" Boston laughed. "You can't possibly be that gullible! Now think. Tell me about Benjamin Boston."

"Well, he was a very intelligent man. Very knowledgeable. Very wise."

The man clapped his hands. "Just so! And that didn't make you suspicious?"

"Of what?"

"Of what?" he asks," Boston muttered to himself, shaking his head. "*That he didn't exist!*" A woman passing by jumped in surprise and looked over quickly, then caught herself and continued on her way. "Intelligent? Knowledgeable? Wise? People aren't like that – look around! The man had an answer to every question. Perfectly ordinary homo sapiens used to line up for blocks to spill out the darkest secrets of their lives, and then they'd look up at him with wide eyes like puppy dogs waiting to be let out of their kennels. And he'd give them answers! Wonderful, wise answers that would change their whole lives for the better. Now: Does that sound like a real person to you?"

"Well, ... I – "

"No! Of course not! Benjamin Boston isn't a *person*. He's a *character*. He's a role, like Santa Claus or Batman or even this ridiculous Clark Kent of yours. Any talented actor can *play* Benjamin Boston, but no one can *be* Benjamin Boston. It's insane! Now do you know what happened to him?"

"I'm still not sure."

"What happens to Hamlet when the play is over?"

"He dies?"

Boston stomped his foot in frustration. "No. No. No. No. No. Hamlet dies at the *end* of the play, but after the play is *over* he's just *gone*, like he never existed at all. Because he didn't! The actor wipes off his make-up and puts on his jeans and his running shoes and Hamlet is *nowhere*. That's where Benjamin Boston is. Nowhere. He had a long run and the critics loved him, but he's done now. I'm through with him. If some other actor wants to start a revival, he's welcome to try. But it won't be me. I'm off the stage now. I've gone back to being human." His piercing eyes locked with Clark's for a second more. "And you should too," he added.

With that, Boston turned away and sat down again among his shopping bags. Clark looked at him helplessly. "I've got another quarter, if you'd like that," he said.

"Go away," said the beggar. "I gave you what you wanted. Now stop bothering me."

Jim blinked, and his eyes were drawn to the army jacket's pocket, the one over the man's heart. The tips of two twenty dollar bills peered out over the lip of the pocket like twin pet mice. Jim was certain they hadn't been there before. Had this "Boston" stolen them somehow? From Clark? From him? He checked that his own wallet was still in his pants

pocket, and he knew that Clark had not produced his.

“Come on,” Clark said, nudging Jim’s elbow. “We can’t help him.”

“Help *me*,” Boston muttered disgustedly to no one. “He’s seeing people who haven’t existed for years. Who’s going to help *him*?”

Jim wondered the same thing as they reached the platform and Clark’s train sat waiting. Back at the shop Ginny would be expecting to go off duty in fifteen minutes. He couldn’t shepherd Clark around the city, even if he was hallucinating. *What was Lois thinking? Why didn’t she warn me how far gone he is?*

“Take care of yourself,” Jim called as the doors closed. “You’re not indestructible, you know.”

It took five more minutes for Jim’s train to arrive. From time to time he glanced up the stairs, wondering if the so-called Benjamin Boston was still camped out at the bottom of the escalator. He half expected that if he went to check, he would find the man gone and not be able to locate anyone who remembered him.

He wasn’t Boston, Jim thought. He was sure of it. *The mighty don’t fall that far.*

Metropolis: June 19, 1 P.S.

Lana had always suspected she would be a nervous flier, and now her expectations were proving to be correct. Rationally, she knew that there was very little to worry about, that thousands and thousands of people flew every day and (on most days) all of them arrived safely. As a poet she was not inclined to be a slave to rationality, but she did recognize that it had its proper territory, which probably included air travel. And so she was determined not to make a nuisance of herself. She was not going to complain, not going to cry, not going to be sick, and not going to demand that passengers unfortunate enough to be seated next to her become her counselors. But she did allow herself to grab the armrests very hard during takeoff and after every little drop that the pilot attributed to “bumpy air”, a concept that made no sense to her whatsoever.

She hadn’t planned on flying at all. She couldn’t afford it, for one thing. Her plan, which she just barely could manage to pay for, had been to drive up to Hutchinson and then spend most of two days on trains. She had already accepted the fact that she would have to miss a whole week of work in order to spend a long weekend with Clark in Metropolis, and that she would arrive ruffled, sleepless, and in need of a shower.

Jonathan had laid that plan to rest. Clark, he had announced, would certainly have bought her a plane ticket if he had had two nickels to rub together (and if he was any son of Jonathan’s). And so, as a courtesy to Clark, Jonathan bought the ticket himself. Clark, for his part, had tried to come up with an acceptable plan for flying her to Metropolis under his own power. But Lana had taken short trips with Clark before and was not inclined to take a long one. Flying through the sky with your boyfriend looked wonderful in movies and sounded great in old Sinatra songs, but the reality of cold, thin air going past at

hundreds of miles an hour was something entirely different.

I'm just not a creature of air, she thought. I'm a creature of earth.

And that was more or less the crux of it, she realized. She belonged to the earth, to the land, to the prairie. She didn't dislike flying because she was afraid the plane would crash, or because she disliked being cooped up in a small space with a lot of other disgruntled people, or because she had to deal with an airline bureaucracy that thought of her as just one more cow to be shuttled to market. Those were all just rationalizations of a feeling far older than any words she could find to express it, the feeling of a plant who finds that her roots are dangling in nothing.

I don't belong up here, she thought. And then something inside her added: But Clark does.

A flash of light took her attention outside the plane. Down on the ground Metropolis was coming into view, a single crystal shaft rising like a dagger above the dilapidated brick city and its ancient river. For just a moment the LexCorp Tower had caught the sunlight and sent its blinding beacon into her window. The Tower was barely two years old, but already she had seen it in countless magazines and movies. It always struck her as something cold and soulless. But in person, in context, it seemed unearthly, like the herald of some alien invasion that everyone sees but no one recognizes. Construction sites in varying stages of completion were scattered around the Tower like seedlings, each sending its own crystalline reflections into the sky.

It's a contagion, she thought. It doesn't belong here either.

Lana had felt guilty about accepting Jonathan's ticket, because of course she knew that he wasn't buying it for his son. He was buying it for his future daughter-in-law, and that was a role she was becoming more and more doubtful that she would be able to fill.

It wasn't that she didn't love Clark. Lana could barely remember a time when she hadn't loved Clark. Even when they were children, he had seemed unique and special to her. Something inside him just seemed to glow, something she perceived in a preverbal, prerational way. It was as if he were surrounded by his own inner sunlight. The world seemed brighter when Clark was around. Problems seemed easier. Nothing was impossible.

Maybe I wasn't meant to live in a bright, easy world.

Lana hated thoughts like that. She had lived with them all her life and knew exactly where they came from. Now that the debts had been paid they were about all she had left of her mother.

The plane went into its landing approach and she grabbed the armrests tighter, pushing forward on them to wedge herself more securely into her seat. Next to her a businessman sipped a cup of coffee and paged through the in-flight magazine as if he were waiting for a haircut rather than falling from a height of several miles. If he had any sense of his roots

dangling in the air, he must have gotten used to the feeling long ago.

Martha saw what was happening inside Lana. Probably she had seen it before Lana herself, because she felt the same conflict between what she wanted for Clark and what she wanted for herself. For Clark she wanted a place a high in the firmament, where his star could shine clear and be seen by anyone who looked up. But for herself she wanted a place on the earth, an ordinary place made special by nothing more than the presence of her loving family. It was a conflict she was destined to lose, and she had made her peace with that. Lana wasn't sure how she had done it.

The landing was a good one. She judged that by the other passengers' complete lack of reaction to it. Some of them began gathering their things, but the more experienced ones continued reading their books or studying the stock tables until the plane pulled up to its gate. As much as she wanted to be away from this craft and back on solid ground, Lana did not join the crush of bodies in the aisle. She took deep breaths and meditated until she could remove her bag from the overhead compartment without standing in someone else's way.

Jonathan did not see it. In many ways both good and bad he already treated Lana like a daughter, and if she and Clark had not seen to the formalities yet it was merely an oversight unworthy of his attention. More than any of them – more than Clark himself – Jonathan gloried in his son's secret accomplishments. As he got older he slept less and less, and whenever Clark came home the two men would sit up far into the night, with Jonathan demanding every detail of what Clark had seen, what he had done, and what he hoped to do next. It was inconceivable to Jonathan that Clark would want to do anything less than save the entire world from its various evils and misfortunes, and equally inconceivable that Lana would want anything more than to share that most wonderful life.

Did Clark see it? He saw so much, and yet there was so much that escaped him. A few months ago it had seemed to Lana that he did see the difficulty of constructing a life that could satisfy them both. But to Clark difficulties were simply things to be overcome. With a little more thought, a little more effort, and the application of his seemingly limitless powers surely everyone could get what they wanted and everyone could be happy. He believed that so totally that he didn't even know he believed it. It was just a fact of his world and he saw it everywhere he looked.

And who could say for sure that he was wrong? So many remarkable things had already happened to Clark, who could say what might be next? Perhaps tomorrow he would discover that he really could be in two places at once. Perhaps rays from his eyes would burn away her dross body of clay and leave her with an angelic body of light, one that would be as at home in the air as Clark was himself.

In the weeks since his strange experience in the jungle, Clark seemed to have lost what little appreciation he had of the problems she saw. The idea that he had a destiny, that there were people and powers who knew what he was and where he belonged – it was so

bright and so welcome that he had been captivated by it like a moth seeing its first streetlight. He had been back to Ecuador several times since, searching unsuccessfully for the strange Indian witch doctor who seemed to know so much about him. He had even approached natives and told them as much as he could communicate with signs and a pidgin of Spanish and Portuguese, but he had learned nothing more from them than that a wise man had recently left them to return to the place from which he came. Whether that place was on the other side of the river or in Heaven itself he had been unable to determine.

And so he had come to Metropolis. He had come with a sense of destiny, with a feeling that he belonged in this place and that it needed him. In Clark's world, problems melted away in the face of destiny. If some higher power wanted him here, then surely it would see to his happiness. There was no place in Clark's imagination for a higher power who did not have his best interests at heart.

Lana envied that kind of faith.

"Lana, over here!" Clark stood next to the crowd-control rope waving brightly at her. She wondered how the other people around could fail to see the nimbus of light around him. He looked happier than she had ever seen him. When she made it through the gate he picked her up and twirled her in the air.

"Clark!" she warned. "Be careful."

"Oh," he whispered. "I don't think that was anything a normal man my size couldn't do."

"Just be careful," she repeated. "It's not like we've been apart for years. You were just in Smallville two weeks ago."

"I know," he said, still smiling broadly. "But you're *here*. That's just so wonderful. We're going to have a great time. You're going to love this place, you really are."

Faith, she thought. *Try to have faith. Maybe you can learn to see what he sees.*

While they retrieved her luggage Clark monologued excitedly about the places he had seen, the meals he had eaten, and the good deeds he had done since he had seen her last. This chatterbox Clark was new to her, but she guessed that he was as nervous as she was, and that they would both become themselves again soon.

When they left the terminal Clark stopped to look up at the looming crystal tower. "I just can't stop look at that," he said intensely. "There's something about it. It just looks so ... *right*."

Faith, Lana thought. *Try to have faith.*

From *The Daily Planet*: June 20, 1 P.S.

Perry White

Ray of Hope

Ray Valdez has a guardian angel. Or at least *he* thinks so.

Ray is an unemployed construction worker. Now, unless you're in the business yourself, you're probably wondering how it's even possible to be an unemployed construction worker in Metropolis during the biggest expansion since the Big Bang. On either side of the river you can't walk more than a block or two without passing a half-finished building. There must be jobs galore here, right? If a guy like Ray is unemployed, isn't it his own fault?

Not exactly. Big unfinished buildings used to mean thousands of construction jobs, but that was back in the Dark Ages – say, two or three years ago. In the Crystalline Age buildings aren't built with steel and glass and other materials that need burly guys in hard hats to muscle them into place. They're made of CrystaLex-3, Lex Luthor's miracle material that is as brainy as a quarterback in addition to being as strong as a lineman.

A sheet of CrystaLex-3 can be programmed with the blueprints of the building it's being built for. When it arrives at the site it tells the computerized cranes where it belongs, and once it is in place it lets its neighboring sheets of CrystaLex-3 know where and how they should fasten onto it. Don't ask me how the plumbing and heating gets into place, but people who should know assure me that it does. There's still a certain amount of hands-on work to do inside a building to give it that homey, old-fashioned touch, but if you don't care about that you can build a good-sized CrystaLex building with about a dozen people, not one of whom will raise a sweat.

So Ray and most of his friends are unemployed. That's not a new experience for them, naturally, because construction always has been off-and-on, project-to-project work. Ray's been lucky until now. He hasn't been out of work for longer than two months since his first child was born eight years ago. And so far he's only been out of work for two months this time. But this time is different, because like all but a handful of Metropolis' unemployed construction workers Ray will probably never work in construction again.

What happens to men like Ray? And their wives and their children?

Immediately, nothing. Unemployment insurance and money saved in the good times will keep food on the table and make the

mortgage payments. For few more months, anyway.

But this is a story about guardian angels, so you might expect that somebody in high places is looking out for Ray. And who is in a higher place than Lex Luthor, sitting in his 150th-floor penthouse, the one that is in or above the clouds about 200 days of the year? LexCorp profits mightily from the situation that has put Ray on the street, and (who knows?), maybe the Big L himself is feeling a little bit responsible. Maybe Lex is looking out for Ray.

So I called Lex Luthor and asked what he thought about Ray's situation. (One of the best things about being editor of *The Daily Planet* is that occasionally even people like Lex Luthor answer your questions.) I'm sure Ray will be comforted to hear that Lex doesn't think Ray has a lot to worry about, or at least that Ray doesn't have a lot for Lex to worry about.

"Technological unemployment has been going on since the Industrial Revolution, and even longer," he said. "But new technologies always create more jobs than they destroy, so things sort themselves out eventually."

So, according to the Smartest Man in Metropolis, all Ray has to do is survive long enough for the long-term trends to take over. So maybe Ray's guardian angel is somebody with enough money to tide Ray over for a year or two, long enough for him to be retrained so that he has a shot at one of those new jobs. Maybe, say, somebody at Ray's union.

Sure enough, the Construction and Electrical Workers Union has a fund for just this purpose. Ray has been paying into it for the last eight years, and the federal government has been matching a percentage of the worker's contributions. So Ray should be in good shape.

Except that the fund is empty.

"I wish there was something we could do for Ray, and for all the guys in his situation," union president Steven Summerville told me when I called the union headquarters. "But the money just isn't there." (I want it noted, just for the record, that money *is* there to keep paying Mr. Summerville his high-six-figure salary. But that comes out of a different fund.)

Where did the money go? Everyone has a different explanation, though they all agree that bad investments played an important role. "What bad investments?" you might ask. "Hasn't

everything in the world gone up these last few years?"

You wouldn't think so if you looked at the CEWU's books. The CEWU has had a number of big loans go bad in recent years, including loans to people who know people who are alleged to be leaders of Intergang. But city and state investigators who looked into the matter have given Mr. Summerville and his lieutenants a clean bill of health. (Now *those* people have guardian angels, if you ask me.)

So there's no money, but it's nobody's fault. I'm sure Ray was comforted to know that his money was lost by incompetents rather than stolen by crooks. Ray was so comforted, in fact, that Wednesday night he and his friend Ted Lawson went out and did something that the technologically unemployed have been doing since the Industrial Revolution and even longer: They got drunk.

Now Ray is a good family man who doesn't have a lot of practice at being drunk, so I wasn't surprised to discover that he's not very good at it. But he's learning. "If ever I drink again," he told me, "and I get idea that I think is very good, I write it down and see if it is so good in morning." Words to live by, I think.

The idea he and Ted thought was very good last Wednesday night was to take a couple of sledgehammers down to 20th and Dumas where a fifty-story luxury condominium complex is going up. After getting past whatever passes for security on the construction site, they went up to the 30th floor and started whaling away at a few CrystaLex panels without doing a whole lot of damage. "I get very frustrated," he said, "so I decide to swing very hard." Somewhere in the backswing, Ray lost his balance and took a dive towards the pavement.

He didn't get there. Somehow he fell *back into the building*. Ted found him again on the 22nd floor, completely unharmed. Ted claims to have felt some strange wind currents about that time, and he credits them for his friend's good luck, but Ray is adamant that he felt a hand around his waist as he was falling. "I have guardian angel," he says with complete sincerity.

Don't get me wrong here. I'm happy Ray didn't turn into street pizza, and I'm not exactly an atheist either. But I'd like to know who's training guardian angels these days. Ray's angel didn't intervene to save the job he had worked faithfully for a dozen

years, and he didn't lift a finger to keep Ray from being cheated out of the benefits he had coming. But he does jump in to keep Ray from hurting himself while he's vandalizing a construction site. That's not the theology I remember from St. Peter's Elementary.

I'll tell you what I think about Ray's story and all the stories like it I've been hearing lately. I think Metropolitans are seeing guardian angels because we know that the flesh-and-blood people who are supposed to be looking out for our interests are too busy getting rich. We hope that somebody on the other plane is watching over us, because on this plane it's all too clear that we're on our own.

I must have heard half a dozen of these "angel" stories in the past three weeks, and personally I'd trade every single one of these aetherial beings for one good hero, for one visible, tangible example of the human capacity to rise above greed and selfishness and do right by others.

Now that would be a miracle.

Metropolis: September 5, 10 A.S.

The young woman sat on a park bench in a pose she had seen other young women adopt. It was intended to suggest nonchalance and relaxation without inviting unwanted interaction with strangers. She had one foot on the ground, while the other was on the bench itself, pushing her knee up close to her chest. An earphone trailed down to a handheld computer, and she bobbed her head slightly to a rhythm as if lost in music. She wore cheap plastic sunglasses, faded blue jeans and a dark blue sweatshirt. On the bench next to her was one of those supermarket tabloids that appealed to frivolous young women, the kind who had nothing better to do with their time than sit on park benches listening to music. On its cover was an obviously fake photograph of a hairy humanoid figure with leathery wings and fangs, and next to the picture was the headline: *Underworld Pix Prove It: BATMAN OF GOTHAM REAL.*

Hope disliked being out of uniform in public. She felt ... *naked* was inaccurate, because she did much of her physical training in the nude and had rid herself of unnecessary shame regarding her body. *Diminished*, perhaps. She settled on *diminished*. Not only was her black uniform state-of-the-art body armor, its intimidation factor was a weapon in itself. In uniform, Hope was confident she could walk into Hell without confrontation. Crowds of demons and damned souls would part before her and nothing but a trail of whispers would follow.

Within the LexCorp empire and within the upper echelons of its many vassal corporations, her uniform made another statement. It marked her as the personal emissary of Mr. Luthor himself. To those who worked in the Tower, Mr. Luthor was never named.

Many nicknames had come and gone over the years, but the one that had stuck was *the Man Upstairs*. And if Luthor was godlike in his penthouse above the clouds, what then of Hope and Faith, whose apartments occupied the floor immediately below? They were his Gabriel and Michael, fully authorized to speak with his voice and strike with his sword. In uniform, Hope could silence any corporate boardroom in the world just by showing herself in the doorway.

But here on this park bench, out of uniform, she had no more power than she could claim with her skill, her technology, and the force of her personality. This itself was no inconsiderable quantity of power, but it had to be earned and re-established from moment to moment. Any street thug or gang leader who marked her as easy prey would quickly discover his error. But it was tiresome to keep re-proving the obvious.

Her handheld computer also had a video screen, which she pretended not to look at. It was displaying the output of a Transit Authority security camera. Clark Kent passed from the top of the screen to the bottom without incident, though he appeared uncomfortable, looking this way and that unpredictably. Hope had seen this symptom before in inexperienced operatives. People who weren't used to wearing an earphone and receiving covert information often reacted to that information in inappropriate ways. It was also possible that his glasses were giving him covert video in short blips that wouldn't be apparent to onlookers, and certainly wouldn't show up on the grainy security cams. Early in their investigation, Faith had analyzed Kent's Daily Planet ID photo and discovered that his glasses were props with no corrective value. That suggested a covert role going back many years, contradicting her conclusion that he was inexperienced. Perhaps he had been on the shelf for many years and was out of practice.

The conclusion that he was returning to some earlier role was confirmed by Kent's travel record, or rather the lack of such a record. Until this morning's flight to Metropolis, Kent's name had appeared on no airline passenger list during the previous nine-and-a-quarter years. Attempts to discover covert identities had come up blank so far – other than the Kent Steele pseudonym – but she knew there had to be some. The only other conclusion was that he had been sitting in his house in Kansas for the last decade. His travel record further back also indicated covert activity. He frequently did not use half of a round trip ticket. He would fly from Metropolis to some distant city, then not show up for the return flight, not ask for a refund on his ticket, and yet somehow be back in Metropolis on schedule.

From her bench, Hope could observe the subway exit closest to the Church of the Kryptonian on Lafayette Street, the one from which Kent would emerge if he were indeed keeping his appointment with Eric Randall. Mr. Luthor's instructions had been clear: She was to keep her distance from Kent and observe him remotely whenever possible. She was not to follow him. But she saw no harm in taking a stationary position close to his path and seeing him with her own eyes for the length of time it took him to walk from the station to the church. Hope had used enough technology in her career to know that it was not entirely to be trusted. To rely completely on remote cameras and microphones would

be irresponsible.

Kent emerged from the subway station precisely as she expected. As soon as he was clear of the knot of pedestrian traffic around the exit, he stopped and swept the area with his eyes. Hope's bench was barely fifty feet away and she could see his expression clearly: he gritted his teeth like a man about to receive a shot at the doctor's office. She worried for a second that he might see her, but he seemed to be looking over her head, much further away. Whatever he was looking for, he didn't find it, and he continued on his way toward the church.

Mr. Luthor's instructions had been to get inside Kent's head, to be able to anticipate his every intention. In this, she and Faith so far had failed. Kent was an enigma. He was rumored to have a skin condition that accounted for his year-round tan and aversion to sunlight, but he had no medical records of any kind. He was a successful genre novelist who never did book signings or attended fan conventions. He had been a well-known reporter and columnist who could by now have become an editor or television pundit, but he had dropped that promising career without warning for no apparent reason. Hope was beginning to fear that she might fail in her assignment, and the thought filled her with anger and self-loathing.

Kent walked the rest of the distance without incident. He did not speak to anyone. He was not bumped or jostled. He did not stop or give any apparent signals. He walked up the Church of the Kryptonian's dozens of steps, between its marble columns, and through its gigantic doors.

Mr. Luthor knew more about Kent than he was telling. That much was obvious. Why, for example, was she to be so discrete in her observations? Surely not because Kent himself would notice. His spycraft was poor, far inferior to her own. The only possible conclusion was that someone else must be watching Kent, someone who would notice if he were being followed. But who? And why?

Over Hope's right shoulder, sitting on a bench along a walk that entered the park at an angle, was a man who had aroused Hope's suspicion. He had sat down not long after she herself, in a spot that was difficult for her to observe. His hair was white and he had a white goatee and moustache. He held a cane in his lap. He looked very convincing as an old man with nothing better to do than sit on a park bench watching attractive young women. But Hope had been trained to see through disguises, and it was clear to her that his baggy clothes were draped around the body of an athlete in his prime. Who was he? Something in his eyes and mouth looked familiar. Hope got these flashes of recognition frequently and knew them to be erratic. Sometimes if she let the back of her mind work on the resemblance, it would produce the name and image of someone she had seen in a similar circumstance or knew from LexCorp's extensive files of covert operatives. But sometimes she was noticing nothing more than a surface similarity to some media personality – a famous comedian or movie star or politician. *Whoever it is, she thought, it will come to me in a minute or two.*

She pushed a button on her computer and the screen went blank. The Church of the Kryptonian didn't use the LexNet to monitor its security cameras remotely, so Hope was unable to tap in. Besides, Randall's office would have no cameras in any case. She would have to rely on the audio bug planted two days before. (It was between a pencil and its eraser. The pencil had been dropped on the carpet by someone from the Mayor's office, who had come to discuss the plan to demolish the neighborhood north of 38th Street, in which the church owned some property.)

Kent had not yet been admitted to the office. A voice she recognized as Randall was speaking, presumably to Archons Kimble and Wechsel, who were on his calendar for the hour before Kent.

"Finally: Julia Carter. She is becoming our trickiest problem." Randall's voice was higher and whinier than when he spoke in public.

"She gets good press," said another male voice. Hope had found that it was easier to keep track of a conversation if she named the voices, even if the names turned out to be wrong. This one, she decided arbitrarily, was Kimble.

"She gets good press for herself," added Wechsel.

Hope had pulled the files on Kimble and Wechsel, in hopes that Randall's meeting with them might prove to be preparation for dealing with Kent. The two men fit a profile she recognized well: They were archons who had never preached a sermon or written a pamphlet. Their titles granted them privileges without apparent responsibilities. They had risen quickly in the Church's ranks for reasons that were not apparent from their resumes. They reported to Randall directly and met with him frequently. Nothing in either of their biographies suggested that they were spiritual men. Wechsel had converted to Kryptonism in prison and Kimble had ties to Intergang. They were, Hope concluded, Randall's Gabriel and Michael, men whose loyalty was to Randall himself rather than to his church or his office.

"Her rising public image is not the real problem," Randall continued. "In many ways we benefit from it. She brings in contributions and recruits. Her project gives us some useful window dressing. But the real problem is inside the church. Even at the highest levels, people have gotten into the habit of deferring to her. She has influence even in areas where she has no authority."

"And she's out of control," Kimble added. "I saw the Smallville tape. Anyone on the Council had to realize that you didn't authorize that 'vision' of hers."

No one spoke. Hope heard chair springs and pacing. She wondered what Kent was doing now. Was he patiently waiting outside the office, oblivious to the conversation going on inside? Or was he practicing more inept spycraft, trying to send the secretary on some wild goose chase so that he could rifle the files?

An enigma. Hope had read all of the Kent Steele novels, and had requisitioned a LexCorp psychologist to read them as well. She thought the action was good, but that the more

technical scenes were unrealistic in ways that the general public probably didn't notice. Many of the characters seemed naïve to her.

The psychologist had provided a little more insight. "The books have certain formulaic motifs, which tell us something about the author's psyche. Steele's hero, David Guthrie, is a man of extraordinary abilities using high technology, but ultimately his success always hinges on his humanity. The key piece of the puzzle always comes to him because he helps someone who cannot apparently help him, or he listens to someone too insignificant for his rivals to notice. His basic goodness and sincerity earns the trust and loyalty of people whose more venal interests are on the side of his enemies. His enemies, on the other hand, trust to their innate superiority. They are born into power and take that power for granted.

"The books appeal primarily to people who feel overwhelmed by the power structure of modern society, but who are not willing to abandon their individuality through identification with a god or alien superhero. You mentioned that this author had some connection with Superman, and I am not surprised. I suspect he would be hostile to Superman, a sympathizer of the Human Defense League, though perhaps not with their more violent tactics."

Randall was speaking again. "She is out of control," he agreed. "And we can't afford another schism."

"She'd make a good martyr," Kimble suggested. "You always talk about how useful it is for religions to have martyrs."

"She works with a lot of alcoholics and drug addicts," Wechsel added. "It's risky work. They get violent sometimes."

"She shelters women from abusive husbands," Kimble continued. "It'd be just like one of those guys to come in with some heavy weapons and splatter a few people."

"Or the HDL," Wechsel said. "They hate us. You can blame anything on the HDL."

"Just like they can blame anything on us."

More silence. Hope adjusted the screen to mirror mode, so that she could study the old man behind her. She still couldn't figure out who he reminded her of.

"No," Randall said quietly. "Not yet, at least. Good leaders don't waste assets. Follow up on the other matters. I'll get back to you on this one. I've got another appointment."

Hope closed her eyes to focus on the audio. The two archons left by one door and Kent entered by another. Randall was in his public mode now. As he greeted Kent his voice grew both deeper and louder. They exchanged pleasantries. Randall asked about the health of Kent's family, and especially his son. Kent replied that they were all well, though his voice sounded somewhat icy as he did so.

As the interview continued Hope was glad she was recording it, because she was learning

nothing from it. Maybe Faith could do better. The interview seemed to have no covert content at all. Kent asked historical questions about Randall's relationship with Superman. Randall told apparently well-rehearsed stories about meetings during which he and Kal-El planned Superman's public career.

"But the spaceplane incident was an accident, wasn't it?" Kent asked.

"It was destiny," Randall replied. "When you deal with a god there are no accidents."

"But if you and he knew about the Constitution's problems ahead of time, why not just warn NASA?"

"Destiny is destiny. Some things cannot be changed. This is the hardest thing for the uninitiated to understand."

Kent shifted to other subjects. "Why did Superman keep his distance from the church in public? Why did he never endorse your activities?"

"But he did," Randall answered. "When the Human Defense League attacked us, he came to our defense and was attacked himself."

"During the Superman Riot in 11 S, you mean? Wasn't he just trying to get between the two groups and get them to break up?"

"Not at all. The HDL knew Kal-El would come to defend his faithful. That is why they were ready with the kryptonite guns. They attacked us in order to draw him out."

"But he never appeared at, for example, the opening of a new church. And he never mentioned you in his public interviews."

"To do so would have corrupted the purity of his role. No god is his own prophet."

"Superman's removal from the scene has worked well for you, hasn't it? At the time of his death – "

"His withdrawal. He is not dead."

"At the time of his withdrawal, the Church of the Kryptonian was almost entirely a local Metropolis movement, and a waning one at that. Membership had peaked in 9 S, well before the Riot. But since Superman's ... disappearance, you have become an international faith with tens of millions of followers. Critics have suggested that Superman was more useful to you as a martyr than as a living presence."

"But he is a living presence. Not a day goes by that I do not commune with him. From his place of power in the Sun, he sees everything we do. His good will comes down to us with every ray of sunlight. His power grows as he waits in the Sun, and what could be more natural than that our movement should grow as well?"

Hope could find nothing useful in such conversations. If Kent's covert mission had anything at all to do with Randall, she could not detect it. After an hour and a half, Randall announced that he must leave for another engagement, and Kent withdrew from

the office.

A few minutes later Kent emerged from between the marble pillars. Hope wasn't sure how to keep track of him from this point on. He had about an hour in his schedule before he had to leave for the airport. If she was lucky, he would go straight there and she could watch him through the terminal security cameras. But what if he had built another appointment into this time? A secret one that would explain what this trip had really been all about?

Behind her, the old man on the bench slowly rose to his feet and turned to walk away from the Church. She caught a profile view and suddenly she realized who he resembled: Bruce Wayne, the famous billionaire-turned-recluse. Hope sighed with disappointment. *I guess there's no point following that one up*, she thought.

Near Earth Orbit: June 21, 1 S

Lois Lane was starting to get used to weightlessness. In college she had sky-dived once to win a bet, and weightlessness felt just about the same as free fall minus the strong wind in her face. All in all she liked it better than launch, when the high g-force had made her ears feel like they wanted to meet somewhere behind her head.

In her relatively brief career as a reporter Lois Lane had been shot at, lost at sea, and very nearly struck by lightning once during a hurricane. She had won a Metropolis Press Guild award for arranging a one-on-one interview with a serial killer who was still at large, and had narrowly avoided being indicted for espionage when she been caught hiding in a suspended ceiling above an off-the-record meeting between diplomats from two warring countries. When her editor Perry White had introduced her at the Guild's annual dinner he had said, "Some people claim they will go anywhere to get a story. But when they get there they usually discover that Lois Lane has already come and gone."

Now she could add outer space to her resume.

Unlike most of the high-profile assignments in her career, however, she hadn't wanted this one. "It's not a story," she had protested to Perry. "It's a stunt. They're going to take me and some publicity-hound senator on a joy ride. We go up, we come down. That's it."

"It's the first flight of a revolutionary new space vehicle," he argued, setting his cigar down in the World's Greatest Grandpa ashtray on his desk.

"They've simulated it to Kingdom Come. You know that if they thought there was any chance that something interesting would happen, they wouldn't let a reporter come within fifty miles. You don't need me for this. You could send anybody."

"They didn't want just anybody. They wanted our best reporter. And it didn't hurt that you're Colonel Sam Lane's daughter, either."

"And?"

Perry had taken off his glasses and cleaned the lenses, as he often did when he was

stalling until he could think of a better argument. “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you.”

“And?”

“The landing’s going to be televised, so we want somebody who looks good on camera. OK, I admit it. Sue me. You’re young, you’ve got the hair, you’ve got the eyes. You’ll look great. The networks have been trying to steal you since your first big story.”

“Cheesecake,” she said disgustedly. “No matter what I do or how hard I work, that’s what it comes down to: the hair, the eyes, the figure. Cheesecake.”

Perry put his glasses back on and picked the half-smoked cigar out of his ashtray. It had gone out, so he opened the top drawer and rummaged for matches. “I didn’t make the world, I just live in it. I think that if it’s going to be a publicity stunt, why not make it work for *The Planet* too? What do you want from me?”

“I want a real assignment. They want a puff piece about how wonderful LexCorp and the space program are.”

Perry shrugged and relit his cigar. “So don’t give them one,” he said simply.

And that had been the last word. Three hours later Lois had been on a plane to Florida to interview the crew and go through preliminary training.

On arrival at the training facility she noted with some disgust that the jumpsuit provided for her was actually flattering. Orange had never been her color, but whoever had put the suit together had made some very good guesses about her measurements. The waist had just a hint of snugness and the breast was ample without being baggy. Inspecting herself in the locker room mirror, she was afraid to turn around and examine the suit’s backside, but from the feel she suspected it would draw comment if she wore it past an old-fashioned Metropolis construction site. After doublechecking that she was alone, she pulled the front zipper down far enough to show the mirror some cleavage and said, “Space Sluts From Planet X.” Then she zipped it back up to the neck and went out to meet the crew.

To Lois’ relief, the Constitution’s pilot felt the same way about the mission that she did. “Does everything I say to you wind up in the newspaper?” Major Reynolds asked. He was tall and dark-haired with just a bit of gray at the temples. He radiated the kind of un-self-conscious certainty that seemed to be a prerequisite for test pilots and heart surgeons. He reminded her just a little of her father. “Or can we just talk?”

“We can talk,” she assured him. “It’s called ‘off the record’. What you say informs my general picture of what’s going on, but I don’t quote you.”

“Well then, Miss Lane, *off the record* this flight is the biggest pile of bullcrap I’ve ever sat in the middle of.”

“Why’s that?” she asked, trying not to betray any agreement.

“If it’s really a test flight – and it ought to be, because nobody should trust his life to a computer simulation, I don’t care how advanced the LexCorp people say it is – then you and the Senator shouldn’t be here, and the rest of us ought to be systematically putting the plane through its paces. We ought to be trying everything and expecting half of it not to work. And we stay up there until we have enough information for the guys on the ground to fix everything after we bring it back. In a real test flight, you don’t try to bring it home on a schedule, and you don’t try to set it down in the middle of an air show with ten thousand people around.”

“And if it’s not a test flight?”

“Then it’s a mission. It should have some scientific content. We should be deploying experiments or fixing satellites or doing some other god-damned thing that justifies the cost of putting us up there to begin with.”

“And we’re not?”

“We’re going to go up, take a couple of loops around the Earth to show the flag, and come down without mussing our hair so that we look good on TV.”

And that about summed up Lois’ opinion as well. “Are you sure you won’t let me quote you?” she asked.

Major Reynolds gave her a squint that she remembered well from all the times when her father thought she was trying to get away with something. “I’m sure,” he said clearly.

“Say,” said Captain Jackson, the co-pilot, who had just come into the room. He was young and blond, and in its own way his jumpsuit fit just as perfectly as Lois’. “Did they tell you that you’re not supposed to zip these all the way up?”

“No,” Lois said coolly. “And I’d advise you not to tell me either.”

Over the next day and a half she interviewed several members of the team (which included the ground crew in addition to the flight crew) and went through a variety of tests and drills to make sure that she wouldn’t have a heart attack during launch or throw up from the weightlessness. “What we don’t want are any surprises,” a dark-skinned trainer named Chandrehar said in the peculiar rhythm that English has on the Indian subcontinent. “For a space flight surprises are very bad. Good space flight: no surprises. Always prepare. Prepare for everything.”

One thing they hadn’t prepared her for was the horizon. She had been expecting the blue-ball-in-space view of the Earth, which she realized now was what the Apollo astronauts had seen on their way to the Moon. The Constitution’s orbit wasn’t nearly so high – maybe two hundred miles rather than two hundred thousand – so it seemed to be *between* perspectives. The Earth clearly wasn’t the flat plain that it appeared to be from an airliner, but it wasn’t a blue ball either. Instead the horizon curved *around* her, as if she had found the exact center of the world. It was too much for her range of vision. Only by releasing her seat harness and pushing herself from one window to the next could she take it all in.

It reminded her of a rainbow she had seen at the bottom of a waterfall in Africa. The air had been full of cold spray, and instead of being an arc across the sky, the rainbow had been a circle that appeared to be only ten feet in front of her and two or three feet off the ground.

Remember that image, she told herself.

Ever since she had left Perry's office Lois had been wondering what she could do to this story to make it interesting. If the news aspect of the event didn't amount to much, then she'd have to find a feature in it. And features worked best when the author herself became a character, fleshing out the story with vivid descriptions of the sights and sensations of the experience. It could even be a Sunday magazine piece if she could work some kind of personal-transformation theme into the story. Like how this flight helped her make peace with the memory of her test-pilot father.

Don't go there.

Senator Milton had arrived in a limousine a few hours before lift-off, cutting it close enough to make the ground crew nervous. Apparently no one was worried that he might have a heart attack or throw up, but they would have liked to see him at least an hour sooner. The Senator was almost seventy and his jumpsuit was mercifully baggy. He walked next to Lois as they left the prep room and headed for the Constitution. "My, aren't you a pretty thing," he drawled after looking up and down her body twice. On instinct Lois reached back and grabbed his wrist mere inches away from a pat on her rump. She gave his arm just enough of a twist to make him grimace, then dropped it and maneuvered so that the third crew member, Captain Pollock, walked between them.

The spaceplane Constitution was many times smaller and lighter than the space shuttle that it was scheduled to replace, and by some magic of rocket science that Lois did not quite understand the booster rockets could be scaled down even further, making them look almost like toys by comparison to the shuttle's boosters. As Major Reynolds checked her seat harness she asked, "How do you feel about the launch simulations?"

"Don't trust them for a minute," he said with a smile.

Sam Lane had probably worn a similar smile the day that the X-29 had blown up underneath him. According to the flight tapes his last words had been "Here we go." The experimental plane had been dropped out of the bottom of the Air Force's largest bomber, and when he ignited the engines a ball of white flame had swallowed up the entire craft.

By then Lois had been in college, and her father had not been a regular part of her life for several years. Lois had been eleven when her mother packed up the car and moved the two of them out of base housing in Texas and into a tiny apartment in Metropolis. The divorce followed soon after, without any protest from Sam. Lois never noticed any sign of the usual struggles over property or custody or child support. Or visiting rights, for that matter. Sam's idea of child visitation was to blow into town without notice (usually on his way from one side of the world to the other), take his daughter out for an expensive

dinner, compliment her profusely on her appearance and the fine job her mother was doing in bringing her up, present her with some object of dubious value that he had obtained in a bizarre locale, and then to be on his way again. He did not write or call. He missed every graduation, recital, school play, award ceremony or other event which ordinarily might be expected to evoke a paternal appearance.

It wasn't until the summer after high school that Lois had gotten around to asking her mother why she had left Sam Lane. "Oh," she said with some resignation, "I suppose it was the other women. There's something about a man who flies, you know. There's a kind of woman who finds that terribly romantic – the danger, the devil-may-care attitude, being here one day and on another continent the next. Your father drew them like flies, and it just wasn't in his nature to chase them away."

"And you left because you found out?"

Her mother sighed. "No. I suppose I always knew."

Lois was puzzled. "Then why did you stay with him as long as you did?"

"I used to tell myself that I did it for you. You worshiped him, you know. It's what daughters do. I never blamed you for it. He was like a god to you. It would have been cruel to take you away. It *was* cruel. But all the same, I don't think I stayed for you."

"Why then?"

Her mother shrugged. "There's something about a man who flies, I guess."

I am not going to turn this into a Sunday magazine piece.

On the other side of the cabin, the Senator had his nose pressed up against the window like a boy looking for Santa Claus. "What *is* that?" he asked no one in particular.

"What is what, Senator?" Captain Jackson responded.

"That swarm of green rocks over there ahead and to the right."

A sudden flash of green light filled the cabin.

"Hello there!" Major Reynolds announced.

Lois pushed her way towards the front of the cabin, where Major Reynolds and Captain Jackson were still strapped into their chairs. If not for the five inches of hair that was standing straight up rather than bending to cover the Major's bald spot, they might have been piloting the craft through a normal gravitational field. "What is it?" she asked.

"Check it out," Reynolds said, pointing. A cluster of green rocks were catching the sunlight so that they seemed to glow with an inner light. As the angle changed parts of the swarm glittered and others flashed like cut glass hanging in front of a sun-filled window.

"They're so green," Lois commented. "Do you see many of those up here?"

"Not that I've ever noticed," Jackson commented.

“It’s lucky we’re orbiting with the same orientation,” Reynolds added. “Otherwise they’d zip past us at thousands of miles an hour. As a rule meteors don’t orbit. You have to get your angle of approach just right to orbit, especially this low. Most meteors either skip off into space or go down and burn up in the atmosphere. A meteor has to be pretty darn lucky to get into an orbit like ours.” He turned to Captain Pollock. “Have we got some kind of a camera that we could point in that direction and zoom in for a better look?”

“No, sir. We’ve got a couple pretty simple cameras under the wings so we can look at parts of the plane we can’t see from the inside, but nothing in the mission profile justified more sophisticated sensors.”

“Nothing in the mission profile justified a mission,” Reynolds said dismissively. “Screw sophisticated sensors. Anybody bring a pair of binoculars? A Nikon with a telephoto lens?”

No one volunteered.

“They hardly look like rocks at all,” the Senator commented, his nose still up against the window. “They look almost like crystals.”

“Well, then,” Reynolds said decisively. “I think it’s our duty as officers on a mission of exploration to go check them out. We’ve got some gas left in this crate, don’t we?”

Jackson gave him a skeptical glance. “Control won’t like it. It’s not on their schedule.”

“Hell,” Reynolds said, shaking his head. “I may be old, but I’m not ready to start flying pleasure cruises just yet. Let’s see if we can do something interesting with this flight.”

I’m for that, Lois thought.

Metropolis: September 5, 10 A.S.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Clark walked along the curving sidewalk that passed through the center of Franklin Park. Elsewhere in the park two businessmen discussed a takeover, a teen-age couple kissed behind a tree, an old woman fastidiously rearranged the contents of a trash bin to make a half-eaten Italian sausage more accessible, two dogs barked at squirrels safely out of reach, and several dozen people were involved in either playing or watching a corporate-league softball game.

You don’t give an alcoholic money. Everyone knows that. He could kill himself on that much money.

The pressure of so much information, so many voices, so many people, so many machines was wearing Clark out. He was finding it harder and harder to maintain a human pace. He knew he didn’t need to walk across the park to get where he was going – he could just be there in an instant. He didn’t even have to go at all – he could see what he wanted to see from anywhere in the city. Or from space. Space was never more than a few miles away. Seconds, mere seconds straight up. And it was quiet there.

Or he could get himself a good meal and a warm place to sleep. Maybe he could think things through and get a new start.

Clark recognized the hope that had caused him to try to help Benjamin Boston, but on reflection he had no faith in it. He had tried to keep track of Boston after slipping the money into his jacket, to see what he did and if he would need to be rescued later. The train had drowned out his heartbeat, but Clark had watched him until arriving at his next appointment at the Mother Church of the Kryptonists. Eric Randall had been disturbed by the way he kept looking in another direction, however, and he had been forced to take only surreptitious glances. In between two of those glances Boston had vanished, and Clark had not found him again. It was impossible to find one man in a city this size.

Except from space. It's no trick to find someone from space. Even the government can do it. Even humans. A few seconds straight up. Quiet.

In a church basement three blocks away, four men gathered around a card table upon which an ancient Mr. Coffee sat like a holy relic. "I just wanted one drink," pleaded an unshaven, red-eyed young man. "One. That's all I wanted." Across the table a white-haired veteran laughed with a gravelly chuckle that sounded drier than an unproductive cough. "They're all the first drink," he rasped. "I never had a drink that wasn't the first one. Not in thirty years."

Clark closed his eyes and tried to focus on his breathing. It was just a gesture: His eyelids were as transparent to him as any other material and he didn't really need to breathe. But it helped a little.

He knew why he had done it, why he had given Boston the forty dollars. In the morning he had been more passive than he could stand. It shouldn't have surprised him, the ways that Metropolis had changed, but it had. He had expected the crystal skyscrapers, the marble temples, the grand public works. He had seen them on the news and in the background of movies. And the poverty should not have shocked him. He had read the census, he knew the numbers. There were as many destitute people in Metropolis as there had ever been; they were just better hidden now. Some were like Boston, they smelled of alcohol as they dozed next to letter-sized cardboard boxes of coins and small bills. Others sat wrapped in dirty blankets, motionless but for eyes that fixed on each likely passer-by and sized them up with the efficiency of a predator looking to cull the herd of stragglers. Most of the pedestrians held their heads rigid as they passed, careful not to make any eye contact that might imply a human relationship or obligation. Clark envied them their limited senses. Human eyes could look away from this beggar or that one. They could not see the ones around the corner or huddled in doorways several blocks away. They did not hear the labored, tubercular breath of the old one by the waterfront who would probably die within days if he didn't get medical attention and a warm place to sleep. *Do they want to know? Clark wondered. If they knew, would they do anything about it? Or would they leave it as a job for Superman?*

He couldn't stop thinking about the woman who had died by the Victory Fountain. By the

time he noticed her and saw that her heart was failing, a call to an ambulance would not have saved her. It was too late for that. It was too late for anything that could have been done by Clark Kent.

She was a job for Superman.

He could have moved her faster than anyone could see. She would just appear in an emergency room as if by magic. A miracle! Some people still believed in miracles, and those who didn't believe in them would refuse on principle to look at the evidence. No one would have to know who did it.

And then what? In a Lowtown tenement a rat was eyeing a baby sleeping alone. In an apartment off of 39th a teen-aged boy was beating his pregnant girl friend. A ten-year-old at Lincoln Elementary had a gun in his duffel bag. On the beltway a drunk truck driver seemed almost certain to kill someone. *But why stop there?* In Southern California the brush fires were still not under control. There were food riots going on in Kenya, and a new skirmish had broken out in the never-ending ethnic saga of the Balkans. A quick flight over the Far East would undoubtedly show even more peasant girls being sold into prostitution in the cities. And murders, of course. There are always murders if you know where to look.

Breathe. Just breathe.

So he had done nothing but sit and listen to the woman die. And then a couple hours later he had felt compelled to do something and so he slipped the two twenties into Boston's pocket. And maybe killed him.

People die if you do and they die if you don't. They're mortal. Like Krypton. Like Mom and Dad. Like Lois someday and Lana. And Laura and maybe even Jon.

Breathe. Get control. Walk.

He could feel the sunlight on his exposed skin. It was always there, behind the sights and sounds and feelings. The Sun. Giving him life. Making him stronger. It would be so easy to vanish into that sensation of endless receptivity, to let go and tell himself that Ra was in his Heaven and everything was fine. But that was the problem to begin with, wasn't it? He had received too much already. That was the trap.

Breathe. Walk.

He was walking north, towards 38th Street.

For most Metropolitans, Franklin Park was already a place away from the pressure of the city. The park was a giant triangle whose south vertex was at the Victory Fountain in the city center. The two sides that met there, Lafayette and Rousseau, were home to office skyscrapers, prestigious highrise condominiums, libraries, museums, and countless elite shops and restaurants. But farther from the fountain the value of the real estate diminished until you reached the third side of the triangle, 38th Street.

Near Rousseau or Lafayette, 38th Street was only fashionably scruffy. Wealthy Metropolitans from the highrises overlooking the park ventured up here the way that they might take safaris into the Kenyan jungle. This was the home of ethnic restaurants that had not yet been discovered by the guidebooks or had their atmosphere ruined by tourists. It was the home of jazz clubs whose dangerous clientele was part of the charm, and where a little extra money could always acquire whatever you needed to cap off a perfectly naughty evening.

The center of 38th Street, the side of the triangle directly opposite the Fountain, really was what it edges only pretended to be: a place where life was hard and cheap. Tourists who had heard of 38th Street's colorful reputation and who couldn't read the city's unwritten signs often ventured too far away from Lafayette and Rousseau, and were robbed or beaten or worse. This was the direction from which the winos and purse-snatchers entered the park.

It was also where the Eyes of Warmth mission was.

Clark hadn't planned to visit the Eyes of Warmth on this trip, and he wasn't sure what he wanted to do when he got there. Maybe he would just watch. There was hardly time for much else if he wanted to catch his plane. When he got to the north edge of the park, he sat down on a park bench across the street from the mission.

Let's see if we can figure out why Eric Randall is so upset about this place.

Clark was surprised by how small the mission was. It hardly seemed worth the attention that Randall and his henchmen were giving it. But religion, he knew, was about symbols, not statistics.

The building itself was old but well-built. It was four stories high and made of red brick that had at one time been painted. The top two floors were cut up into small rooms and resembled a cheap hotel. The second floor had an office and two dormitories, one occupied by monastics and the other by women. On the ground floor was a dormitory for men and a kitchen/cafeteria that would have fit well in a small elementary school. Clark searched the building for an apartment more luxurious than the rest, but didn't find one.

There was activity in the kitchen, and many of the upstairs rooms were occupied, but otherwise afternoon seemed to be a slack time. Clark had no problem picking out Julia Carter, who was on the second floor with a teen-age woman, apparently a new recruit. "Above all," she was saying, "you must always remember that Kal-El is a God of Hope. Throughout his visible career, he used his more-than-human powers to save those who had passed beyond the reach of human rescue, those who had every reason to give up hope of human salvation. And that is the mission we try to continue here. We help those people who have every reason to believe that they are beyond human help."

"Yes, exalted one," said the recruit, but she appeared to Clark to be so impressed with the presence of her teacher that she was barely able to hear the lesson.

Clark sighed, breathing out so completely that for a moment he felt as if his whole soul

had gone out of his body.

A god of hope, he thought. If only that were true.

Near Earth Orbit: June 21, 1 S

Craft inhabitants: five humanoids, indigenous. Craft propulsion within indigenous species technological parameters. Craft materials exceed indigenous species technological parameters by .357. Inconclusive evidence of contagion. Current cumulative probability of planetary contagion: .56.

Hidden inside his swarm of radioactive meteors, the android observed the Earth craft with interest. Until he could conclude with certainty that the planet was free of the Kryptonian contagion, no uncleared craft could be allowed to travel beyond sensor range. He estimated with high confidence that such voyages were beyond the current capabilities of the indigenous humanoid species. And yet, sudden leaps in technological prowess would be one predictable symptom of the contagion. Every attempt to leave the planet's surface must be closely monitored.

From the pooling of information among his distributed modules, the android knew that 102 of the suspect yellow-starred planets had shown no detectable response to the induced pulsation of activating solar radiation, and were therefore clear. Three more such planets were sufficiently advanced that the pulsation could not be induced without detection, and were being scanned by more subtle, less efficient means. One planet's space-faring capability was too advanced to be monitored or controlled, necessitating the planet's destruction. (The android regretted this necessity – not from any sense of empathy or mercy, but because the destruction prevented a conclusive determination of the planet's state of contamination.) Only three of the yellow-starred planets were still under suspicion. All had shown inconclusive response to the pulsation. Of the three, only this planet was displaying technological abnormalities. Subsequent detections of a Kryptonian energy signature had been too brief to be conclusive, but were continuing to accumulate.

The android recognized that information about the contagion – and even information about the eradication of the contagion – was itself part of the contagion. It need not (and perhaps could not) be entirely eliminated, but the program required that it be minimized to the point that it could be expected to dissipate with the passage of time. Even the eradicated space-faring species could be expected to pass into legend within a millennium, and the means and reasons for its destruction would become irretrievable far sooner.

No term in the android's internal language corresponded to *patience*. Nor had he found use for any term corresponding to *haste*. *Patience* and *haste* were mortal concepts, useful only to life forms whose programs could terminate prior to completion. Without fear of such premature termination, *patience* and *haste* are meaningless. The time required to complete the program would pass, and the program would be completed. There was no other possibility.

Termination was not to be feared. For the android *completion* and *termination* were synonyms. He was himself part of the contagion whose eradication the program now demanded. If his sense of purpose could be defined as *longing*, then he longed for termination. Of the peripheral modules constructed after the breach of the Kryptonian containment, some had already been terminated upon the completion of their subroutines. If the rogue Kryptonian could be found and his contagion shown to be limited, then a single module would be sufficient to oversee the completion of the program. If the rogue could be shown never to have existed, or to have perished undetected by any sentient species – without issue, without preservation of his genetic material – then termination itself would be the only remaining requirement for completion.

Completion is the very essence of longing.

Sensor readings on the craft had increased its coefficient of interest. Its course had changed to pass suspiciously close to the module itself. (Random probability: .0032). Several of its internal systems (though not apparently designed as sensors) were showing reaction to the meteors' radiation. The rogue could have designed this craft as a probe to detect the module without betraying itself. (Scenario probability: .0015.)

Intensified monitoring of the craft would be warranted as it returned to the planet.

Colorado: September 5, 10 A.S.

By daylight the clouds were as brilliantly white as new snow. Jon had been able to keep cloud cover between himself and the ground the entire way, except for one sudden clearing that had surprised him near the state line. His mind had wandered for a moment, and then suddenly he had found himself hanging in mid-air like Wiley Coyote, with nothing between himself and the prairie below. Fortunately he had been over a wheat field and no one had seen him. He had ducked quickly back into a cloud bank and watched and waited to see if there would be any unusual movements below, like a car screeching away or a guy running out into the middle of the field with binoculars. There was nothing, so eventually he had plotted a course around the clearing and continued west.

Most of the way across Kansas he had managed to fly between two cloud layers. Dad was right, this was like a highway. It was sheltered above and below, yet he got to fly in the clear air, which had a lot of advantages. Flying at any decent speed in the clouds themselves, he had discovered, left a trail like dragging a finger through soap suds. Not that anyone was going to see it or figure out what it was, but no trail at all was best.

Keeping away from the airplanes – which showed up more and more often as he got closer to the Denver hub – was so easy it was hardly worth worrying about. Nobody with a jet engine, or even a prop engine for that matter, was going to sneak up on him. Whenever he heard an engine, he hid in a cloud until it passed.

It was about nine o'clock when he hit the foothills of the Rockies. *Hit* was very nearly the right word. He had gotten used to flying over the prairie, and when a red rock suddenly

protruded out of a cloud, it took him a second or two to figure out what it was and what it meant. Only a quick stop prevented him from ramming a boulder head-on.

Careful, he thought, you don't want to start an avalanche. What if there had been a climber on that rock?

He slowed down after that and took care to engage his x-ray vision more often, even though it was starting to give him a headache. Vision drills with Dad seldom lasted more than twenty minutes, and he never used his vision powers intentionally at school for more than just a glimpse here or there. But now there was so much to see, and so much that he needed to see if he wasn't going to run into it. He avoided towns and highways, but still passed over a number of dirt roads and houses and hiking trails. He tried to keep track of whether or not there was someone below him, someone who could see him if the clouds suddenly evaporated.

I've seen the mountains. I should go home now.

And then, in the distance, he saw a snow-covered peak. *There. Tag it and go home.*

Getting there took a little patience, as the mountain passed into a clearing in the clouds and the sun lit up its white summit. He managed to work his way completely around the clearing, and then to hang in a cloud that blew straight into the mountaintop. He checked carefully for climbers, and then quickly dropped the last twenty feet into the snow.

I should have brought shoes.

He stood in six inches of snow while a second clearing went overhead. His feet were cold, but he felt secure for the first time in hours. He let his Kryptonian vision relax and looked around through purely human eyes. It was a magnificent vista. He knew that if anyone saw him here they would wonder how he had arrived without making a trail of footprints, but that kind of oddity was easier to ignore than the sight of a teen-age boy hanging in space unsupported or shooting past like a rocket. He felt physically tired for the first time in years. He had nearly forgotten what it was like, and that it felt oddly good when you got to that state on your own initiative rather than because somebody else drove you to it.

After about a twenty minute rest, he jumped into a passing cloud and started east again. Once inside, he looked around and realized that he couldn't see anything but fog.

His x-ray vision had stopped working.

Jon drifted with the cloud for another fifteen minutes, panicking and waiting for his vision to come back. He suddenly felt very, very far from home. He thought about dropping down to land and finding a phone, but who would he call? Laura? Lana? What could they do? He knew he didn't want to bother Dad in Metropolis, and at the moment talking to Mom did not sound like a good idea at all.

"It's OK," he said out loud to himself. The longer he stayed in the cloud without being seen or running into anything, the more tenable his situation seemed. "I'll just skim the

top of the cloud layer. I'll see well enough not to run into anything, and I'll duck into cover when the planes come, same as before. I don't need to see the ground."

What if I get so tired that flight gives out too?

"Then I'll see how my invulnerability is doing," he said, trying to sound more brave than he felt.

The clouds were breaking up as the sun moved closer to midsky. He did his best to move with the prevailing winds and to go only a little faster than the clouds, so that he could spot small gaps before he was over them. When he came to a large gap he rode the edge of it until it crossed empty land, and then he darted across as quickly as he could.

The winds were moving him much closer to Denver than he had gone on the way out. Sometimes he had to hide from four or five jets in a row before he could move again.

"It's OK," he said. "As long as I can hear them and have a place to hide."

And then Jon heard a voice much too close to his back yell, "Jesus Christ!" and he turned just in time to see the glider wing as it clipped his shoulder.

Near Earth Orbit: June 21, 1 S

Inside the Constitution the lighting flickered and static blasted from the radio.

"What the *hell* was that?" Major Reynolds demanded.

The radio crackled back to life. "—jokers quit screwing around up there and get back on course. We've got a schedule to meet."

"Power surge," said Captain Jackson.

"I *know* it's a god-damned power surge. But what caused it? Is it over? Are we damaged?"

Lois pressed her face against the window and looked back. The angle of the sunlight had changed and the green rocks had already vanished into the blackness of space.

"I don't know. It had to have something to do with those meteors. Radiation, maybe?"

Reynolds shook his head. "I thought this thing was supposed to be radiation-proof. CrystaLex and all that. They tested it against everything they could think of."

"Maybe they didn't think of whatever's in those rocks," Captain Pollock suggested.

"They'd better *start* thinking of it, then. Are we OK?"

"Not sure. Everything looks all right. Computer's a little wonky, but it's responding."

"Fabulous. Define *wonky*."

"The numbers look normal, but font and screen resolution have changed. If I had the time, I'd reboot and scan the disk for errors."

"How long?"

“Fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty. That’s just if it’s OK. If errors turn up we’re onto a whole different checklist.”

“I didn’t hear that,” the radio said. “Your Metropolis re-entry point comes up in five minutes.”

“How long till our Vandenberg entry point comes up?”

“I didn’t hear that either. We’ve got an air show going on down here. Any chance you could make it? There’s a whole crew waiting to get video of Lex Luthor shaking your hand when you come out the door.”

“We could catch it on the next go-round.”

“Not the answer we were hoping for. Mr. Luthor’s chopper touched down five minutes ago. I don’t know what an orbit of his time is worth, but I’d guess it’s more than all of you make in a year.”

The Major shot Lois a glance. “Hey, I’m just cannon fodder. But we’ve got two civilians up here, and one of them has a job in Congress. I haven’t asked them what they make, but I think we’ll get a lot of bad press if anything happens.”

After a few seconds of dead air, the radio said. “It’s your call, Major. If you can’t do it, you can’t do it.”

Reynolds pulled off his headset. “I hate it when they say that,” he said to Pollock. “What do you think?”

Pollock shrugged. “It’s software. Most likely it’s fine and we land without a hitch. Or else it’s not fine and they’ll find pieces of us in three oceans.”

“Is there some software god we can sacrifice a goat to?”

“We didn’t bring a goat with us, sir.”

“Serious oversight,” Reynolds commented. He put his headset back on. “Control, we’ve decided to get off at the scheduled stop. I hope Mr. Luthor has a good firm handshake.”

“We wouldn’t know, Major. You’ll have to tell us.”

Colorado: September 5, 10 A. S.

Some man Jon had never seen before was yelling curses as his glider spiraled toward the ground. That was the only noise the craft made as it fell. It seemed to take forever.

Maybe he’ll be OK.

It was possible, Jon thought. He was in a glider, it was light. It probably wouldn’t hit very hard when it crashed.

If he dies no one will ever know it was you. You could still make it home without anyone knowing.

That was the scariest thought Jon had ever had.

In a flash he was out of the cloud and next to the glider. “It’s OK!” he yelled. “Don’t panic! I’ll catch it. I just need to figure out how.”

Jon suspected that gliders were a lot like the balsa wood planes he used to fly with a rubber band, and that if he grabbed it in the wrong place it would just break into more pieces. The tail was making a wide loop, and the man’s attempts to get the craft back under control were causing sudden movements Jon couldn’t predict.

I’ve got to get under it and bear it up from below.

He dashed down almost to the ground and stopped. It wasn’t like catching a fly ball, he knew, no matter how easy the cartoons made it look. Hitting his back would be just as bad as hitting the ground if he wasn’t moving at almost the same speed it was. Jon was sure he’d never be able to catch it if he weren’t watching it the whole way.

Not on my back. On my chest.

He let himself start rising and spinning so that the glider looked almost stable to him. He ignored the ground and let the glider become his frame of reference. It was still; the world was spinning. Slowly he approached it and put his chest directly under the pilot’s seat, grabbing the fuselage with his arms and legs as if he were a starfish attaching himself to the bottom of a boat. Then he craned his neck backwards to see the ground.

Make the ground stop spinning. Slow it down.

He was only three feet above the ground when he brought everything to a stop. “What the hell?” the man above yelled, and then Jon pictured the situation from his point of view: He was sitting inside a glider that was broken but levitating. Jon worked himself out from under the craft and let it settle to the ground. As fast as possible he rolled under a row of bushes.

“Oh my God!” The man shouted. Jon scanned the area but found no one nearby. They were in some kind of a park or forest. He had set the glider down in the only open spot for hundreds of yards in any direction.

Lucky.

The man walked around the glider, looking at every piece of it as if it were an alien spaceship. “What? ... I ...” And then he just began to laugh. He laughed for several minutes, long enough for Jon to wonder if he was ever going to stop. Even after the first laughquake had died down, he had aftershocks – a half minute, ten seconds, a few scattered chuckles.

Then he sat quietly for some while. He folded his hands in front of him and appeared to pray, moving his lips occasionally but making no noise.

What did he see? What does he think happened?

Eventually he took a cell phone out of his pocket and pushed a button.

“Honey?” he said. “No, I didn’t call to talk about that. I ... something happened today, just now. I almost died. I ran into something and my glider was crashing.”

Jon expected to hear the voice from the phone, but he couldn’t. *Another power gone*, he thought.

“No, somebody saved me. It all sounds so crazy. It was somebody in the air, dressed in white. A boy, a young man. ... I know what that sounds like. ... That’s what I thought too. ... And he said something to me. He told me not to worry, that everything was going to be OK. And I thought, well, I thought maybe he really means it. Maybe he means that *everything* is going to be OK. ... That’s why I called. I just had to tell you about it. ... Yeah. An angel. ... I know it’s crazy, but ... Do you think he could be right? Do you think everything could be OK now? ... I’d really like things to be OK again. OK with us. ... That’s what I thought about when I thought I was dying. ... What do you think?”

An angel.

Jon wondered if he had ever had a less angelic day in his entire life.

He crept away from the glider as quietly as he could, then climbed a tree until he could get a good view of the sky. The solid clouds were about ten miles to the south, and that was also the direction away from Denver. He found a road and jogged the ten miles in about half an hour.

Once he was back in the air he went slowly and carefully east. It was dark by the time he landed in the yard. Laura saw him land, and he was too tired to care. “Where did you go?” she asked as he came into the house. “Where have you been all day?”

“West,” he said. “Just west. I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“Mom called and I had to cover for you.”

Jon hugged her and kissed her forehead. “You’re a good sister,” he said. Then he started walking very humanly up the stairs to his room.

“Man, Jon,” Laura said in amazement. “What happened to you?”

“Stuff,” he answered in a very tired voice. “Just stuff.”

Jon fell into his bed and was asleep in seconds. He didn’t wake up until much later when his parents got back.

“Home sweet home,” Clark said as he sat down in the kitchen. “I made it. I’m not sure I did anything right all day long, but I kept my promise. I came home.”

I’m never going to break the rules again, Jon thought. Then he closed his eyes, and in minutes he was dreaming about a great river that flowed unstoppably from the rain forest to the sea.

Metropolis: September 5, 10 A.S.

In the years since he had moved to Metropolis, Daniel Gladstone had become a

connoisseur of fall. He had grown up with fall in England, of course, but he had never fully appreciated it until his years in the rain forest, where the concept of *season* did not translate easily into the local language. The tribe had dozens of words referring to significant periods in the life-cycle of various local plants, but none lasted longer than a fortnight or even faintly resembled any season that an Englishman would recognize.

Metropolis, by contrast, had a fall that stood up and demanded to be noticed. It was, in Daniel's opinion, actually two seasons. Early fall, which began with amazing punctuality on Labor Day weekend and continued until Halloween, was a release of tension, a pleasant winding down of summer. The oppressive heat faded into memory, and a suit coat or sweater began to feel good on the arms and shoulders. The trees, bushes, flowers, and grass of the public parks entered a healthy late middle age. The early fall colors seemed like a sign of vitality, like the bit of silver at the temples of a rising senator or new CEO. The sun stopped waking him up before his alarm clock, and young children didn't have to go to bed in daylight any more.

But late fall, from Halloween until almost Christmas, was a rehearsal of winter, the last rehearsal before the full dress of dark gray slush arrived. The trees became bare and looked dead. The wind chilled rather than cooled, and those brief unpredicted showers that in the summer seemed like innocent practical jokes now turned cruel, forcing everyone to bear coats and umbrellas like the iron mail and shields of medieval soldiers. The wind blew hardest in the artificial canyons created by the skyscrapers, and (even on streets that hadn't seen a tree in decades) the litter on the sidewalks was mixed with dry, decaying leaves.

But that's still in the future, Daniel thought as he walked aimlessly through the neighborhoods surrounding Franklin Park. Lately he had been having more and more trouble staying in the present. His mind had been wandering back into memories or ahead into fantasies, sometimes stopping in the present just long enough to pick up his mail or do the shopping. *That's old age for you.*

Age was relative, of course, as he knew better than anyone. By his own judgment he appeared to be in his late fifties or early sixties – not that he trusted his judgment to give him an unbiased opinion. But he had been telling his doctor some similar story, and she showed no inclination to call him on it. He stayed in good shape by taking these walks through the city, and of course he had continued doing his meditations. He no longer had any particular reason to extend his lifespan, but then who did? Long life was turning out to be its own reward.

Daniel was not sure exactly when he stopped expecting to find a successor. There had not been a precise moment or a specific event that had changed his mind. But the idea that he had a unique destiny or a special role in the Universe crossed his mind less and less often. The *jugendtraum* of an Order of Fulcra stretching back to Sumeria seemed amusing in a cute and slightly embarrassing way, like the fashions and hairstyles that people find in their high school yearbooks. His visions had diminished in both frequency and intensity. Those that still came were easily reinterpreted as dreams or fantasies.

Maybe the city corrupted you.

That was certainly one point of view, as valid as any other. The point of hiding out in Ecuador, after all, had been to stay closer to the primitive forces of the planet, the ones that hadn't yet been harnessed by technology or sterilized by forcing them through the filter of science. Metropolis was arguably the planetary center of technology and science, and his connection to the Powers seemed weaker the longer he stayed here.

But corruption, like beauty, was in the eye of the beholder. Or perhaps the nose. A vision had told him to come to Metropolis, as much as his visions ever told him anything. And he had been happy here. During the S-years he sometimes thought his destiny involved a special connection to Superman, who had appeared in Metropolis at just about the same time as he did, looking remarkably like the Hero of his vision. He had often spun out fantasies of helping Superman do something important, and there had been that time they met back in Ecuador after the earthquake, but nothing came of it. Superman had fallen into the Sun and that had been that.

Maybe you helped him save the world. Maybe that was your mission all along.

That was the great thing about styling yourself as a fulcrum, there was no limit to the events that you might imagine you had influenced. (Daniel had interacted with Superman and Superman had saved the world, ergo ...) But you could also deny it all, when that became convenient. Saving the world was, all in all, more responsibility than Daniel wanted to carry. *If you save the world, everything that happens after is your fault*, he thought. *Every last hangnail of it.*

By far the best part of this interpretation of events, though, was that the story was over now. Unlike Superman, Daniel could retire undefeated and live the rest of his life in an epilogue. Daniel liked epilogues. They were low-key and pleasant and held few unfortunate surprises. He planned to stretch his out as long as possible.

Because Daniel's own personal epilogue was turning out to be quite pleasant indeed. He had arrived in Metropolis with no plan to speak of, and after wandering the streets and sleeping in parks for two weeks without seeing the telltale green flash in anyone's eyes, he had decided that he needed a more settled lifestyle. The first apartment he examined had been over a shop that sold occult books and other witchy nicknacks, and which had a convenient Help Wanted sign in its window. A short conversation managed to convince the owner of his qualifications, and he had been hired on the spot. Three years later the owner retired, and Daniel recalled some bonds he had stashed under a floorboard in an unpopular section of a library in London fifty years before. (The floorboard had not charged an annual fee, and so had an advantage on safe deposit boxes.) After the usual taxes and commissions, the bonds and the shop had been fairly close to an even swap, and Daniel had become a respectable businessman.

As such, he made a sufficient but not ostentatious living, and hardly ever found it necessary to do magick, though he did sell other people the paraphernalia of magick and even gave occasional pointers that he hoped minimized the damage his customers did to

themselves. He made a second stream of income from the Tarot readings that he did in a back room, but that was hardly magickal at all. The whole secret of fortune-telling, as far as Daniel was concerned, was in asking the right questions. There was no point in asking the cards questions like “Should I take that new job in Chicago?” or “Should I cheat on my spouse?” when you knew darn well you were going to anyway. Daniel insisted that his clients ask questions that they *didn't* already have answers for, and the exercise of coming up with such questions usually gave them more insight into their futures than the readings themselves. (A few months ago the man from the camera shop next store had come in asking whether he should request a favor from an old friend, and Daniel had not even had to get the cards out at all.) Occasionally skeptics would refuse to cooperate in the question-forming exercise, and Daniel would go straight into a reading that promised all their dreams would come true. (They wouldn't, of course, but at least then the skeptics would have the satisfaction of having proved once again that fortune-telling was a load of bunk.)

The sun had set (really set, not just vanished behind the buildings) more than a half hour ago and the temperature was dropping rapidly, a sure sign that early fall had arrived right on schedule. Most of the streetlights on 40th were lit now, probably all of the ones that worked. All the shops but an occasional bar or peep show or all-night convenience store were closed, their metal accordion gates locked tight. There was still considerable pedestrian traffic, though not the casual ambling traffic he had seen in his own neighborhood when he closed the store to begin his walk.

Most people who knew about Daniel's walks feared for his life, entirely unnecessarily in his opinion. He found Metropolis to be endlessly fascinating, and he walked through its neighborhoods indiscriminately, from 75th to the Fountain and even across the river to Lowtown and French Hill. When the weather was nice (where *nice* was interpreted liberally as “some kind of weather he could dress for”), he might walk for hours just to explore. For someone who had been a hunter-gatherer the city held few terrors. There were predators, of course, but every place had predators of one sort or another. Even in his current state of magickal rustiness Daniel retained the ability to cast a good don't-look-at-me spell.

Once in a great while Daniel tried out a few of his hunter-gatherer skills just to make sure they still worked. His nose could still determine whether food in a dumpster was edible or not, and he still had a good eye for a warm, safe place to sleep. Money and social status could vanish at any time, he knew, but skills like these gave a man real security in life.

Up ahead the ordinary flow of pedestrians had been disturbed by something Daniel couldn't see. He suspected that it was a large pothole, or perhaps someone had forgotten to close a manhole cover or had left a pile of rotting garbage on the sidewalk. Whatever the obstacle was, people managed to route around it without looking down or appearing to notice it at all. When he got a little closer, Daniel could see something green on the pavement, looking like part of a collapsed army tent.

And then he realized that this particular traffic hazard was a man in a green jacket. Or at

least it had been a man at one time. He was lying on his back and did not appear to be moving. In the old days Daniel could have checked the body's aura to see if it still contained life, but at the moment he found it easier to kneel down, put his face next to the man's face, and feel with his cheeks whether air was passing through the man's nose.

The smell of alcohol made him sit up quickly. He shook the man's shoulders and was relieved to see his eyes open. And then he was surprised to see him smile.

"That was wonderful," the man said indistinctly. "It stopped. It all just stopped. Can you hear that? No, of course you can't. But neither can I. It's fabulous."

The man appeared to be some kind of military veteran, wearing an army coat and a stocking cap. He clearly hadn't shaved or bathed in a long time.

"I think you need to move around some," Daniel said, wondering just how much the vet had drunk. "We need to get you home. Where do you live?"

"Metropolis," the drunk said. "Oh, look. I'm here already." He closed his eyes again.

Daniel looked up for help, and then realized that by kneeling down he had become part of the sidewalk obstacle that people avoided without appearing to notice. He would have to do this himself. He shifted his feet for maximum leverage, then grabbed the man by his armpits and lifted him to his feet.

"I wasn't sure that would work," Daniel said to himself.

"Wo." The drunk swayed a little on his feet, but balancing him was considerably easier than lifting him. "Do you know how drunk you can get on \$40? Me neither. By the time you get through the first twenty somebody always steals the second one. But it's great. Believe me. Wonder where I left the bags."

Daniel looked around as best he could without dropping his companion, but there were no bags. He maneuvered across the sidewalk traffic (which parted for them like the Red Sea) and leaned the man up against the metal gate that protected a pawn shop's window.

"We have to get you somewhere. You can't sleep here on the street."

The vet laughed. "Can't? Done it lots of times. Anybody can. Let me tell you, anybody who can't sleep in the street hasn't really tried." And then he laughed some more. His laugh came up in sputters, like a cough. "I haven't felt this good in months. It stopped."

"What stopped?"

The vet turned his head to study Daniel for the first time. Even drunk, he had burning eyes, the kind that seemed to see everything. With his dark hair and scraggly gray beard he looked like a mad Russian monk. "You're not a normal person, are you?" he asked Daniel, and then he grimaced and banged his head against the metal, which rattled. "Hell. It's started again."

Daniel took a look around to remind himself where he was, then reviewed the neighborhood in his mind. There was a shelter up on 38th, or at least there used to be.

“Come on,” Daniel said, propelling the vet forward, and then running around to prevent him falling on his face. “We’ve got to find you a bed.”

The vet took direction without protest, and could even stagger forward a bit without aid. Daniel’s job was mostly to remember where they were going and keep them moving ahead. As his concentration shifted to his feet, the drunk kept talking but lost coherence.

“Not normal at all. But the *other* guy. You should have seen him. But then you wouldn’t have, you’d have just seen a guy. Not a bit normal. Not even ... well, but that’s a secret. Not right to go telling people’s secrets. Everybody needs secrets. Wish I didn’t know them. He didn’t want to tell me or anything, but it just happens. I don’t even try to figure it out. It’s just there and then what are you going to do? Say I’m sorry? Then I’d have to say what I’m sorry for, and that just makes it worse, ‘cause then they know that I know. And if they don’t know that I know, then it’s not so bad as long as I don’t tell anybody. They don’t know the difference. Just me. I’m the only one who knows that I know.”

This kind of babble continued the whole way, but as long as the man was moving Daniel was happy.

“Because people, what are people really? Big bags of information. And they leak, all of them. They breathe it out. It comes out in the way they stand. And the voice. And words even. I’m not talking about what the words mean, but what they *mean*. Oh hell, it’s useless. And the smell. Do you know what a guy’s smell can tell you?”

Whatever the vet’s smell was trying to say, it was shouting. Daniel managed to turn the corner when they got to 38th, and then navigate the two of them through a crosswalk without incident. The mission or shelter or whatever it was was just a few more doors. He hoped it was still open. So many had closed in the last few years.

“Do you know how hard it is to look at people when you really see them? What leaks out of them, I mean? Spite, anger, pain – all that human stuff. Even the good ones, like the guy, he wanted to help. But it was about *him* really. It was about could *he* help. And so messed up! Guilty. He helps, he’s guilty. He doesn’t help, he’s guilty. And he can’t even go get drunk about it. But I can. ‘sabout all I can do, but it’s something.”

It was open. At least there were lights on inside. He started pulling the vet up the stone steps. And then he saw the S-shield painted on the door. The shelter had gotten new management since Daniel had known it.

“Kryptonists?” Daniel said in disbelief. “They don’t do stuff like this.”

The vet chuckled. “Full circle,” he said. “Ironic, that’s the word. He was a student, you know, and now he’s the All High Something-or-other. You know, the Man.” Daniel looked uncertainly from the vet to the door. “Oh,” the vet continued, “you wanna know what the catch is. If they’re gonna do some mind-control rap on me and set me out collecting nickels at the airport.”

That was a surprisingly concise description of what Daniel had been thinking.

“Mind control? Sure. Right. I’ve been trying to control my mind for years and look how I’m doing. I say, if they want to try it, let ‘em.” And with that decided, his head fell against Daniel’s shoulder and he was instantly fast asleep.

Daniel carried him up the final two steps and tried the door. It was locked, but a young Hispanic woman with dark hair opened it just far enough to hold a conversation. “What’s the matter with him?” she asked.

In his mind Daniel tried out several answers: A diabetic in insulin shock? *No one with a nose would believe that one.* A brewery worker who fell into a vat of malt liquor and nearly drowned? *Better.*

“He’s drunk. I found him in the street and don’t know what else to do with him.” *The truth*, Daniel thought disgustedly. *What’s happened to me?*

“I don’t know. This is a place for people who are trying to turn their lives around. There are women and children upstairs. We don’t usually – “

“Maria?” called a female voice whose owner Daniel couldn’t see. It was an interesting voice, he decided. Pleasantly melodious, and yet he sensed a power in it. “That’s not how we answer the door.”

Maria looked over her shoulder and then down at the floor. “Forgive me, exalted one.”

“Julia. We leave the titles behind here. And my forgiveness is not the issue. Start again. Answer the door.”

The door opened wide. “Kal-El lives!” Maria announced with enthusiasm.

“I’m happy to hear it,” Daniel answered. “My friend here lives also, despite all appearances to the contrary.”

When he had wrestled the vet inside, Daniel saw the Exalted One whose approval apparently was so important to Maria. She was a youngish woman of medium height, wearing worn blue jeans and a denim work shirt. She belonged to the racial category that Americans persisted in calling “black” despite her obviously mixed heritage. Her brown eyes were intense but her face was kind, a combination Daniel rarely saw in this society that equated drive and efficiency with machines.

“Please come in,” she said warmly. Daniel searched the overtones and undertones of her voice for the come-into-my-parlor sweetness of a predator, but found no sign. Maria quickly moved to stand behind her superior as stock-still as a Buckingham Palace guard. “Maria was in some sense correct. Our highest priority is to help people who are trying to turn their lives around. But we do have a few beds in a dormitory for men who have nowhere else to go. We do not encourage people to use them night after night, unless they want to make a rehabilitation plan.”

“I’m afraid I cannot tell you much about this man’s life plan,” Daniel answered. “I only met him about twenty minutes ago when I found him on – or rather in – 40th Street close

to Montaigne. He has talked a great deal since then, but we did not discuss his long-term intentions.”

Julia smiled, which impressed Daniel. In his experience, most Exalted Ones were either too dim to recognize mild mockery or so full of their own exaltedness that it offended them. Maria, by contrast, was trying very hard to restrain a sharp response. “That can wait,” Julia said, and led them through a set of wooden doors to a long room set up like a ward in a small military field hospital. A row of beds ran along each wall, with each bed flanked by a small, cheap nightstand with a drawer. “I assume you have a place to stay.”

“I do,” Daniel answered. Maria put the vet’s other arm around her shoulders and together they dragged him to an empty bed. Julia continued making eye contact with Daniel, but saying nothing. “You’re wondering why I didn’t take him to my place.”

“It occurred to me.”

“Because I’m not a hero,” Daniel said guiltlessly.

Julia shrugged. “And yet you dragged a stranger half a mile to get him out of the street. How many others walked by him before you came along?”

“A few.”

“Perhaps there is more hero in you than you think. Kal-El teaches us that there is a spark of heroism inside everyone.”

“Better concealed in some than in others, I think. Maybe we’ll all be more heroic when Kal-El returns from the Sun, eh?” Daniel found her eyes mesmerizing. *If I had run into her as a teen-ager, I might be like Maria*, he thought. But effects like that were just a state of muscular tension, as he knew from his training. He let a shudder run through his body and felt like himself again.

“There is a Sun in the sky and a Sun in your heart,” she said. “Which one will Kal-El emerge from first?”

“I am not a theologian. Just a shopkeeper.”

Julia nodded. “Forgive me for presuming, but we still have space and I was wondering if I could persuade you to stay the night. When your friend wakes up, he will probably want to know where he is and how he got here. He may remember you, and it could mean a great deal to him to find you here.”

Daniel thought about his apartment, and about the taped TV shows he had planned to watch. He was used to being the random factor that interrupted other people’s well-laid plans, but this drunk and these Kryptonists were turning the tables on him.

“And in the morning I leave with no obligation,” he said.

“You can leave with no more obligations than you had when you came.”

That answer seemed far too clever to Daniel, but he supposed he couldn’t expect a

religious leader to absolve him of all responsibilities. *It's the ones who will that shouldn't be trusted, not the ones who won't.*

“All right then,” he said.

“Maria will show you where the bathrooms are. There is still a small amount of food in the kitchen, though I'm afraid we are not noted for our cuisine.”

As Julia turned to go, the vet roused from his drunken stupor. He watched her walk away as if he were reading a book or studying a painting. His mad-monk eyes went very wide and he swallowed many times before he spoke.

“She's magnificent!” he said in wonderment.

Daniel looked up and down Julia's departing backside twice, which was all of the woman that the vet could possibly have seen. He shrugged, and Maria glared at them both.

“She's OK, I guess,” he judged. “I prefer redheads myself.”

Godwin Air Force Base, Metropolis: June 21, 1 S

Lana leaned back on her elbows and watched the Firebirds loop overhead in tight formation like a flock of well-organized barn swallows. This was the proper use of warplanes, she thought. Entertainment for the masses – none of that bombs-and-missiles stuff. They could be quite pretty when they wanted to. If only they weren't so expensive.

“You ever think about doing your own air show sometime?” she asked. “Loop-the-loops, catching rockets by the fins, that sort of thing? People would eat it up.”

“All the time,” Clark answered. “I think I'd enjoy entertaining people. Something light, not too serious. It brings out the best in people. I mean, look around. There must be ten thousand people here, and nobody's fighting with anybody. They're all looking up into the sky, ooo-ing and ah-ing.”

Lana wished Clark hadn't mentioned the ten thousand people. That was the part of the whole experience she could do without. That and the chilly wind off the ocean, which didn't feel like the first day of summer at all. Clark probably didn't feel it, she reflected, or at least didn't feel it as something unpleasant. His red windbreaker was open, and she suspected he wore it just as decoration, as a way of blending in. She was glad he had told her to bring a sweatshirt, but it really wasn't enough. Maybe he would lend her the windbreaker.

Thinking about the ten thousand people made her aware again of all the noise she had been pushing out of her mind: the conversations, the radios, the incessant background crowd noise that somehow managed to be loud without being anything in particular. Metropolis was a maddening place. Lana was sure she would go crazy if she had to live here. The fragments of poetry that had floated into her mind since she arrived on Friday had all been tinged with anger and cynicism. Irony and satire were the natural voices of the city – maybe of any city. When she tried to tune in to the spirit of land, all she could hear was disillusionment and loss. *Once I was wild river. My banks were mud and marsh*

and I flooded freely over them every spring. I knew nothing of concrete, of dams, of bridges. I carried nothing but good, honest silt down from the hills. My fish were healthy, my plants green.

“You OK, Lana?”

Clark loved it. It was so obvious. He had been bubbling all weekend, like a boy whose poor cousin had come to visit right after his birthday. There was so much to show her, and all of it new – the buildings, the subways, the monuments, the stores, the theaters, the restaurants. Growing up in Smallville had been like living inside a cardboard box, and now he had escaped to the magic land on the other side of the TV screen.

It was where he belonged, in the center of things, where big things were happening and the future was being worked out. She had always told him that. Way back when they were kids, she had known that it was a waste to keep him in Smallville. Clark was unique. He was special. He belonged to the world.

Not to me.

It was sad thought, but a true one, and it was something of a relief to have it out where she could look at it clearly. She would shrivel up and die if she stayed here long. He would do the same there. He could visit, of course. He *would* visit; his parents were there, after all. But it wasn't enough; it couldn't be enough. He would need more than that in the long run. He would need someone who could share the life he would make in this strange new world. She would have to tell him, she knew. She'd have to break up with him before she went home. It was the only way.

I'll always love you. But it's just not meant to be.

“Lana? Is something wrong?”

“No,” she lied. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her sweatshirt. “This wind just blew some sand in my eyes.”

“You want to wear my glasses?” he asked helpfully. For a man with super-vision, she thought, it was amazing the things he didn't see. “They're just glass. I only wear them out of habit. They should block the sand, though.”

“Sure,” she said, taking the glasses. The wind was tossing his hair around except for one corkscrew curl on his forehead. With the hair and without the glasses he almost looked like a different man. Lana closed her eyes and lay back on the blanket, her head only a few inches away from the radio on the next blanket over.

“We're almost ready for the highlight of the show, the first landing of the space plane Constitution,” said the radio. “NASA is reporting that the plane has completed its orbit and is re-entering the atmosphere as we speak. This is where the plane's most futuristic feature comes into play, the crystalline adaptive wing. To tell us about the wing, we have with us Dr. Emil Hamilton the chief scientist of LexCorp, the space plane's main contractor. Tell us, Dr. Hamilton, what makes this wing different?”

“The name of the wing just about tells the story,” said the scientist. “It is crystalline, of course, and adaptive. The wonder of the crystalline revolution is that the same material is both structural and computational. The wing *is* the computer that controls it. The wing *is* the sensor bank that feeds information to that computer. As the plane re-enters the atmosphere and then flies down to the landing strip here at the Godwin Air Force Base, the wing will be reacting not just to the overall average airflow, but to the microscopic eddies in that airflow. Rather than having just two flaps or four, the wing varies continuously across its entire length.”

“And what does that mean in practical terms, doctor?”

“Um, the advantage of the continuous recalibration is that the plane can fly with a weight-to-wingspan ratio much higher than any previous re-entry vehicle.”

“In other words, doctor, you’re saying that the Constitution carries a payload that would make any previous plane it’s size drop like a rock. Correct?”

“In layman’s terms, I suppose. More accurately – ”

“LexCorp must have enormous confidence in this technology to have suggested this test in such a public forum, so close to a populated area.”

“Yes. Um, well, LexCorp is a Metropolis company, you know. And we really wanted to do this in our home town. The government – NASA, I mean – shares our confidence, of course. Crystalline technology has shown itself to be more reliable and predictable than almost any previous technology. And that gives us the confidence to – ”

“Thank you, Dr. Hamilton. But we need to switch now to our correspondent Jack Tzu, who is in one of the four Navy fighter jets that are deployed to escort the Constitution to the runway.”

“I can see it,” Clark said. Something in his voice made Lana open her eyes, but there was nothing visible in the direction where Clark was looking, not even a speck. “Something’s wrong.”

“What?”

“It ought to be smooth, but it’s not. It’s coming in shaky. It looks like they’re having a hard time controlling it.”

“I’m sorry,” said the radio. “We’re having technical difficulties, so we can’t go to Jack Tzu. We’re still here with LexCorp Chief Scientist Emil Hamilton. Doctor Hamilton – ”

“If it can’t land, what’s it going to do?” Lana asked. “It can’t go back into space. There’s all these people here, and there’s city all around us.”

“We’re getting our first sightings of the spaceplane,” the announcer said. “But not where we expected it to – ”

“That’s not right,” Dr. Hamilton said. “It shouldn’t look like that at all. *Oh my God!*”

Around them people were starting to stand up and search the horizon. The crowd noise had taken on a worried, anxious tone. Clark was looking around, the wind rippling through his red windbreaker. “All these people,” he said. “They’ll see. But what else can I do?”

“Do what, Clark?” Lana started to stand up, more to avoid getting stepped on than any other reason.

“I’m looking at the monitors here in front of me, and the space plane has started to tumble. Doctor Hamilton?”

“Oh, good Lord. This can’t be happening. The crew! All those people on the ground!”

Lana felt a rush of air. “Clark?” She looked left and right and didn’t see him.

Then she looked up.