

*There's a somebody I'm longing to see
I hope that he
Turns out to be
Someone who'll watch over me.*

-- George and Ira Gershwin

7. Longings

Everyone longs to be a hero. You used to believe that. You really did.

And in a perfect world everyone would be a hero – you believed that too.

How did you picture them, the heroes of this stainless world? Heroically pouring milk onto their corn flakes? Heroically washing their cars, mowing their lawns, adding a heroic pinch of seasoning to their kettles of soup?

Only foolishness is boundless. Everything else has a limit.

Heroes exist only in those places where the fabric of history has bunched up, where the threads of many individual stories have escaped their parallel tracks and telescoped down to a snag, a point just big enough to be filled by a single being – you, the hero. All the threads of the past funnel into you. All the threads of the future emerge out of you. You are the one everybody remembers, the one nobody can ignore. You are the hero.

It is a selfish fantasy. The balance must be maintained, and if you wish to embody great Good, then you wish Evil out into the world in equal measure.

Say no. Do not wish it. Do not even wish to wish it. Wish instead that the loom of time weave true, that its threads never snag, that the fabric of history lie flat.

In a perfect world no one is a hero.

Let it be so.

From *The Ahab Years* by Ezra Watts (copyright 4 A.S.)

Everybody claims they had no idea that June 21 was going to be a big day, the kind where you don't even have to say what happened – you know, you just say "June 21" and everybody knows what you're talking about. Well, I knew it was going to be big – I just had the reason wrong. I figured June 21 was going to be Ahab's coming out party.

I'd been working on it for weeks. Or months or maybe my whole life, depending on when you want to say the whole thing started. I'd been hacking since I was 10 and figured out how to beat the sex-filters on the computers at the public library. (Never let anybody tell you you can't get an education at the library.) I started going by "Ahab" online when I was 15. I thought it sounded dangerous and a little crazy. It also sounded old and white and like the kind of name somebody from Yale would pick, which maybe would throw people off the track somewhere down the line. Also, I liked that Ahab was the kind of guy who shakes his fist at God and tries to take down

the biggest thing he can find. That was who I wanted to be.

I was collecting equipment even before I got a real job. By the time I started making serious money, all the local FedEx drivers knew me. Most of them turned three shades whiter than they already were when they delivered stuff to my place in Lowtown. More than one of them told me I should move somewhere safer, but I was spending all my money on crystal computers and door locks.

I don't know when I got political. I think I needed a good story to tell myself about hacking, and I didn't want to be a gangster. That left Robin Hood. I got all kinds of stuff sent to places that needed it and got the bills sent to places too big and rich to notice. I never took anything for myself, not even equipment or stuff that I could put back into "the business". That was the gangster thing, and it wasn't me. I was a hero, not a gangster.

At least I was a hero in my own mind. I couldn't be a hero to anybody else because nobody knew who I was. I was that good. I covered all my tracks. The people who got stuff probably thanked God or thought it was just a mistake. They didn't thank Ahab because they'd never heard of Ahab. And they sure as hell hadn't heard of Ezra Watts.

So I wanted a coming out party. For Ahab. For the work he did. I wanted something flashy. Not some computer thing that just the other hackers would notice. Something big and bright and physical.

Then I saw that C-4 was coming to the LexiCon. Or, for people who call things by their long names, the Crystalline Computing and Communication Conference was coming to the Metropolis Convention Center June 19-21. And I thought about the LexiCon, and about the lightboard that goes all the way around it. Headlines crawled around the building on that lightboard 24/7. That's how all the tourists and conventioners knew which overhyped factoids to obsess over.

So I decided it was time people started obsessing over Ahab the Hacker.

It took two weeks. I almost didn't make it in time. The conference only had another two and a half hours to go when I finally got control. Somebody must have tried to hijack that board some other time, because underneath all the usual Maginot-line stuff the LexCorp guys had set up some scary black-ice security that I almost didn't see in time. I was up for the last 48 hours straight, sweating and drinking coffee and thinking about jail. I'd never been so happy in my whole life.

Then I had it. I had the five security cameras showing me the people milling around and staring up at the board. I had the headline ticker rolling: REGENTS LOSE TO GOTHAM KNIGHTS 2-1 ... STUDY SAYS MORE AMERICANS OVERWAIT ... LEXCORP TO BUY ZVM. I knew I had it, because I stuck in the typo: *overwait* instead of *overweight*. It wasn't until I saw the typo with a security camera that I was sure they weren't just spoofing me to reel me in.

Then I had one of those oh-crap moments, like when you wait overnight for concert tickets and then realize you left your wallet

at home. *I didn't know what I wanted to put on the board.* I never got around to thinking of something.

I knew I wanted to do something that would attract attention, and then sign it Ahab the Hacker. But I kept putting off writing the attract-attention part of the plan, and then I hit the black ice and my whole brain went into combat mode until I beat it. Now it was like: "OK, snap in the attract-attention module, sign it, and let's get out of here before we get caught." Except there wasn't any attract-attention module. I had the board; what did I want to do with it?

The easiest thing would be to make it all stop. No headlines at all, and then: THIS PROPAGANDA-FREE MINUTE BROUGHT TO YOU BY AHAB THE HACKER. But that was so low-key. It would maybe make page five in *The Planet*, but *The Herald* and the TV stations probably wouldn't even notice.

Then I thought I'd put the fear of god into the C-4 technocrats with some cyber-Marxist slogans: THE MEANS OF COMPUTATION BELONG TO THE PEOPLE! PROTOCOLS ARE NOT PROPERTY! And so on. But I hate guys who talk in exclamation points. No imagination. No sense of humor.

In the meantime the headlines keep scrolling: EURO FALLS AGAINST YEN ... DUVREAU NEW FRENCH PRIME MINISTER ... MAYOR'S POPULARITY RISES. And I think: Maybe it would be better to act more like a practical joker than a zealot. What would that great anarchist Bugs Bunny do in this situation? I try to think up some joke headlines: UFO LANDS IN VATICAN ... PRESIDENT RESIGNS, TAKES CUSTODIAL JOB ... WASHINGTON MONUMENT BLASTS INTO ORBIT. So then I remember that I haven't slept in two days and maybe somebody who has should double-check that the stuff *I* think is funny really *is* funny.

And then this goes past: FLYING MAN SAVES SPACE PLANE.

And I say to myself: "Maybe I'm not the only one doing this."

Kansas: September 12, 10 A.S

Laura's body was defeating her.

Twenty pages from the end of the novel, her eyes were drooping and her mind refused to focus. If she weren't tired those pages would fly past, but after starting the same paragraph for the fourth time she could see that it just wasn't going to happen. She slammed the book in disgust and dropped it over the side the bed.

The Mom-in-her-head made its typically aggravating attempt to comfort her in her failure. *People get tired, honey. It's just human.*

"But I don't *want* to be human," she answered. "*I hate* being human."

After the reading light was off the room seemed totally dark for a few seconds. But then her eyes started to adjust, and she noticed the moonlight coming in through the outside wall. It illuminated a picture that she had cut into strips so that it fit onto the lead blinds that kept Jon from seeing into her room. Superman was flying out of a burning apartment building, carrying a baby under one arm and a girl about Laura's age under the other.

The picture looked just like Dad. She didn't understand why other people didn't see it, why it wasn't obvious. It was just Dad with a costume. Dad without glasses. Dad looking happy.

Being too tired to read didn't mean that Laura was going to fall asleep right away. It was her eyes that had failed, not her mind. There was always more to think about. Mom kept telling her that sleep was easy: you just close your eyes and don't move, and soon you'll be asleep. But lately Laura had begun to suspect that Mom was just repeating things people had told her, that it didn't really work that way for her either. Sometimes Laura would wake up in the middle of the night and hear someone walking on the stairs or in the kitchen. It wasn't Dad and it wasn't Jon; they both floated when they were up at night. You never heard them unless they moved something. So it had to be Mom. She was starting to suspect that Mom's brain worked the same way hers did. It didn't stop just because she closed her eyes and didn't move.

Laura had created most of her fantasy life as a way of staying entertained while she waited for sleep. She wanted to believe that she could influence her dreams that way, that if she fell asleep while fantasizing something she would just drift into a dream of the same thing. But it never worked. Lately it was working even worse than usual. The better the fantasies, the worse the dreams.

Of all the figures in the picture, the girl was the easiest to imagine. Had she been lying in a bed in a dark room just like this one when the fire started? Or was she asleep and too groggy to understand what was happening until she found herself wrapped in a strong arm and flying through the night air? Laura liked to think that the girl had been awake, that her mind had just been too busy to let go. And then she smelled the smoke or maybe even saw the flickering light or felt the room get warm. Did she run around looking for a way out? Call for Mom? Try to save her baby sister?

The girl in Laura's fantasy was scared, more scared than Laura ever got herself. The apartment fire had been early in Superman's career, so maybe the girl didn't even know about him, or at least didn't think to remember him when she was in trouble in the middle of the night. He would have been just a picture in the newspaper to her, a name she heard on TV. She was black and the building didn't look very fancy. The world that gets covered in the newspapers and TV would have seemed very far away. She wouldn't have expected him to save her.

Laura could imagine that fear, even though she never felt it. Even when she had been in real danger, even when she had been falling that night when Uncle Jimmy visited, she hadn't really believed that she would hit the floor. She had screamed "Daddy!" not in panic but in confidence, and then his arms had been under her and she had been safe.

But the fantasy was better if the girl was truly afraid, if she didn't believe. Then came the shattering of glass and the strong arms and the voice telling her it would all be OK as the street loomed five floors below. Laura could imagine it.

She could also imagine being Jimmy on the ground, looking up at the flames through his

view-finder and realizing that the angle was all wrong. There must have been a building across the street – it was a parking deck in her fantasy – and he must have raced up the stairs as high as he could go before looking back at the burning building and zooming in on a window across the way where someone was clearly inside. He probably snapped wildly, this window and then that one, only to get lucky when Superman burst out of the window he was shooting with a girl in each arm and flames bursting out behind him.

But what had it been like to be Dad? To be the hero, the flying man, the one who saves from danger? That was the best fantasy of all, but it was the hardest. To feel herself bursting with power, to feel the flight and the speed. And yet to feel the tenderness, the sensitivity for the fragility of the girls he carried. And the heat – what does heat feel like when you know you can't burn? What does it feel like to shatter glass when you know it can't cut you?

And, most of all, what does it feel like to know that you are the Hero? To know that the people who were counting on you to save them were right, and that those who gave up hope were wrong? Because you can save them. You can be the one who turns the situation upside down. No one has to die today. No one has to be unhappy.

Never happen. To Jon, maybe. Not me.

Don't cry about it. That's just how things are. He's the next Superman and you're just a girl with some strange DNA. Billions of people don't have powers, but they don't cry about it. They just live a life. They're just human.

At some point Laura must have fallen asleep.

She knew she had been sleeping because her eyes were closed tight now and she could not open them. She could see that the insides of her eyelids were red, not dark brown or blue, so the room must be full of light. It must be morning.

Laura wished she could see what was happening, but something was keeping her eyes closed. And she wished she could scream, but her mouth was no more cooperative than her eyelids. She must be strapped to a table of some sort, she thought. She was flat on her back and not able to move any part of her body.

She could hear, though, and that was in some ways the strangest part of the experience. A woman was standing over her, singing to her very softly. Her voice sounded ... Laura had no words for it, but the singing was soothing her. And she smelled ... no words came to mind to describe the scent either, at least no words that made sense. The woman smelled like a shade of yellow, or like the wind underneath your wingtips on a warm spring day. Between the scent and the voice, Laura was as soothed as it is possible to be with a stabbing pain coming down from the top of your head. *Surgery*, she thought. *She's doing surgery on my brain.*

That must hurt terribly, the woman said (or sang, it was so hard to tell the difference). *But you can hear me now.*

Laura wanted to speak, to ask a question or maybe a whole string of questions. But there was no point in trying. If she could speak she could scream, and screaming definitely had priority. *Daddy*, she thought, but then she remembered that he couldn't hear thoughts.

Out in the hallway Jon was talking to someone. A girl? Not that Barbie-doll ex-girlfriend, she hoped.

"This house is amazing," the girl said. Not Darla, somebody else. "The main walls – that's CrystaLex, isn't it?"

"Not exactly," Jon said. "It's ... well, it's sort of a knock-off of CrystaLex. It's ... similar. In some ways it's even ... well, it's similar."

Shut up, Jon. That was something else to say, if she ever got control of her mouth again.

"Wow. It must have cost a fortune. Your mom must have sold a lot of books."

"Not exactly. I mean: yeah, she did. And Dad too. But also it's sort of an inheritance from my grandfather."

Shut up, Jon.

"Your grandfather the test pilot or your grandfather the farmer?"

"I forgot I told you about them. Neither one. My father, well, he was adopted. And his real father left him an inheritance. We, like, we don't talk about it much. I never met him or anything. He's been dead a long time."

So don't talk about him, then.

"That's neat. ... Not that he's dead, I mean. Um, I can't believe I just said that it's neat somebody's dead. I mean, it's neat that you know about him, and that he wanted to leave your father something."

"Yeah. I guess so."

The woman was singing again. *Almost done for today. You're a brave girl.*

I don't care what you smell like or how you sound. My Dad will break you into little pieces if you keep hurting me. My brother is right over there, and he's stronger than he looks.

"I'd show you this room, but it's my sister's and she's still in bed. She stays up late reading or something, and then you can't wake her up. At least not on weekends."

"These blinds are strange. What are they, some kind of metal?"

"Something like that. Laura is ... well, she's strange, but she's just a kid. She'll grow out of it. If the blinds were open you'd see how she's done her room. It's all in Superman. She's got pictures of him covering all the walls."

"Cool." Laura knew the girl now. She was that short one with the mousy brown hair, the one with all the causes. She was smiling and Jon was looking kind of confused at her.

And that was other strange thing – other than the stabbing pain and the singing woman she couldn't see – Laura could see them standing out in the hall. Her first thought was to get excited and think that maybe her powers were finally starting to kick in – x-ray vision and all that. *That's what the surgery is for, maybe, to take out whatever's blocking my powers.* But then she remembered that the blinds were closed. She could see them, closed, right behind Jon and the girl (Lisa, Leslie – whatever her name was). And if the blinds were *behind* them, then where was she looking from?

“You like Superman?”

“Well, sure. What's not to like about Superman?” She held up a hand and started to count on her fingers. “He was, like, seriously handsome. He could do anything. And he was good. I mean, he was really, really good. He could have, you know, tried to rule the world or something, but he didn't. He helped people. So many powerful people don't seem to care about anybody but themselves, and then you look at Superman. He knew that if you have power, you have an obligation to help people. That's what it really means to be a hero.”

Jon squirmed a little and started to walk toward the stairs. “You should join the Church.”

“No, not like that. Those people are so screwed up. The point isn't to worship him. The point is to be like him.”

“But how can anybody be like Superman? He could fly. He was indestructible ... well, except for the Sun. And he had heat vision.”

“Everybody has some kind of talent. Everybody can do something. The point isn't to have bullets bounce off of your chest. The point is to do what you can do to make things better. That's what Superman was about.”

They were going down the stairs now, but Laura could still see them. It was like in a movie. Except that movies didn't usually hurt like this.

Jon smiled the half-smile he had when he was trying to make a joke. “Not me,” he said. “I've got no talents at all. I'm just a gimpy guy in a cast.”

“Like football was the only talent you had. You're probably the most talented guy I know. You can do anything you set your mind to. You ...” she stopped at the bottom of the stairs and cocked her head a little to one side, “you even sort of *look* like Superman.”

Done.

Laura opened her eyes and saw a blue woman standing over her bed, her blue face blocking the view of Superman flying down LaFayette Avenue.

And then she woke up.

And screamed.

Metropolis: June 21, 1 S.

Later, when he had the time and perspective to reflect on the experience, Clark realized that it could only have taken a few seconds – ten at the most – for him to reach the space plane. At first he had risen off the ground quickly but with care not to create a dangerous updraft or a lethal sonic boom. When the crowd was safely distant he cut loose with everything he had. He had never flown so fast before.

Seconds.

And yet, in retrospect, it seemed to have taken so much longer. There was so much he realized in those few seconds, so much he understood for the first time. How could it have been only a few seconds?

Countless times he had read about people who said that their whole lives flashed before them during an emergency. He had imagined all the events of a lifetime zipping past like a tape on fast-forward: the ten thousand teeth-brushings, the fifty thousand glasses of water, morning after morning of cereal and toast. It seemed so unlikely, so unbelievable. In movies the lifetime went past like a postgame highlight reel: the touchdowns, the fumbles, the passes-almost-caught. A three-hour game reduced to fifteen seconds.

It wasn't like that.

It was more like standing outside the time stream altogether, looking over God's shoulder at a lifetime that sat like a clay pot glistening on the wheel. It wasn't like a chunk of time at all; there was nothing to relive or review. It just sat there like a single work of dubious art waiting for his response.

I've always been tentative.

It wasn't even a thought, really, just a flash captured on a piece of film that could develop into a thought later.

Tentative. He had never suspected. All the time he spent trying one thing while wondering if he really should be doing something else. All the effort he put into repressing his instincts, calibrating his strength, not killing with a glance, planning his every move with the thought: *Who will see me? What will they think?* It was like the water that a fish swims in. He didn't think about it. He didn't see it. It just was.

Until now. Now he was streaking across the sky to save at least five people and maybe thousands more. Not tentative. Not holding back. *Who will see me? Everyone. What will they think? It's not important.* The five, the thousands – they were important. Not him. Not his secret.

I've always been selfish.

Selfish. How could that be? He had always thought of himself as a good boy, a good son, a good person. He cared about people. He tried not to hurt anyone. He had helped dozens, maybe even hundreds of people.

When it was convenient. When he could help without revealing himself or his powers.

But there was no time for that now.

I've always been afraid.

Afraid? What was there to be afraid of? He couldn't be cut or burned. He never got sick. The strongest blows did him no damage. It had been years since he had suffered anything more than a momentary physical discomfort.

And yet he had been living like a fugitive, traveling around the world, constantly looking over his shoulder to make sure no one had seen him use his powers. Who did he think was looking for him? Who was he afraid would find him? What did he think they might do to him?

It was time to stop being afraid.

If some Eye in the Sky was watching, Clark didn't believe it belonged to an all-powerful government satellite waiting to zap him. "To whom much is given," Pastor Harris had often quoted, "of him is much required." How much should be required of someone who had been given powers like his? That's what he had been hiding from. Not the public, not some hypersecret government agency.

Judgment.

He was afraid of being judged and found wanting. He was hiding so that no one would know how much potential he was squandering, how many opportunities he was letting slide away.

But there are eyes you can't hide from. If you worry about their judgment, all you can do is live up to their standards.

Seconds.

Maybe five seconds. Maybe ten. A lifetime spinning on the wheel, waiting for his shaping hand.

When he got to the Constitution he knew what to do without thinking, without planning. He rested his back against the center of the fuselage and gave himself up to the plane's tumbling. And then slowly, gradually, over the course of nearly half a minute, he straightened out.

Then he was flying with a crystal spacecraft on his back, its five passengers shaken and unwell, but alive. Four confused jet fighters were trying to converge on his position. Ten thousand spectators sat safely on the ground, squinting and pointing in his general direction.

If there was an Eye in the Sky, it did nothing.

Kansas: September 12, 10 A.S

Chapter 4. Superman the Hero

The Space Plane Rescue

Like Pearl Harbor, like the Kennedy assassination, everyone remembers where they were the day that the Constitution didn't crash.

Clark looked at the screen and shook his head. "Bad grammar," he muttered. He deleted the text. If he had been at the Fortress he might have deleted the entire office. Since the day in Metropolis he hadn't written anything that seemed worth saving.

It had been a bad week all around. The crystal dream was back. Night after night the world shattered under his touch. By day he felt ... *exposed* was the best word he could find for it. Exposed to challenge. Exposed to judgment. He dared not watch the news or read a paper or even look at headlines on the internet. Every event made him question himself: *Did I cause it? Should I have stopped it?* Memory was treacherous as well. Every action or inaction of his entire life, all the way back to the Constitution and even further, was questionable.

No, not the Constitution. Lois was on the Constitution.

And then he thought about Laura falling from trapeze. Whatever unforeseen events that rescue might ultimately cause, he could not doubt himself for saving her. It was Laura, his princess, his little girl.

But what about other people's daughters? Do they just die? Is that how it works?

It had been several days since he had tried to work at home. When he was in Smallville he couldn't help hearing the radios of passing cars, and so he had been spending as much time as he could up at the Fortress. He had been living like a Japanese salaryman with a long commute; he came home to have dinner with the family and to sleep and to spend an hour or two in his basement hideout. This morning was Saturday, and he was trying to stick around long enough to say hello to everyone. He hadn't expected Laura to sleep this late. He had planned to be gone by now.

The mall had been open for almost two hours. The Kryptonian walls of the basement muffled most noises that far away, but cars on their way to the mall passed within earshot. He could ignore the engine-and-tire noises, but not the arguments, the insults, the cruel jokes, and the bigotry. "I don't care if he is nice to you," a father was telling his six-year-old son. "You stay away from those kind of people. Some them act nice, but they all carry knives and you never know when they'll decide to turn on you."

How are you going to use your powers on that?

Upstairs, Lois was at her own computer working on her own book. A girl from school had come over to work with Jon on some project, and now their books were on the kitchen table while he gave her a tour of the house. Clark had been trying not to listen and he wasn't sure where this girl fit into the larger scheme of things, but Jon didn't usually bring friends home so it was probably good that she was here. Laura was feverish again, and her heart was beating much too fast for her to be asleep. She was motionless but all her muscles were tense, especially the ones keeping her eyes closed. These morning

episodes, whatever they were, kept increasing in both frequency and intensity. Clark worried about them, but they seemed to cause no damage that he or Hamilton's machines could detect.

Lois had been trying very hard to understand what was going on with him this week. She tried to stay cheerful, tried to talk about hopeful things. But just her presence, just that extra pair of eyes looking at him, was painful. And even her patience wore down. She didn't have to say anything; he could see the frustration in her breath, in her blood, in her glands. He knew that it was better for both of them that they not spend much time together.

Jon seemed to know instinctively to stay away. He had been distant lately, avoiding Clark's glance, spending as little time in his presence as possible. He had stopped badgering Clark for more flying practice. Most evenings he went to the library to read books about South America for some project at school, maybe the same one he was talking about now. And sometimes he was just away. Clark worried about him almost as much as Laura, and wondered sometimes if he should scan the town to see what Jon was up to. But he was afraid what else he would see. *Leave him alone*, he thought. *I told Bruce he was a good boy. I should try to have some faith in him.*

Only Laura knew how to be around him. She didn't say anything. But once in a while she came down to the basement room and sat on his lap with her head on his neck, as if she were the one being comforted. He knew there was no rational reason why that should help, but it did. Time seemed to freeze when she was there. The endless chain of events causing other events and leading to God-knows-what, it just stopped mattering. They were *here* and if someday there would be some time other than *now*, it could take care of itself.

Maybe that's even true, he thought. Benjamin Boston must have taken care of himself, or found someone else to take care of him. After that day in Metropolis, Clark had worried that Boston was dead, that he poisoned himself with alcohol or fell under a bus or got himself killed in a drunken brawl. But even so, Clark hadn't looked for him right away. The day after his trip to Metropolis Clark had done nothing but sit in a chair and shake. The sense of exposure hadn't felt like a psychological state at all, but like some malarial infection that his body had to throw off. It wasn't until the next day that he had been able to think, to wonder, to feel like he ought to go back and fix the things he had done wrong. Or at least witness the consequences.

It had taken most of a day to find Boston. He searched the city from space, high enough above the atmosphere that no noise could reach him. He looked in the morgues first, then the hospitals, then the jails. Boston wasn't in any of them, but many other people were. Some were recently dead, others badly hurt – shot, burned, beaten, mangled in accidents. *You didn't cause any of that*, he told himself, but another voice in his head responded: *You didn't stop it either.*

Other things happened while he watched – drug deals, domestic violence, purse

snatchings, rapes. *That's what happens to other people's wives*, the voice in his head taunted. *That's what happens to other people's daughters*. Several times he started to move, to go down and intervene, but always the vision of the Crystal Earth came back to him. The flaw at the center. The concentric spheres shattering one after the other. He began to shake again.

He looked at funerals, though he doubted a funeral for Boston would be happening this soon. And though the sounds of city could not propagate beyond the atmosphere, sometimes he could not stop himself from reading the lips of the eulogists. "Whenever a child dies in such a tragedy as this, people come to me and say, 'Rabbi, where was God? Why did He let this happen?' And I can only say that the God I believe in does not save humanity from the consequences of its own decisions. When men decide to drink and drive, children die. It is not God who kills them. Where is God? I believe that God is here with us now, feeling our pain, crying with us, waiting for us humans to get our house in order."

Then God is in Hell, Clark thought. *Why does he torture himself by feeling the pain of people he won't help?* The feckless gods of the Greeks and Romans made more sense to him than that.

He looked in the subway stations and in the parks, and then started scanning the city street-by-street. Benjamin Boston turned up in one of the last places Clark could have imagined: in the cafeteria of the Kryptonist mission. He was clean and shaved and ladling soup out of a large kettle. There was very little in his stomach and at times he appeared to get dizzy, but he did his menial job with courage and determination. He made eye contact with each person in the soup line and said "Kal-El lives" as he delivered each bowl.

I wonder what they did to him, Clark thought. But he decided to solve that mystery another day. Boston was alive and even sober. It was more than Clark had felt a right to expect.

Upstairs, Laura sat bolt upright in her bed and screamed, "Daddy!" as loud as she could.

Before she had even finished the word, Clark was at her bedside. She had an arm around his neck, and with the other hand she was probing the top of her head. "It was horrible!" she said. "It was ... it was ..."

"It was a dream," Clark reassured. "It's over now."

"She was right here. She was ..."

"It's OK, Princess," he said, risking the nickname she had told him to stop using six months ago.

She stopped checking her head, wrapped the other arm around his neck and squeezed as hard as a human 11-year-old girl could. She breathed deeply in and out as if she could inhale security from his aura. Jon and the girl were in the doorway now. Laura dropped her voice to a whisper that Jon's friend surely could not hear.

“Sometimes,” she said, “it’s really good to have your Dad be the strongest man in the world.”

Metropolis: June 21, 1 S

Lois Lane had imagined dying many times. As a girl she had daydreamed combat missions with her father, the two of them plunging together to a fiery death after some heroic deed. In college, after Sam was dead, she had been a hypochondriac for a year or so. Every few weeks she would show up at student health believing that some rash or itch or ache was the first sign of impending doom. As a reporter she sometimes seemed to court death, eagerly venturing into war zones, crime scenes, riots, disputed gang turf, and totalitarian states that had already evicted her once before and weren’t likely to be so nice about it next time.

Some reporters used denial to cope with the risks of the job, as if the first amendment provided some kind of metaphysical shield in addition to its legal protection. But Lois just went ahead and imagined dying. Sometimes she added a melodramatic twist to the fantasy and let herself get in some crushing last word to the dictator or thug or torturer who was killing her. Or she imagined that the bomb would strike while she was instant-messaging a story. Her incredibly brave and apt last words would remain in a text box at *The Daily Planet*, a cursor flashing next to them as if she might continue at any moment.

I didn’t picture this, she thought.

Strapped down to a chair, with no chance to run or fight or influence her fate in any way. Without a phone or a keyboard or anyone listening to what might be her last words. She had thought about getting out her recorder and wedging its microphone into the seat harness, but she couldn’t raise faith in the idea that the recorder’s memory would survive if she did not. Now, as they began their descent, she wished she had set it up anyway. The crew was busy, the senator was continuing to stare out the opposite window, and Lois would have felt much more like herself if she could have been dictating her observations.

She had a bad feeling about this re-entry. It was something she picked up from the crew, coupled with some nameless intuition of her own. The crystalline wing seemed like such an improbable device, now that their lives depended on it and there was some doubt about its software. The idea that it would reconfigure its shape in response to the atmosphere sounded wonderful on the ground. But if its timing was only one thousandth of a second off, what then?

The craft began to vibrate and the temperature rose. She felt like she ought to say something. The situation called for something brave, something profound, even if nobody else would hear it. But she couldn’t think of anything. “Here we go,” she whispered.

And then there was no doubt that something was wrong. Some part of the wing zigged when it should have zagged, and suddenly they were tumbling. “It was like falling down a flight of stairs,” Lois said later on CNN.

“If the plane was anything but CrystaLex it would have broken into a million pieces,”

Senator Milton added.

The cameras on the jet fighters that were supposed to escort the Constitution to Godwin had trouble keeping the space plane in sight and in focus, but all together they produced about ten seconds of footage in which the Constitution looked like a leaf blowing in a high wind. The total tumbling time was later calculated to be 24 seconds until a small, unknown object intercepted it.

“At first I thought it was a missile,” Captain Leroy Williams, pilot of one of the escort fighters, reported afterward. “And then I thought that it must be the second missile, and that the first one had been what caused it to go out of control to begin with. So I headed off in the direction the missile had come from, so that I could go after whatever shot it. But there wasn’t anything there. Just Godwin.”

Lois felt as if she were watching herself from a long distance. She later examined her memories at length and determined that there was nothing paranormal about them. She didn’t see the space plane from the outside, or see the object that approached it. But she had no sense of being inside her body as it somersaulted through the atmosphere. She was aware of every bounce and spin, but it was as if she were watching it happen to someone else in slow motion.

And then it was over. They were flying smoothly again. Lois’ consciousness had retaken its usual seat behind her eyes and time had returned to its usual pace. The reports estimated that 19 seconds elapsed between the arrival of the UFO and resumption of level flight. Lois could not have guessed. She later wondered if she might not have spent one or two of those seconds unconscious, because she could not remember the transition between tumbling and smooth flight. It was like realizing that someone had started talking a few words ago, and even knowing what those words had been, but not being able to remember *hearing* the words.

“Chuck, what did you do?” Captain Pollock had said a second or two before. “I thought we were dead.”

“Not a damn thing,” Major Reynolds answered. “I’m not doing a damn thing now, either. The computer must have done it.”

“No way. The computer’s out. Should I try to reboot?”

“Not until we figure out why we’re not crashing.”

“Holy shit,” Captain Jackson muttered to no one in particular. “Who is that? Did somebody fall out? Wait. That doesn’t make any sense.”

Lois popped the harness and came out of her seat. The senator appeared to be unconscious. Gravity was closer to normal than she was used to, but she managed to wobble far enough to grab the back of Major Reynolds’ chair.

“Get back in your seat!” he yelled, unaware that Lois had been disobeying direct military commands since the age of two. Jackson appeared to be the most stunned of the three

crew members, so she followed his eyes to the screens displaying the output of the wing cameras. Both of them showed a man attached to the bottom of the craft.

“Where did he come from?” Lois asked.

By now Reynolds and Pollock were also looking at the wing camera displays. The picture was pixelated and indistinct, but there was no mistaking the human form underneath the fuselage.

“What’s he breathing?” Reynolds asked. “Why doesn’t he freeze? What’s he hanging on to?”

“Is that why the wing screwed up? Because he was out there and it couldn’t compensate for the extra drag?” Pollock wondered.

“Look at his hands,” Jackson said. “He’s not grabbing onto anything. It’s like his back is stuck to us somehow.”

“No,” Lois said, barely believing her own words. “He’s not riding underneath us. He’s *carrying* us.”

“That’s im – ” Reynolds stopped in mid-word. No one spoke for several seconds. “No,” he said in a tone of complete normality, “she’s right. He’s carrying us. There’s got to be some reason we’re not falling out of the sky.”

“I’m right?”

“Chuck,” Pollock said, “you don’t really think ... I mean ... how’s he doing it?”

“Have to ask him that.”

“We’re dead,” Jackson said quietly but with conviction. “It’s the only explanation that makes sense. We couldn’t have survived that, so we didn’t. This is some kind of afterlife thing.”

“So, what do you think?” Pollock asked. “He’s like an angel or something?”

“He’s wearing jeans and a windbreaker,” Lois observed. “And ... I think those are tennis shoes.”

“Must have changed the dress code,” Reynolds commented. He sat back and folded his hands on his lap. “I look at it this way. None of us is flying this thing and the computer’s not flying it. That leaves him. I think we sit back and enjoy the ride. Because, well, what the hell else are we going to do?” He waited for a reaction, and then, hearing none, said: “Didn’t this crate used to have a radio?”

Pollock looked down at the controls. “It’s out. Figures.”

Reynolds continued to sit with his hands folded on his stomach like a churchman looking forward to nodding off during the sermon. Pollock and Jackson kept glancing from the window to the camera displays and back. Eventually Pollock looked up at Lois. “What’s your guess? LexCorp maybe? Some kind of genetic engineering thing? Or a

whatchacallit, cyborg?"

"No idea," she answered. "But I'm going to find out."

The Constitution landed far more smoothly than it had taken off. Lois almost fell out when the door came open, but then managed to hang from its lip and drop onto the runway. Several phalanxes of vehicles were converging from different directions, but were still some distance away. The man was already in the air and beginning to pick up speed.

"Hey! You!" Lois yelled in her most commanding voice, the one she had learned from Sam Lane. She didn't expect it to work. He was already some distance away, probably well out of earshot. But in a second he was back, hanging in the air maybe twenty or thirty feet in front of her.

Except for his ordinary clothes, he looked godlike. Tall, young, lean, with the ocean breeze gusting through his hair. "Are you all right?" he asked. His voice was deep and strong, but filled with warmth. His eyes seemed to glow with an ocean blue color. Later when she described them Perry scoffed that she couldn't have seen the color of his eyes at that distance. But she was sure she had.

"Who are you?" she asked. "How do you do what you do? Why did you save us?"

"I saved you because you would have died," he answered. Now he turned to look at the approaching vehicles. "I can't stay," he said.

With impossible ease, he was gone.

"No rockets," Lois said to herself. "No exhaust. No heat. No shimmer." And the way he accelerated ... she knew that there must be a technical term for it, but she couldn't think of one. All she knew was that he didn't rise like a rocket being powered from below. It was effortless, as if the atmosphere had just sucked him up, like a ping-pong ball being pulled up one of the old-fashioned pneumatic tubes.

All around her, jeeps and ambulances and fire engines were screeching to a halt. "I guess I should have said thank you," she reflected.

The Fortress of Solitude: September 12, 10 A.S.

Chapter 4. Superman the Hero

The Space Plane Rescue

Some events are like flashbulbs.

Pearl Harbor. The Kennedy assassination.

One moment life seems to be moving along normally, each day more-or-less like the next. Then the flash goes off, and wherever you are, whatever you are doing, is imprinted on your mind forever. Over the years I've had occasion to ask hundreds of people where they were the day that Superman saved the Constitution. None of them has ever replied, "I don't remember."

What they remember, however, varies significantly from one person to the next. Naturally everyone remembers the same television images, the ones that were repeated over and over for nearly a week until Superman's first appearance in costume. But each person embedded those images into the story of his or her own life. All of us sensed that we had seen something important, but each of us interpreted that importance in a unique way.

From the very beginning, then, Superman's story was not just Superman's. It was everyone's story, forced to bear more meaning and significance than a single story can carry.

"Better," Clark said to himself. "Now give some examples." He knew of several from published sources, and several others from interviews that either he or Lois had conducted over the years. He re-read ten in a few seconds and felt vaguely disappointed. They suggested but did not fully capture the sense of mythic projection he wanted to get across.

The best stories, he thought, probably never got written down.

Metropolis: June 21, 1 S.

All of her life, Julia Carter had believed – no, more than believed, she had sensed – that someone was watching over her.

When she was a girl she had thought it was her father – or rather, the ghost of her father. She carried a picture of him in her wallet, but she never showed it to anyone because they wouldn't have understood. It was an unremarkable picture, taken a few months before his death. Walt Carter's hair was already mostly gone by then, and he had a drawn, prematurely old face that Julia would (some years in the future) come to associate with alcoholics. But he did have an endearing smile, as if he were happy to have his picture taken with his daughter sitting on his lap.

A little imagination was required to identify the three-year-old on his lap as Julia. She had been squirming when the shutter fell, so her features were blurred. And Julia didn't actually remember the photo being taken, or anything about that day other than the dress she wore. It was white and very frilly and it had been a Christmas present. Her mother had called it her "princess dress" and Julia had liked that. She had kept wearing the dress from time to time until it was much too small and the other kids made fun of it.

The wallet photo was Julia's only picture of her father. Most of the other memorabilia of her childhood had been lost one spring when a landlord changed the locks on an apartment that Julia and her mother had been sharing with a man.

Julia didn't often reminisce. The past did not pull on her, and the present was always so full of things to do. At this particular moment there was a cart of books to be reshelved. She was on duty for another hour, and then she had a paper to finish and a book to read by Monday morning. It was all part of the bizarre work/scholarship program that was getting her through the University of Metropolis. No one understood the program, least of all her, but it was securing her a good education, which in some way or another was part

of her destiny. She didn't understand her destiny either, but she was coming to have faith in it.

Julia had heard other students reminisce about their childhoods. When they talked, it was as if their memories were on video; the stories spun out with plots and characters and themes. Julia's childhood memories were more like watercolor stills. She could list the series of men in her mother's life the way that sixth-graders learn to list the presidents, sometimes skipping one or getting a couple out of order. Her memories about each of them were generic rather than episodic: This one yelled a lot, and that one would play cards with her, but she was unable to recall any particular argument or card game. Some of them she remembered as nice and others she was afraid of, while some of them spoke softly to her and gave her treats, but looked at her in ways that made her afraid of them anyway.

Other than her father, they were all no good. Her mother had told her many times that they were all no good, and looking back from the perspective of a young adult she could see that it was true. None of them had treated her mother well. None of them stayed around for long. None of them could hold onto a job or provide the kind of home that some of the other kids at school had. They were all the kind of men who went through life looking for a big score, and if they got it you could be sure they'd be out the door by sundown and on to a better life without a look back. Sometimes at night she would take out the little wallet photo and think about the life her father would have wanted for her if he had lived. After she was in bed and the lights were out, she would picture him up in Heaven, watching over her, making sure that none of her mother's boyfriends would hurt her.

When Julia was fourteen another man started watching over her. His name was Alan, and he taught history at her middle school. It was a bad school, one of the worst in Lowtown, but Alan was friendly and worked very hard to make his class interesting. He was white, and some people claimed he came from a rich family. They also said that he didn't have to be in a school like this one if he didn't want to be. The others thought that Alan was an idiot, but Julia thought it was heroic to go where you were needed instead of wherever was easiest.

After school she would stop by Alan's classroom and do her homework while he graded papers or worked on his lessons for the next day. Sometimes she would do little jobs for him like totaling up test scores. If she got stuck on her homework, he would help, no matter what subject it was. She had never known anyone as smart as Alan, or as nice. Some days they would both lose track of time and she would miss the bus, and on those days Alan would drive her home.

Julia's mother saw her arrive home by car one evening, and she threw a fit. She wouldn't listen to any talk about how nice Alan was or how he was one of the good men. "There aren't any good men," her mother told her. "Some of them just pretend a little better than others until they get what they want."

“But what about Daddy?” Julia asked, and was surprised to hear her mother reply: “Don’t ask me about him. I don’t want to talk about it.”

She made the bus every day after that for two weeks. And then there was a surprise rainstorm, such a strong one that she knew she would be soaked and cold before she made it out to the bus, and soaked even worse walking the three blocks from the bus stop to the apartment. So she went back to Alan and asked for a ride. He worked very late that night. By the time he was ready to leave Julia had finished all her homework and the rain had stopped. Alan’s car was the last one left in the teachers’ lot. Instead of starting the engine, he leaned over and kissed her and told her that he loved her. They stayed in the parking lot for a very long time, and then Alan drove her home.

Julia’s mother was waiting when she came in the door. She called Julia some ugly names, and told her that she was a fool, and that she should have seen enough of men these last ten years to know what they were like. “And don’t talk to me about your father. You were just a girl then. You didn’t know him.” And then she yelled out all kinds of nasty things about Walt Carter, things that had to be lies if anything she had ever told Julia before was true. Walt was a drunk and a gambler, she said, and she had spent seven years with him moving from place to place to stay ahead of his debts. The few times he had won a little money, he spent it before he got home, spent it trying to impress other women, and when she had yelled at him he hit her. “And I wish I had taken a picture of my face all bruised up, so that you could carry that around with you right next to that picture of him, so you’d know the kind of man your father really was.”

Julia couldn’t listen. She went to her room and moved the dresser in front of the door so that her mother couldn’t get in. The next morning she got up early, packed her gym bag full of some favorite clothes, and sneaked out of the house before her mother got up. She walked around the neighborhood for more than an hour until it was time to catch the bus to school.

At lunch hour she went to Alan’s room, but he was busy with other people. Just before the lunch period was over he spoke to her alone and said they had to be more careful now. If Julia wasn’t careful, he said, she would get him fired and then he’d have to move away and they couldn’t ever see each other again.

After school she went back to his room with her gym bag, and she told him that her mother had thrown her out of the house. She needed somewhere to live, she said, and she didn’t have any other place to go. Alan looked very distant while he listened to her. When she was done he said that he had thought she was more mature than this. He had thought that she could handle the situation like an adult, but he could see now that he had been wrong. She was taking everything much too seriously, and he thought now that they should stay away from each other until she was more grown up.

That evening after school Julia had carried her gym bag all the way to the LaFontaine Bridge. From the center of the bridge she could see the whole skyline, and she watched it as the sun went down and the lights came on. It was the first time she had seen most of

the new crystal buildings. They looked like upside-down icicles or a row of sharp teeth.

Julia had planned to jump off the bridge and kill herself, but as she stood there looking down at the water she realized that suicide wouldn't be romantic at all. It would just prove what Alan had said about her. He wouldn't be sorry and her mother wouldn't be sorry. They'd just be that much more sure that she was a foolish girl who didn't understand anything.

After dark she walked into the city, away from Lowtown, and found a place in Franklin Park where she didn't think anyone would see her. She put on all the clothes in her gym bag and laid down in the bushes. She stuffed leaves into the empty bag and used it as her pillow.

And she had a dream. In the dream, she was floating over the city, which was all lit up like it had been from the bridge. But it looked different now because she was over it, not off to its side. A man was up there with her, a tall, handsome man with dark hair. He looked very kind and understanding, and she could feel that he cared about her and wanted her to be happy. "Are you my father?" she asked. "Is this what you look like in Heaven? Are you young again and have your hair back?"

The man said that he was not her father, but that they were connected in some way that he could not explain to her yet. But someday she would be ready to understand.

"Why are you here now, then?" Julia asked.

"Because you have gotten so confused that I was afraid for you. I knew I had to come and tell you a piece of the truth, or you might not survive long enough to be ready to understand the whole truth."

"Then tell me," she said. "I want to know."

The dark-haired man told her that she must never doubt that her father was a good man, or that there were many other good men in the world. Someone had been chosen for her before she had even been born, someone kind and gentle and good. When the time was right he would come into her life and love her in the way that she deserved to be loved. "Never doubt that you are worthy," he said. "And never doubt that you will find what you seek. And not only that, but so much more that you have yet to imagine."

That dream changed Julia's life. She went back to school the next day and never bothered Alan again. She went home that night and told her mother that everything would be fine now, and her mother was so happy to see her safe that they never got around to discussing a punishment for running away from home. Ever after that, when a boy (or later, a man) would show an interest in her, she asked herself if he could be the one set aside for her, if he could be the one who was kind and gentle and good. It usually didn't take long to answer that question, but she never became desperate or tried to fool herself, because she believed in the dark-haired man's promise.

High school, she discovered, is not difficult when you know that your destiny is assured.

Free from self-doubt and confident that she was watched over by forces more powerful than she could imagine, Julia excelled.

It was not long before another mysterious but powerful entity began to watch over her. Julia's guidance counselor asked if she would take some tests, and explained that there was a program to give scholarships to fatherless girls of high potential. Runaways were particularly targeted, and even though she had only run away for a single day, that might be enough to get her in the door. Probably it would lead to nothing, the counselor cautioned, "but you never know."

It led to a series of follow-up tests and interviews in the cleanest, most modern building Julia had ever seen. Each time there had been fewer girls in the room. In the summer she was invited to a camp for three weeks. She had never been to camp before, but she doubted that other camps were like this one. Twenty-five girls were at the camp, but she did not know any of their names – they were forbidden to use their real names. Instead they had been named after colors; her own color had been Violet. Names weren't important, they were told. What was important was that they were being considered for a unique, very important role. Those who were chosen would be given new names; they would have no need for their old ones.

Julia had never experienced such a combination of luxury and discipline. Days were exhausting, filled with intense training in a seemingly random collection of skills – computers, self-defense, first aid, weaponry. At all times they were surrounded by adults who observed them and kept detailed notes. It was clear to Julia that they were being judged, but she could not guess whether she was being judged positively or negatively.

At the end of the three weeks a woman in her forties arrived. She was clearly important; all the adults deferred to her and even seemed to be afraid. She looked fearsome. She had a lean, wiry body and she wore a uniform of black leather. She introduced herself as Charity, which Julia supposed was one of the new names. She interviewed the girls one by one. The girls she interviewed did not return to the waiting area, where the rest of the girls sat in silent rows. In Julia's interview Charity told her that the organization would retain an interest in her education, but had no further need of her. As a consolation, she could have her tuition paid when she was ready to go to the University of Metropolis. She was dismissed and driven home. She never saw any of the other girls again.

Julia did not believe what Charity had told her, but when she graduated (with honors), the promised scholarship did indeed appear. It paid tuition, and jobs were arranged so that she could earn enough money for her other needs. In the summer after her sophomore year, she got a job at the college library and took summer classes. She was offered overtime pay to work on the reorganization of the library's stacks over one weekend, and so she was pushing a bookcart when Mark, one of the other library assistants, came up to her and whispered, "Did you hear what happened at the Air Show?"

The story he told her was incredible, and she did not believe it. But she made a point to stop and look at a TV in the audio-visual center before she went home. On every channel

the same videos were playing over and over again. “No one knows who this flying man might be,” the anchorman was saying, “or where he came from or where he has gone.”

But Julia knew. The pictures were fuzzy, but she had no trouble recognizing him. It was the dark-haired man from her dream. She was sure of it.

Metropolis: June 21, 1 S

The HeLex-3000 was the smallest, quietest, fastest, most maneuverable helicopter in the world. A year before, a precision formation of HeLex-2000s had been the hit of the Metropolis Air Show. In the months that followed they became an indispensable badge of status for CEOs at all the companies of the Crystalline Revolution.

But the 3000 wasn't ready for precision formations at this year's show. It hadn't even been announced. This was only one.

The prototype had room for a pilot and a bank of monitors through which Lex Luthor watched the progress of his revolutionary space plane. He got the same feeds that mission control was getting, and could have spoken directly to either the controllers or the astronauts, but he preferred not to let them know he was on the line. At the appropriate moment the 3000 would whisk him to the end of the runway so that he could greet his intrepid test crew.

“What was in those damn green rocks?” he grumbled to no one as the Constitution's transmissions cut out and the video from the escort jets showed it tumbling into the atmosphere. “Crystal, green radiation – it can't be a coincidence.”

Another man might have been distracted by the fate of the crew, the risk to the thousands on the ground, the possible loss of the billions that had been invested in the space plane project, or the black mark that any of the above would make on LexCorp's public image. But Luthor's intuition looked past all that. His alarm bells were ringing for a different reason. Somewhere in all this, he felt certain, a deeper and more sinister force was working.

He had not expected the plane to right itself, but when it did he was not surprised. He knew a set-up when he saw one. When the feeds from the Constitution's cameras came on line again, he watched in increasing horror as the controllers tried to make sense of what they were seeing: A man under the space plane – riding on it, holding it up, saving it from imminent destruction. A man? An angel? An android? The ground crew might debate among itself, but Luthor knew immediately what he was seeing:

Extra-terrestrial science.

“Mercy,” he said to his leather-clad pilot. “We're going to land and pick up Hamilton, then leave as quickly as we can and return to the Tower. Call ahead and have October and – I'm sorry – have Anderson and Marquez waiting in my office when we get there.”

Who could have access to such technology? And who would choose to reveal it here, by showing up LexCorp during its biggest publicity stunt ever?

The Service.

“They’ve cracked the Object,” he whispered to himself. “It’s the only explanation.”

Metropolis: June 21, 1 S

It was hard to see much from the ground.

Within seconds after Lana looked up, Clark was barely a dot in the sky. Then he vanished completely behind a cloud. Some time later – it could have been several minutes or as little as ten seconds – tones of confusion and disbelief began coming out of the radio, followed by confusion and joy. Eventually the space plane itself became visible to the naked eye, and it landed as planned on a runway sufficiently far from the crowd that it looked no bigger than a sea gull.

Clark was under there somewhere, she knew. He brought the plane in far enough up the runway that the commentators weren’t getting a good view, and it touched down like a feather almost a quarter mile from the reviewing stand where Lex Luthor and various NASA and Metropolis officials were scheduled to meet it. After half a minute or so something flew away from the plane very fast.

Good boy, Clark, she thought, and realized that she wasn’t sure whether she meant the rescue itself, or the fact that he might yet get away unidentified. And then she thought: *I wonder what I do now?*

A few minutes later Clark came back, stepping carefully between the lawn chairs and blankets. His red windbreaker was gone and a white baseball hat with the red Metropolis Regents logo was pulled low over his face. He wore large sunglasses that made him look like a bad spy trying to go incognito. Lana jumped to her feet and hugged him. “Clark, that was wonderful! What did – ”

“We can’t stay here,” he whispered. “What if they saw me?”

“Everybody saw you,” she whispered back. “But I don’t think anybody knows what to make of you.”

“If we leave now we can catch a bus before everybody realizes that the show is over.”

Clark was right about that. No one was leaving as they picked their way through the crowd. There was a tone of excitement in the air, both from the radios and from the people themselves. “I don’t know what I just saw,” a radio commentator was saying. “WGBS has shown the replay four times already, and I still don’t know what I’m looking at.”

“I ... I always thought I would do something like that someday,” he whispered excitedly. “I mean, I’ve saved people before, one or two at a time. But never like that before. Never ...”

“In front of everybody.”

He shuddered, and his voice suddenly changed, becoming younger, higher, and weaker.

“Oh God, they all saw me. What are they going to think? Somebody who can do what I do ... they’ll think I’m some kind of monster.”

“You’re a hero, Clark,” she said as firmly as she could without being overheard. “You’ve been a hero since you were 12.” *To me*, she thought. *Now you’ll be a hero to everybody. You belong to the world.*

They got on a bus easily, and it left with few empty seats but no one standing. A teen in the back had a boombox radio on, which was against the rules but no one objected. “It was a flying man,” a female reporter from *The Daily Planet* said authoritatively. “That doesn’t make any more sense to me than it does to you, but all of us on the Constitution know what we saw. A flying man slowed us down, then put the plane on his back and carried us in.”

“Miss Lane, we’ve gotten reports from a variety of sources that something flew under the Constitution and buoyed it up, but the general consensus is that it had to be some kind of very fast, very agile missile. Dr. Hamilton from LexCorp has denied knowing about any kind of rescue missile program, or that the Constitution was disabled intentionally to demonstrate the capabilities of the missile. But – ”

“No. It was a flying man. He spoke to me. There must be pictures somewhere that will show him.”

“I hope not,” Clark whispered. “But I don’t know. There were jets around with cameras. I don’t think they got much, but I don’t know. I thought about zapping them with heat vision, but ...”

“You didn’t want to break anything.”

“Right. They had cameras on the space plane too, but I heard them talking and I don’t think they were very clear.” Lana said nothing, because he seemed to be about to continue. And then he blurted, “I really did it, didn’t I? I saved all those people.”

“Shhh ... not so loud.”

“I felt ... maybe this is what I’m meant to do. Maybe this is why I have all these ... abilities.”

She waited, and within a few seconds his mood swung again. “Oh God,” he said. “I don’t know what happens now. I don’t have any idea.”

I do, she thought. *We both go where we’ve always been destined to be. I go back to Smallville and you go on to greatness.*

“I’m so glad you were here when this happened,” he said, taking her hand. “I don’t know what I would have done.”

“You’d go back to the farm for a day or two to figure it all out. And that’s what we’re going to do anyway.”

“Oh God,” he said. “Mom and Dad. I haven’t been thinking about them. Do you think

they saw?”

“Everybody saw, Clark” she said. “Everybody.”

Metropolis: June 21, 1 S

Three hours into the 13th annual *Future Directions in Consciousness* conference, Eric Randall was becoming bored. In the term paper he had written after the previous year’s conference, his first, Eric had sorted the speakers into two basic categories: Humanists (who thought that higher consciousness occurred naturally in the human species) and Supplicants (who expected enlightenment to come to humanity from somewhere else). The Humanists broke down into the Evolutionists (who looked to the future) and the Restorationists (who wanted to recapture states of consciousness that our ancestors had mastered, possibly by channeling the spirit of some prehistoric warrior or shaman). The Supplicants broke down into Angelists and Alienists, depending on where they expected the gift of higher consciousness to come from.

That paper had gotten accepted by the MTU’s journal, which would look spectacular on his resume when he finally graduated and had to think of something to do his education. (Most of his classmates seemed content to take hard-work/low-pay deadend jobs as small-town ministers, but Eric had no interest in that. In truth, he had no interest in academics either, but some deep intuition kept pushing him along. Religion was power, he felt, even more so than politics or business. All a guy needed was the right gimmick and people would line up to offer themselves for servitude.) He had hoped that this year’s conference would offer similar resume-padding opportunities, but so far each talk he had heard was a virtual clone of what he had heard last year. About all he had been able to conclude was that the Evolutionists were wrong: if humanity was anything like the FDiC Conference, it wasn’t evolving at all.

The current speaker, a Alienist, was discussing his enlightening and hopeful communications with the Space Brothers. But Eric couldn’t make out whether these communications were alleged to be face-to-face, through some physical medium like radio, or via a psychic medium like telepathy or channeling. (Channeling Alienists sometimes wobbled over into Angelist territory – space brothers and archangels could sound disconcertingly similar.) At any rate, the message was the same: Humanity’s fledgling space program had brought them to the attention of higher races, and so the Time of Wonders was at hand. Soon a representative of the Space Brothers would appear. He would prevent humanity from destroying the Earth, and be the forerunner of a new Golden Age when enlightened humans would take their destined place in the galactic order.

Eric was beginning to regret skipping the air show. Clearly his next publication was going to have to come from somewhere else. He unzipped his backpack and pulled out the Metropolis Theological Union spiral notebook that he used for scribbling down unfinished ideas. He paged slowly through the notebook, giving half his attention to the speaker and half to remembering why this idea or that one had seemed worth writing

down. He stopped when he came to *How to Found a Major Religion*, a writing project he had started tongue-in-cheek, but was now assessing more seriously. So far he only had one tip:

Make someone else the central figure of your religion. To launch a major religion, you need to fill two key roles: (1) the Central Figure, whose life story provides the religion's mythology; and (2) the Founder, who creates the doctrines, rituals, structure, and practices of the religion around the mythology of the Central Figure. Examples: Jesus and Paul, Buddha and Ananda, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.

Trying to play both roles is asking for trouble in a number of ways. The pressure of both roles is incredible, and often leads to insanity (e.g. Jim Jones). Also, followers who are attracted to an all-in-one leader package (with a visible, touchable Messiah) tend to be unstable. Though they make good cultists, they become an embarrassment as your religion tries to enter the mainstream (e.g. the Moonies). The religious mainstream wants their Messiahs comfortably distant, where they can be ignored when their teachings are inconvenient.

Taking a felt-tipped pen out of the pack's zipper-pouch, Eric added a note in the margin: "Check whether Islam is a counter-example. Does Mohammed play both roles?"

Given that you must choose between the two, it is obvious that you want to be the Founder, not the Central Figure. Not only is it incredibly difficult to live a life worthy of myth, but you run the risk that the Founder role will never be properly filled, and your mythic life will go unnoticed, unrecorded, and (most importantly) uncelebrated by hundreds of millions of followers.

On the other hand, a Founder can always find a Central Figure if s/he is determined to do so. A distant or (preferably) deceased CF is best, minimizing the risk of interference or embarrassment. (In this respect the Founder and the eventual mainstream followers are co-conspirators in keeping the CF at a safe remove. A living, active Messiah is too much of a loose cannon for people who above all want to lead settled, predictable lives.) If necessary, the Central Figure's teachings, writings, deeds, and miracles can be repackaged, reinterpreted, altered, or even made up out of whole cloth - all of which is much easier if the CF himself is not around to kibbitz. Even if the alterations or exaggerations come to light, the priest of a deceased god/man is easily forgiven for being "overzealous". But if the CF is alive and presumed (incorrectly) to be in control, any inflated claims paint him as a liar, an egotist, and a hypocrite.

Something was happening in the auditorium, Eric realized, and he looked up from the notebook. The speaker had stopped talking, and short, chubby, middle-aged man was running down the center aisle.

"The sign!" shouted the man, red in the face and out of breath. He had probably only run upstairs from the lobby, but he looked like the messenger from Marathon about to collapse in a fatal swoon after delivering his announcement. "The representative has

arrived. He just saved the space program. He's on TV right now. Out in the lobby. Come and witness!"

The speaker looked confused and held up his text. "But I still have two pages to go."

"Not important," insisted the red-faced man. "Nothing is important any more. He's here!"

A few people near the door had already gotten the message and were on their way out. Eric considered: Even if this was all a planned stunt, it was (at the very least) better theater than the FDiC had seen to date. He quickly threw everything into his pack and headed for the aisle.

By now the speaker was on his way off the stage and the move for the exits had become a full-scale stampede. Eric looked at the shoving mob by the rear doors, waited for a dozen people to surge past, then stepped out into the cleared aisle and jogged in the opposite direction. The door behind the podium was free and unlocked. He quickly exited and walked down the hallway that surrounded the meeting room, then down the escalator to the hotel bar where some woman in an orange jumpsuit was being interviewed on the projection TV. She looked like Hollywood's idea of an astronaut (or maybe Hollywood's idea of an alien – Eric wasn't sure yet who the representative of the Space Brothers was supposed to be). She was young, beautiful, and showing plenty of cleavage.

"Miss Lane," said the interviewer, wielding a microphone that resembled a billy club, "you seem to be the only person who got a good look at the man's face."

"Yes," the hot young astronaut/alien replied. A subtitle identified her as Lois Lane, reporter from *The Daily Planet*. Behind her people seemed to be racing around in all directions. The camera moved unpredictably, as if the cameraman were being buffeted by a crowd. "I got a good look. I'm sure I'd recognize him again."

The "him" was probably the Space Brother, Eric deduced. Or at least that's how the assignment would be made in the minds of the Alienists. From the Lane woman's tone and posture, Eric suspected she thought he was pretty hot, too. *Now that's a movie plot for sure: Beautiful woman is the first witness to handsome alien. No doubt where that one goes. I wonder what the kids would be like?*

The microphone was picking up a number of voices speaking at once, though Eric couldn't make out what any of them were saying. The bar was beginning to fill up with conferencers who had finally fought their way out of the meeting room, as well as various other passers-by who were being pulled in by the inescapable gravity of people gathered around a television.

"And it was a person, not a robot or some kind of man-shaped rocket?"

"There wasn't time for a blood test, but he looked human to me – a young man, on the large side. Obviously very strong." *She's definitely attracted to him.* He wished his undergraduate advisor, Professor Boston, were here to verify his observation. *He would know for sure. He's uncanny that way.*

“Do you think that this might be a NASA publicity stunt? Their budget is under attack in the Senate, and it was an unusual move for them to allow a reporter on this flight.”

“If it was a stunt, no one told me or the crew. We were all pretty scared up there.”

At this point the interviewer, a woman whose name Eric was sure he knew but couldn't recall, stepped into the center of the camera's field. A gust of wind blew her blond hair in front of her eyes, but she ignored it. *She'd make a good Hollywood alien too*, he thought. *Not as good as that Lane woman, but definitely OK.* “For those of you who just tuned in, I'm here at the Godwin Air Force Base, where a mysterious flying man has just prevented the space plane Constitution from crashing into the crowd gathered here at the Metropolis Air Show. If you feel strange hearing that, imagine how I feel saying it: a mysterious flying man has saved the space plane Constitution and all of its crew, including *The Daily Planet's* Lois Lane, from certain death. Can we roll the tape on this?”

The bar went silent as the news anchor in Washington narrated the fuzzy video of the rescue. Eric could not have interpreted the video on his own. The space plane was a large, fuzzy dot that bounced around the screen. A smaller fuzzy dot came into the picture and merged with the first fuzzy dot. Shortly thereafter, the bouncing stopped. Eric suspected he could have faked the whole thing with a home camcorder, but all around him voices began to whisper, “It's true.” “It's him.” “I never really believed I'd see it happen.”

After ten minutes in the bar, it became clear to Eric that the newscasters had already told him what little they knew, and would now keep looping through it over and over until new information became available. But all around him the conference-goers were not moving. He doubted that today's session would ever get back on track. He looked around to see how easy it would be to get a drink, then started a fantasy about the Lane woman and some hot alien.

Not that he believed any of this. It was all too far-fetched, and too easy to fake. *But what if it were true?* he wondered. The conferencers around him all thought it was true. *What could a person do with that kind of belief?*

Probably they'd all find out soon enough. Whoever staged the hoax would probably waste no time in taking advantage of it. *But what if they don't? What if they bungle it?*

Eric thought about the unfinished paper in his notebook and smiled.

Central Figure? Check.

Metropolis: September 6, 10 A.S.

“Look up! Look up!” called the Watcher in the East. He had raced into position from the kitchen and still had his apron on.

“He descends from the skies to save us,” answered the Watcher in the West. Her timing was a bit off and her voice did not boom the way it ought to.

“Look up! Look up!” called the Watcher in the South, an enormous black man whose deep voice was perfect for the role. Julia wasn’t sure whether he was a Kryptonist or not, but he was a frequent guest who loved the mealtime ritual.

“He comes again in glory!” Julia closed from the North.

The first plate clinked onto the serving table a little too quickly after the closure from the North, and the general hub-bub of conversation – which had never really diminished all that much – rose up immediately.

We’re getting way too lax with our rituals, Julia thought as she walked towards the end of the line. *I’m sure that’s what anybody from the Mother Church would tell me.* And she knew what her own mother would have added: “The fish stinks from the head.”

It’s true, she thought. *The rituals have been meaning less to me lately, too. I wasn’t looking up just now. I was looking around. Why should any of them take things more seriously than I do?*

A rush of last-minute arrivals were joining the line as well, but they stopped jostling each other long enough for Julia to take her place. The guests packed in close to each other, and a few were not above elbowing other guests out of the way, but Julia seemed to have an invisible buffer zone that extended about six inches in all directions. No one touched her or spoke to her. If anyone’s eyes met hers they nodded their respect and looked away. Julia had thought that people would stop doing that when she quit wearing her robes and other emblems of office, but it had made no difference.

The food, as usual, looked filling but uninspiring. Navy beans with ham, and some kind of green leafy side dish – the kind of food that her mother used to tell her would stick to her ribs. “Kal-El lives!” the server said as he dished out her share. He said it with enthusiasm, but Julia wondered whether he was as enthusiastic for the other 75-100 meals he served.

“Kal-El lives,” she responded, trying to get just the right amount of emphasis in her voice. The Supreme Affirmation should never be automatic, she knew, but she also didn’t want to overdo it. *Genuine is best.*

And Julia could be genuine with the Supreme Affirmation, because if there was one teaching that she had never doubted, it was that Kal-El was alive. Her visions of him had not stopped after the Icarus mission, though they were not as frequent. And she continued to feel his presence in her heart as a kind of inner compass and a wind at her back. Kal-El had never seen fit to tell her where his physical body was – whether it was in the Sun (as the Church taught) or back on Earth or somewhere else entirely – but she knew that his astral form was as active as ever, and that a bit of his spirit lived on inside her.

Julia’s one concession to rank at mealtime was that she ate in her office – a closet-sized room with a desk, a computer, and a filing cabinet. For the first few months she had tried eating in the cafeteria, but it didn’t work. If she picked an empty table it would soon be filled with guests or novices wanting to ingratiate themselves to her, and if she sat it an

empty place at a full table, the conversation died. The inspectors from the Mother Church had criticized her for going through the cafeteria line at all. She was, they claimed, not upholding the dignity of her office. Camaraderie with the lower ranks could be taken too far, they said. She knew they had a point, but at the same time she knew that the guests would be treated better if she was with them. And besides, it was the easiest way to get something to eat.

Julia had just set her tray down when Maria breathlessly opened the door.

“Exalted One, come quickly. Something is wrong in the men’s dormitory. Giselle came out of there in a panic and is saying ... I can’t make sense of what she’s saying. Half of it is in that French she speaks.”

Giselle was another novice. Julia was beginning to regret sending most of her best people off to start missions in Chicago and Gotham. It would take some time before this group of monastics developed the kind of experience and confidence that she had started to take for granted. *Until then, I’ll just have to get used to dealing with several of these “emergencies” each day.*

She walked quickly out of her office and towards the dormitory. It was important, she knew, to set the example of moving expeditiously without panic. Maria followed, not running this time, but matching the Archon’s pace. *Her body is learning. Perhaps her mind will catch up.*

The dormitory’s double doors were closed. Giselle stood outside them, being attended by two male monastics who also showed signs of agitation.

“Loa,” Giselle gushed as Julia approached. A string of Haitian-accented French followed, which Julia understood just well enough to gather that something had spoken to Giselle from a closet. A *loa*, she knew, was some kind of spirit or demon.

“Couldn’t the voice just be a man hiding in the closet?” Julia asked. She remembered the unconscious man who had been brought in by a good samaritan the night before. At daybreak he was gone, though the doorkeepers had not seen him leave.

Giselle shook her head violently. Another burst of language erupted from her, but Julia could parse very little of it. “The demon, he knew things,” interpreted Gary, the monastic stroking her hand reassuringly. “Things she is ashamed to admit she has never told you, or any of us. That is how she knows it is not a man.”

Julia thought about this. There was indeed a demonology of Kryptonism; it included tales of the Phantom Zone, some sort of extra-dimensional region into which Krypton had projected its most hardened criminals, and in which they presumably survived the Holy Planet’s destruction. Julia herself did not believe in it; or rather, if it did exist it was closed off from our reality and had no importance. Kal-El had never mentioned the Phantom Zone, either in his public life or in her visions. Many of the converts brought some form of demonology with them, and the Prophet had offered them the Phantom Zone as a harmless place for their demons to reside. She could think of no reason for one

of them to reside in a closet in the men's dormitory.

"What did the voice want from you?"

"To go ...," Giselle was working hard now to control her voice and speak understandable English. "To go away. I wanted to get a broom out of the closet and it held the door closed. ... It wanted me to go away, and when I kept trying to open the door it threatened to say ..." The girl broke down crying.

Wanting to be left alone in a closet doesn't sound all that demonic, Julia thought. "Well," she said. "I suppose we do have to get him out of there somehow."

"I could try to force the door open," Reggie, the larger of the two men, suggested. Julia recognized this as a heroic impulse on his part – he was actually quite scared and hoped she wouldn't take him up on it.

Two members of the kitchen staff came up to ask what was going on, and Gary told them Giselle had spoken to a demon in the closet.

I've got to deal with this before it gets out of hand.

"Is everyone out of the room?" Julia asked as she put her hand on the doorhandle.

"Yes, Exalted One," Maria answered. "But you aren't going in there, are you? He could be dangerous. Let me go with you. It would be an honor to protect you."

Julia recognized this as another heroic offer. "Let's save that honor for some other time," she said. "Keep everyone back and don't let anyone in unless I specifically call for them."

"Yes, Exalted One."

Julia entered the male dorm and shut the door behind her. She stood still for a moment and absorbed the peace and solitude of the room. The beds were made and ready to receive another night's worth of the city's homeless. Reddish light from the approaching sunset reflected off a brick building across the alley and fell in vertical stripes from the tall windows, casting distorted shadows. She checked the sense of Kal-El's spirit that she carried inside her, and found no warning of danger.

That's what I thought.

Slowly, carefully, making no attempt to hide the sound of her footsteps, she went from one window to the next and closed the blinds.

One day when she was seven, Julia had watched three older boys with a ladder trying to get a cat out of a tree. The boy on the ladder stood still whenever the cat was watching him, and advanced whenever the cat looked away. Several times he got within a step or two of the cat, which would then get frightened and climb out of reach. The boys thought it was a joke when Julia asked if she could try, but eventually they got frustrated enough to let her. She did the exact opposite of what the boy had done: she stood still when the cat wasn't watching, and made eye contact whenever she advanced. When the cat was within reach, she put out her arm very slowly, giving the cat plenty of time to decide

whether it wanted to be picked up. In ten minutes she and the cat were on the ground together.

That was how she planned to get the man out of the closet.

When she had made the room as dark as she could, she sat on a bed near the closet door but not directly in front of it. "Everyone is at dinner," she said, loud enough to be heard through the door, but no louder. "We're alone here."

Julia heard traffic noise from 38th Street. She wondered if the man were asleep or unconscious or had harmed himself.

"Thank you for worrying about me," he said after about half a minute. "Your girl was too frightened to think about anyone else. I'm surprised you aren't frightened too, after hearing about the demon in the closet. Aren't you afraid of demons?"

Julia stopped breathing in mid-inhalation. It was as if this voice had heard the conversations in the hall, and perhaps even her thoughts. She thought of the great round Sun and its energizing light. Even in the darkness it strengthened her. She started breathing again.

"No," she said.

After another long pause the voice behind the door said, "You really aren't. That's rare in any religion. Even most people who get personal visions of their god have a lot of fear in them. More than average, most of them."

"Perhaps their visions aren't true ones."

"Maybe not. I wish mine weren't, but unfortunately they usually are." There was a period of silence. Julia could hear his breathing, now that she was attuned to his voice. "Look, I'm sorry I made a disturbance in your mission. And I'm sorry I scared the girl. I'm not usually such a bully. Most of the time I can handle things, but it's always louder when I wake up with a hangover. And being in a room with all those men – I just wasn't ready for it. Do you have any idea how much pain and fear and anxiety those guys carry around with them?"

"Yes."

The voice behind the door didn't answer right away. "I guess maybe you do," he admitted. "Look, if I could get out of here and back on the street where the misery is a little more diffuse, maybe I'd be OK."

By now Julia was fairly certain she was talking to the man who had vanished. She was surprised to discover how seriously she was taking his story. *A man with hyper-acute empathy would find this room a torture, she thought. He would want to anesthetize himself against it.*

"You want to go get drunk again."

He laughed, and then started coughing. "I guess I'm not the only one who reads voices,"

he said. "But you want to get me out of this closet as much as I want to get out of it. I can't still be here when the men come in to sleep. I can't stand it. It will kill me or I'll go insane ... or more insane, I guess."

Julia imagined the possibilities. If the room was torture to this man, she had to get him out of it. But it couldn't be right to send him back out onto the street where the good samaritan had found him. "What else do you read besides voices?" she asked.

"Everything: postures, handwriting, works of art, the mess on your desk, the way you throw your clothes down on the floor. It doesn't matter. If a human being did it, there's information in it."

"And you can read that information."

"Yes. I know what you're going to suggest. You shouldn't."

Rationally, she recognized how incredible his claims sounded. And yet she believed him. She wondered for a moment if the man's occult power could be in his voice rather than his senses – if he could somehow be commanding her to believe him. Once again she checked the Kal-El within, and found no warning of danger.

"This common dorm room is not the only kind of room we have here. There are a few private rooms as well. There's a room on the fifth floor that is fairly isolated. The rest of the floor is mostly storage. It isn't much, but it faces the sunrise."

"And it's your room. You're planning to go sleep with some of the other nuns or whatever you call them."

"I think you'd do better there than being on the street."

"There would still be footsteps in the night, people coughing in their sleep."

"I could get you some ear plugs. They aren't perfect, but they help."

Julia heard a long intake of breath and then an equally long sigh. "The toughest thing about you is that you mean what you say. I can't even write you off as somebody who's trying to make brownie points with God."

Julia waited. The closet door opened slowly. As the man emerged, she could make out just enough of his shadow to verify that he wore the green army-surplus coat she remembered from the previous night. He still had the odor of the street on him, she observed, but it was best to take one step at a time.

"We can take the fire escape up from here," she suggested. "Otherwise you'll have to go past the staff."

"They're leaning against the door, and they're very frustrated that we aren't talking louder. They're afraid for you, but they also don't believe anything can hurt you. Some of them aren't sure they believe in Kal-El, but they do believe in you."

Julia wondered whether he was actually reading the staff or just her. Her ego wanted to

believe such things, she knew. It was a weakness in her that was, perhaps, not so hard to spot. She went a window, raised the blinds, and opened the glass far enough to step outside. The noise from the street became louder and the man flinched. Julia stepped out on to the fire escape and held out her hand.

“You know,” he said. “I can’t stand to be around most people at all when I’m sober. The human soul is such an ugly little thing.”

He took her hand and stepped out the window. Their feet against the metal steps echoed through the alley like the hammering of a distant blacksmith.

“What should I call you?” she asked.

“Ben.”

“No last name?”

“Not just now. If you knew who I was ... well, that would have to be the beginning of a very long story.”

Julia thought of the cat in the tree. “At your own pace,” she said.

En route to Metropolis: June 21, 1 S

Next time, Daniel thought as he paid four dollars for a glass of wine that was far beneath his usual standards and yet better than anything he had tasted in several years, *I’ll have to try to stow away in first class. That would at least be a challenge.*

The problem was that he had picked his target too well: a mid-week flight, half-full, so that neither empty seats nor occupied ones stood out; an inefficient airline from a famously slipshod Latin American nation, now in the middle of a labor dispute with its flight attendants’ union. Planting the idea that two large families should change their seats had created sufficient confusion and annoyance that the stewardess had looked positively relieved to find a polite English gentleman holding down the center of the chaos.

Daniel had forgotten how boring air travel could be. The Californian college boy in the next seat seemed totally uninterested in the story of his alien abduction, and preferred to catch a nap rather than tell his own lies about the charms, endowments, and appetites of the brown-eyed girl whose picture was in his wallet.

Daniel prided himself on his ability to sleep anywhere, but today it was failing him. Perhaps the continuous roar of wind and whine of engines were just too different from the nocturnal insect-munching noises he had grown accustomed to. Perhaps when he arrived in Metropolis he would have to find himself a termite-infested house just so that he could feel at home.

All in all, he was having a hard time thinking about Metropolis and what he might do there, even as the jet crossed into American airspace and began working its way up the coast. His vision hadn’t been very specific, so he supposed he would just have to show up

and await further instructions. Maybe it would be obvious after he got there. Or not.

Failing to have any interesting thoughts about his long-term plans, Daniel turned to more immediate subjects. He had not yet decided how to play the customs officers. They were bound to be suspicious of a man traveling alone without luggage. But his age and race worked in his favor. He considered spinning a story about a daughter who was about to make an unexpected and sure-to-be-disastrous marriage that he had just a few hours to stop. If the officer was a middle-aged male, he would surely sympathize.

On the other hand, Daniel wasn't carrying any drugs or other contraband – he mentally went through his pockets to make sure – so there was nothing to fear other than delay. But delay of what? He had no plans, no one to meet, no place to stay. He knew that north-south flights didn't technically produce jet lag, but he was just creaky enough to wish for a little break time before finding a place for himself in a new city. If he could make the customs people suspicious enough, perhaps he could arrange a couple of days in jail to get his feet on the ground.

Engendering trust required preparing a good story, but raising suspicion always had to be done on the fly. Different people feared different things. You could have the worst possible story ready, but you always ran the risk that some perverse bureaucrat would decide you were harmless.

The impact of landing gear on the runway jolted Daniel out of a doze.

Something is happening. He sat up quickly and began looking around. Whatever it was, no one else seemed alarmed.

“You missed the air show,” the college boy informed him. “We flew right over it. I thought we'd see that new space plane, but it must not have landed yet.”

Cell phones began ringing only seconds after the pilot gave permission for them. “Don't play games with me,” he heard a CEO-type say into a phone about the size of his palm. “Things like that don't really happen.”

Inside the terminal a series of wide hallways emptied into the baggage claim area, which looked all wrong to Daniel. There were too many people about, and they weren't clustering around the baggage carousels, where belts full of luggage were drawing little attention. Some people talked animatedly among themselves in groups of four or six. Others stood alone and talked into phones. In the corners, crowds formed around televisions attached to the ceiling.

“What's happening?” asked an anxious businessman who seemed much too young to be wearing such a serious suit. “Is the market crashing? I have to unwind my option position and the battery on my phone is dead.”

“Don't worry,” Daniel said reassuringly. “It's nothing financial. A comet is headed for the Atlantic. The tidal wave won't make it here for days. We have plenty of time to get away.”

Other than the young businessman, no one seemed to be in a hurry to leave through the hallway that led to the customs inspectors. With no traffic flow to read, Daniel had to look for signs and follow the colored arrows on the floor. In the hallway two men were arguing over a transistor radio. "It's a hoax," one was saying. "It's got to be a hoax."

Daniel wasn't sure how this development, whatever it was, affected his plans. If a war was starting, it might be a bad time to look suspicious. If there had been a plague outbreak, then Metropolis International was either the best or the worst place to be. And if the Second Coming was at hand, well, it was already probably too late for anything but a Perfect Act of Contrition, which Daniel suspected to be beyond his powers.

He reflected that it would be wise to find out what was happening before going any farther. He silently congratulated himself for noticing this, and continued walking.

Only one customs line was open, but it was moving quickly and (due to the jam-up of people at the baggage claim area) wasn't that long. One distracted young man (unlikely to sympathize with the daughter-marrying-some-worthless-young-man story) in a blue customs uniform was stamping passports while looking over his shoulder at an open office door. The office was occupied by five or six other blue-uniformed people, who were clumped in a way that suggested a television Daniel couldn't see.

Time to wing it.

Daniel started taking fast, deep breathes to raise a sweat, while staring at the fluorescent lights to shrink his pupils down to pinpricks. When he handed the young man his British passport he said, "Do you know where I can find a doctor? I'm afraid one of the balloons must have broken."

The customs officer glanced up at him, then back at the office door.

He stamped the passport.

Kansas: September 17, 10 A.S.

Laura cranked the net and tested to see that it was taunt.

Mom has nothing to complain about.

She jumped to catch the low trapeze, flipped over into a sitting position, and then pumped it like a playground swing until it was taking her more than halfway across the atrium. Then she stood on the bar and leap off at the end of its swing, catching the higher trapeze on the opposite side. She repeated the process to catch a set of rings this time, then a swing, and then a rope up to the perch at the top of the dome.

It's a long way down from here.

She took a minute to catch her breath and steel her nerve.

Flying – how hard can it be? Jon does it. Dad does it. Everybody can fly in their dreams.

She tried to remember her flying dreams, the way her body felt, the sense of a force in her

chest that pulled her onward to her destination. But instead she kept seeing the blue woman and feeling the scalpels in her brain.

Focus. And then she thought: Maybe I can use the bad dream. Maybe the lady fixed whatever is keeping me from flying. Try that thought out.

For some time now Laura had believed that her flying problems were mostly mental, that she really could fly, but some kind of block kept her from doing it. (She was a little less clear on how the mental block kept her skin from being invulnerable to scrapes and scratches.) She figured it was like one of those hypnotist acts on TV, where somebody from the audience forgets how to walk because the hypnotist tells them they can't. Or one of those movies where the Olympic skier thinks she can't jump any more after an injury, when really the injury has been completely healed. Laura figured she just needed more little-engine-that-could in her brain.

Mom thought it was a stupid theory. "You're the most determined person I know," she said. "You outrun people who are faster than you. You get better grades than people who are smarter than you. When you get something into your head you never give up. Everybody should have those mental problems."

But I can't fly.

No. No. Stop thinking that. I haven't flown yet. There was a block in my brain and the blue lady fixed it. That's the ticket. It's fixed. Fixed. Fixed. Fixed.

Laura looked down again, then up. Then she decided that closed eyes were probably best. *Jon didn't zip around right away. He kind of hopped and levitated at first.*

That was why this exercise made perfect sense: *Don't try to leap off the ground and keep going. Don't try to jump over something. Just try not to fall so fast.*

Laura tried to remember the dream-sense of something pulling on her chest. She pictured it like a rope or a bungee cord attached to the perch she was sitting on. Except that she was going to jump chest-downward, so she pictured it fastened to her back instead. *It won't let me fall. It will slow me down.*

She held out her arms, leaned forward, and left the perch. *Slow. Slow. Slow.*

Her left arm hit the net first. The impact rolled her so that most of her weight came down awkwardly on her right shoulder. One strand of the net pushed hard on her right cheekbone, reminding her that she really ought to wear goggles before trying this stunt again.

She bounced a couple of times as the shock of her landing rippled out across the net and then reflected from the walls. On the second bounce she flipped over onto her back and opened her eyes.

Jon was hovering over her.

"Let me guess," he said. "You're practicing your suicide attempt, so that you get it just

right and don't wind up crippled or something.”

Laura said a word she wasn't supposed to know. She hoped Dad was at the Fortress and didn't hear her. “How did I fall?” she asked. “Did it look slow?”

“Thirty-two feet per second per second. Galileo is vindicated again.”

She wanted to cry, but not if Jon was watching. “I'll never get it,” she said despairingly. “I don't know how you do it. I've tried everything.”

Jon stopped levitating and sat down on the net, which sagged under his weight as if he were a normal boy. “Do you think you could put off your self-destruction for an hour or two? There's something I want to show you before Dad gets back.”

Laura bounced up and came down in a sitting position, like Jon. “What?” she asked, trying not to sound too eager. But Jon had been up to something this last week or so, and she hadn't been able to figure out what it was. He had seemed beaten for a day or two after he got back from Colorado. But when she had asked him if he was really not using his powers or if he had just gone underground, he had gotten a funny look in his eyes and repeated “underground” as if it had some secret meaning. Since then he had been gone a lot and hadn't told her what he was doing. She knew he was reading a lot about South America, but that didn't seem like something he would have to be secretive about.

“Something I've been working on. Something nobody else knows about.”

“Not even Dad?”

Jon nodded. “I think he'd have said something about it by now if he knew.”

One more bounce and she was standing in the net. “Count me in.”

Metropolis: June 21, 1 S

Lois was exhausted by the time she got back to the newsroom. The Air Force Base had been a frenzy of interview-and-be-interviewed. She had emailed her story paragraph-by-paragraph as she confirmed details and got new quotes. She even managed to shoot a question at Lex Luthor as he swept in with his Tom Swift helicopter and snatched Emil Hamilton. “We did not expect a problem. The rescue was not a LexCorp operation. I don't know what happened,” he said as the chopper door closed and his leather-clad bimbo pilot stared daggers at Lois. “But I will.”

Lois had given her phone a workout as she raced from one witness to another and dealt with the TV reporters who stuck microphones in her face. A quick quote from a University of Metropolis physiology professor explained why a man cannot fly unaided. It was hopeless to try to get comments out of LexCorp – after Dr. Hamilton vanished and the Man Himself professed ignorance, no lesser mortal would comment or even speculate. The NASA spokesman was also useless; he answered all questions in paragraph-long sentences whose content amounted to “We don't know.” A Dr. Flynn from WayneTech explained to her that rocket packs powerful enough to alter the course

of the space plane would be far larger than a man, and even if they could be shrunk down they would incinerate anyone who wore one. “What about insulation?” she asked. “Could some new crystalline material have super-insulating powers of some sort?”

“You’d have to ask LexCorp about that,” Dr. Flynn answered. “I thought crystalline computing was impossible.”

“What about an android? I mean, he looked real enough ...” She thought back to his eyes, to the voice asking if she was all right. Even in such a tiny interaction, he had radiated a kind of warmth, an inner light. No one could make a machine like that. “But what if ... could somebody ...”

“Not us,” Flynn said definitively. “We couldn’t come close. As for LexCorp ... nobody knows what they can do.”

LexCorp ... it didn’t fit. They would have done focus groups on his appearance, given him a costume, and put the big L-logo on his chest. They’d have made some kind of blond Aryan god out of him, and he either would have flown away without any human contact or he would have stayed for a photo session afterward. The man Lois had seen had looked so ... genuine. He looked like someone who was making it up as he went along.

And those eyes.

Lois wasn’t even sure why she had come back to the newsroom. The special edition was on the street already, with her story under the headline MYSTERIOUS SUPERMAN SAVES SPACE PLANE. There was nothing to do now and too much to do. Crazy reports were coming in from the spectators, who had been too far away to see anything anyway. Scientific types would eventually come up with some kind of theory. There were searches to be done about any previous events where reports of a flying man had come in and been ignored.

But Lois had enough experience to know that the next break in the Superman story wouldn’t come through legwork. The ball was in *his* court. He’d appear again, or his agent would make a statement, or he’d announce some kind of pay-per-view special. The President would go on TV to explain the multi-billion dollar project that had created him. Or something. Whatever the next break was, Lois knew it wouldn’t be from her doing. At least not now, not tonight, not until she’d had some sleep.

She turned on her computer and gave the search engine the words *flying*, *man*, and *rescue*.

“Hey Lois, way to go. You’re page one.”

Cat Grant stood at the entrance to Lois’ cubicle, wearing a bright orange dress with a high hemline and low neckline. Her hair was frozen in a windblown effect that Lois would have needed two hours and a full can of spray to achieve.

“Of course it’s page one,” she said. “The guy flew. He saved lives. It’s the biggest story since ... well, *ever*. Isn’t it late for you to be here? Where are you off to?”

Cat shrugged, and it seemed magical that nothing fell out of her dress. “Charity ball. You know: caviar, millionaire bachelors – all the hardships I endure for the sake of my job. And I’m not talking about the *story*. I’m talking about *you*. And that tailored outfit. You were *all over* the networks, like you were 100% serious and didn’t even know how *steamy* you looked. It was *dazzling*. Pictures of you are going to be *everywhere*, girl. You’ll probably have your own *poster* by the end of the week.”

Lois closed her eyes tight and then opened them again. She swiveled her chair to face Cat directly. “What are you talking about?”

Cat looked left and right. “Don’t play, it’s just us girls now,” she whispered. She dropped a newspaper on Lois’ desk, the tabloid *Metropolis Herald*. The huge headline read: “*FLYING MAN SAVED OUR LIVES*”. Above the head was the kicker: *Thousands witness Air Show rescue*.

And then she saw the picture, which took up the entire left side of the front page: Herself, in color. In an orange jumpsuit with the zipper down to space-slut levels.

Lois looked up at the ceiling and closed her eyes again. “Oh God,” she said. “It must have slid when we were buffeting around like that. And I was so busy ... I was on TV like that?”

“Every channel, all day long,” Cat said admiringly. “And the Internet. You’re probably on the hard drive of every teen-age geek in the country by now. Have the men’s magazines started calling yet?”

Lois had been ignoring the blinking message light on her phone. It was easy to ignore, because it was always blinking some number like two or four. Now she noticed that it was blinking 37.

“Oh God.”

“When you do the photo shoot, it could be like a weekend feature for us. We could be interviewing them while they’re asking you who your favorite actors are and stuff like that. I bet a bunch of my readers wonder what it’s like to pose. Lord knows I do.”

“Oh God.”

Cat looked away for a moment and appeared to be thinking. “You don’t think they’d go for a more general *Girls of the Daily Planet* thing, do you?”

Lois put her head down on her desk. But this time when she closed her eyes she saw his eyes looking back at her. “Are you all right?” he asked in that deep, warm voice. *What did I look like then?* she wondered. And then she thought: *That’s a stupid thing to worry about.*

She raised her head and turned back to the computer. “OK, Cinderella,” she said. “You’ve got a ball to go to. Princes to meet. Slippers to lose. And I’ve got a story to work on.”

“I didn’t think so either,” Cat said with resignation, giving the bottom of her dress two quick tugs to level out the neckline. “Some girls get all the breaks.” She turned on her impossibly tiny crystalline spike heels and walked towards the elevator with the grace of a model, her feet seeming to levitate a few inches above the floor.

“Oh God,” Lois said softly to no one. And then she thought: *What did I look like to him?*

Middle America: June 21, 1 S

The dark countryside of the Ohio valley spread beneath Clark, the clusters of town lights looking brighter but more sporadic than the stars above. It would be easy to turn upside down and imagine that the sky was the ground, that the stars were the streetlights of some vast chaotic city. There were no lines in those lights, which meant that the city had no roads. *They must all fly there*, he thought.

He felt the shock wave building around him and slowed down to avoid making a sonic boom. This flight was taking longer than it needed to, but now above all he didn’t want to be noticed. Not since his first flights had Clark been so self-conscious about being in the air. All over the world now, people were watching the skies, hoping to catch a glimpse of the flying man. And now, most of all, he did not want to be seen.

“Come home,” Mom had said on the phone. Before “Hello, Clark” or anything. Just “Come home.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Dad had added when he picked up the other phone. “You, me, your Mom, Lana. Get us all in a room and we’ll figure something out. It isn’t like we never imagined something like this could happen.”

After he hung up Lana had collected her things and they went straight to the airport. Lana had been willing to let him pay for changing her ticket to an earlier flight, but she talked him out of getting a seat with her. “We don’t have the money,” she said. “And besides, there are some ... I don’t know what to call them ... some things I need to think about by myself. And you too. We’ll talk later, at the house. Jonathan is right, we can figure something out.”

Standing alone at the gate, he felt more exposed than he had ever felt in his life. Anyone could see him here. Anyone could say, “There he is, the flying man!” *And then what? What would be so terrible about that?* He might have to sign autographs and let people take his picture. *What would be so terrible?* And yet, terrible or not, he shook when he thought about it.

I felt so sure then. So confident. So brave. And now ... it’s like that was someone else.

After her plane left – *what if it starts crashing too?* he wondered as it took off – Clark had gone back to his apartment. *Maybe I should pack. Maybe I should just vanish as if I had never come to Metropolis at all.*

But he didn’t pack. Instead he turned on the television and watched the endlessly repetitive coverage of himself. He was little more than a dot on the films taken by the

fighter planes, and not much bigger from the perspective of the network cameras racing across the airfield to the place where he had set the Constitution down. The pictures from the space plane's own cameras had just been released to the media, and though they were fuzzy they clearly showed that he was human, or at least human-shaped. (WLEX had a science fiction author on its panel, and he was adamant that the plane's savior must be an android.) Only Lois Lane had gotten a good look at him.

Lois Lane. Oh my God, Lois Lane.

Lois Lane had been the hero of every staffer on the *Wichita State Ledger*. Still in her 20s, she was probably the top reporter in Metropolis. The *Ledger* staff searched the *Daily Planet* each day for her stories the way that high school basketball players searched box scores to see how many points Tyrone Mark had scored. *That could be me someday*, they all thought without really believing it. And now Clark thought: *That's me she's talking about.*

"He's a young man, Caucasian, dark hair. And tall, very tall, at least six and a half feet, maybe seven or more. Very muscular. He was wearing a tight-fitting blue shirt and jeans and a red windbreaker."

"He sounds handsome. Was he handsome?" asked GBS' ditzy female anchor. Lane shot her a disdainful look and said, "I don't think that's going to help us find him. "But yes, he was handsome. One of the most handsome men I've ever seen."

Lois Lane herself was devastatingly beautiful. She had looked pretty in the still photographs he had seen in *Journalism Review*, but that hadn't prepared him for the impact she made in person or on TV. It was so easy to forget what she was saying and just watch her mouth move. He wondered how the men at the *Planet* got any work done. *I'll never find out now*, he thought. *I don't dare go near the place now that she's seen me.*

One more time he wondered why it would be so terrible for Lois Lane to meet him and know that he, Clark Kent, was the flying man who had saved her own life and so many others. "One of the handsomest men I've ever seen." But then he shuddered again. If the best reporter in Metropolis knew his secret, everyone would know. *It would be like being naked. Everywhere. All the time. You can ask why that would be so terrible, but it just would.*

"Someone should have told her about that zipper," he said out loud. Clark could reassemble the order of Lois' TV interviews by checking its level. The last and the most shameless interview had been on the local Galaxy station, WGBS. The camera kept bobbing downward as if the cameraman just couldn't help himself.

As the same clips cycled through again and again, Clark kept expecting one of the networks to break in with a report that people from Kansas had been calling in, and that the flying man had now been definitively identified as ex-high-school-football-star Clark Kent. But it didn't happen. It couldn't happen. The video was too fuzzy for anybody to recognize him.

Only Lois Lane got a good look at me.

It took forever to get dark. There was no way he was going to take off in the city – at superspeed or any speed – and he wasn't going to go up in the air at all until nightfall. Around sundown he went to the commuter rail station and bought a ticket for the westernmost suburb, Champlain. A teen-aged girl three seats away watched him out of the corner of her eye until she got off at Darcy, but just what that meant he couldn't determine. In Champlain he ran only slightly faster than humanly possible for two miles until he was on the back side of the hill that overlooked the town. Then he launched himself into the night sky.

Maybe if I told her the truth, if I let her in on the secret, told her all the good I've done, maybe she wouldn't expose me.

But Clark knew better. He might only be a college journalist, but even he had enough experience to know that you didn't get where Lois Lane was by keeping the best stories secret.

The reports from the by-standers at the Air Show weren't going to give him away. Several people reported seeing him fly over the crowd, but no one saw him leave the ground or could identify Lana as the companion he had left. Some of the accounts were either embellished or fabricated altogether. They had him with wings or with a cape or with a roar like some kind of engine.

“At least six and a half feet,” Lois Lane had said, “maybe seven or more.”

It had felt like that. One moment he had just been himself, sitting with Lana looking up at the sky. And then he was in the air where everybody could see him. And he felt ... bigger. Stronger. More clear. More certain. One moment there had been a decision to make, and then there was nothing to decide. There was only action, motion, speed, strength. The sun above, the crowd below.

It felt so good. That's what he hadn't been able to tell Lana or anyone yet. It wasn't just the flying or having everyone watch him or even saving all those people. It was like something inside him had opened for the first time. *Like being someone else.*

That's crazy, he thought. *I don't want to be someone else. I want to be Clark Kent. Jonathan and Martha's son. Lana's boyfriend.*

But he wasn't Jonathan and Martha's son. Or rather, he was, but he was someone else's son too. Someone he didn't know. Someone who gave him these powers.

Stop it.

Clark knew where that kind of thinking went. Mythology was full of boys who imagined that they were sons of the gods, and none of them had come to any good. Pastor Harris would have called it a blasphemy, and he would be right. These powers were no different from Lana's poetry or Lex Luthor's scientific genius. Everybody had some kind of talent. Gifts like that didn't belong to you, you just held them in trust. For humanity, for the

Universe, for God – it didn't matter what name you used. Gifts like that belonged to something bigger than you.

Something bigger.

He hadn't been sure that he could catch the Constitution before it shook itself into a million crystal shards. He hadn't known if he would be in time, if any of the people inside would still be alive when he got there. But none of that mattered. He was flying faster than he had ever flown in his life, but his mind was still and calm as as a monk in a Himalayan cave. There was only one thing to do, and he was doing it.

In front of everybody. In front of Lois Lane.

It felt so good, he thought. And then he shuddered again. He looked ahead, past the Mississippi into Missouri. *Just get home. We'll figure something out.*

Kansas: September 17, 10 A.S.

“Usual rules apply,” Jon said.

“I know: If I tell anybody you'll never tell me anything ever again.”

“Right.”

Laura was more than a little annoyed to be reminded. After all, she hadn't ever betrayed one of Jon's secrets – other than that time with Darla last year. But she'd been absolutely right then, so it shouldn't count. Her curiosity was stronger than her annoyance, though, so in five minutes she was out of her tights and into jeans. She met Jon in the garage next to the bikes.

“Are you driving?” she asked. Sometimes when they had a long way to go he would let her stand on the footrests that extended from the back axle of his mountain bike. It looked dangerous, but actually wasn't if you considered who she was riding with. When no one was looking Jon would fly the bike an inch or two above the ground. They could cover a lot of distance in a hurry that way, and Laura liked it better than any amusement park ride.

“No,” Jon answered, pointing to her bike, which was next to his. “We don't have far to go. We're taking the subway.”

The nearest subway Laura knew about was in Chicago, but she didn't ask what he meant. She got onto to her bike and rolled out onto the driveway.

“Wear this,” Jon said, tossing Laura her bike helmet. He put two large flashlights and inordinate number of batteries into a backpack.

Jon got on his bike and led the way, traveling at a speed that Laura thought must be painfully slow for him. They went down a dirt tractor path that once had marked the boundary between two of Grandpa Kent's fields. About five minutes after they left the house, the path descended to a small creek that Laura knew was barely two feet deep except after a hard rain. It was a small but persistent creek. Over the centuries it had worn away a gently sloping ravine that descended about fifteen feet from hilltop to creekbed.

Now that the fields were no longer being farmed the ravine had mostly filled in with brush, but Laura noticed a thin new dirt trail that skirted the edge. Jon turned down it and she followed.

Ten minutes later he stopped at a place where the ravine was a little steeper than usual. He got off his bike and scrambled down to a spot just above the edge of the creek. "Come on," he encouraged his sister. "I cleaned out all the poison ivy for you."

Reluctantly, Laura dropped her bike next to his and followed. When she was standing next to him, Jon lifted several interlocking bush branches to reveal a small wooden door. "A hobbit hole?" she guessed. He opened the door to reveal a dark tunnel going sideways under the field.

"You've got to be kidding," Laura said.

"I made the entrance small so it would be hard to find. It's not that bad once you get inside."

"Inside what?"

"The cave. It turns out that the bedrock here is almost all sandstone and limestone. It's got little tunnels all through it. I connected a bunch of them and made an entrance I could get to without people seeing me."

"Wait. Don't tell me why, let me guess. You need a place to hide your pirate treasure. Or to bury the bodies of your victims. Or maybe you're going to tunnel down and unleash the fearsome creatures that live at the center of the Earth."

"The center of the Earth is a bunch of melted rock," Jon responded. "Dad's been there."

"Then I give up."

He took a flashlight out of his pack and handed it to her. "Just go in," he said.

"You first."

"If I go in, who's going to hold the bush back for you?"

Laura sighed. By the flashlight's beam she could clearly see that it was a dark hole in the dirt. She got down on her knees and started to crawl. She was glad that she had kept her helmet on; she didn't like the idea of rubbing dirt into her hair if her head hit the ceiling. Laura tried to be glad that she didn't have the cruel, creepy kind of big brother, like she read about sometimes, the kind that would fill the hole in behind her and dig her out with great amusement in a couple of hours. No, she had the weird kind of big brother, the kind who thought holes were fascinating.

After she had crawled about ten feet, the floor of the tunnel turned to rock and then opened into some kind of larger chamber. She pulled her feet up under her and stepped down with a splash.

"Jon! There's an inch of cold water in here."

A whoosh of air came down the tunnel and then Jon was standing next to her. “Damn!” he swore. “I hate cold water. I’ve been plugging leaks for days and I never get the last one. And the stuff never drains on its own.”

Laura looked around for something to stand on, but it was too late, her tennis shoes and socks had soaked through. “What do you expect? It’s a cave. Is that what you wanted to show me, a cave?”

“Well, sort of. One of the things.”

“I hope you’re not thinking about bringing your girl friend down here, because I have to tell you she will *not* be impressed.”

Jon looked puzzled. “I don’t have a girl friend.”

“Have you told her that?”

“Who?”

“Never mind,” Laura said. “Is this it or is there more?”

“More.”

Jon held the pack in one hand and a flashlight in the other. He had Laura climb onto his back like a monkey, and then he levitated until he was horizontal. They had tried this trick in the atrium many times, but doing it outside the house was new and felt dangerous. “Keep your head down,” Jon instructed.

He started flying, slowly at first but then faster. Laura didn’t need to be told twice to keep her head down, because the passages were irregular and occasionally she heard something scrape against her helmet. Jon was pointing the flashlight forward where she couldn’t see its beam. “One of the branches I’ve found gets twenty five miles from home. But we’re not going there.”

“Where are we going?”

“Here.”

Laura slid tentatively off Jon’s shoulders and was relieved to discover that this part of the floor was dry. She turned on her flashlight. They were in a carved chamber about fifteen feet high. On one side was a pile of rocks that looked like a cave-in.

“Did you make this?” It looked like a lot of work, even for Jon.

“No,” Jon answered. “I found it. We’re right next to the old quarry. I think they made this place to keep stuff out of the rain.”

Laura waved her flashlight around. About twenty feet away she saw something that looked like a small wooden airplane. Or rather, it looked like the kind of airplane that island natives would make out of driftwood for religious purposes, not actually expecting it to fly. The surface was rough and the wings and body were thick. The entire craft was painted an uneven shade of white.

“It’s a glider,” Jon explained. “It doesn’t have an engine or anything.”

Laura approached it and knocked on the wood uncertainly. “Aren’t gliders supposed to be made of ... well, I don’t know what exactly, but something light?”

“It doesn’t really glide. It’s just supposed to look like a glider from a distance.”

No part of the room was more than about forty feet from the center. “Ummm ... what distance would that be?”

Jon pointed his flashlight towards the rockpile. “Out there.” He looked back to see her skeptical expression. “Never mind. Just watch.”

Laura heard the rocks moving before she even realized that Jon was no longer in the beam of her flashlight. She waved the light around, but couldn’t catch him in it. All she could see was indistinct motion and the rockpile shrinking while another rockpile grew on the opposite side of the chamber. In a few minutes light was breaking through where the first pile had been, and less than a minute after that all the rocks were in the second pile. She was looking out an archway towards a pool of water with a rock face on the opposite side.

“I put the pile there so that it would look like a cave-in and keep people out. If I’m going to build stuff here, I don’t want anybody wandering in and finding it.”

Laura said nothing and walked to the edge of the archway. It opened on to a ledge surrounding the old quarry. She recognized the place now. “Aunt Lana says this is the first place Dad ever flew.”

“No kidding,” Jon responded without interest. He lifted the glider and set it down in the doorway. Its wings had only a few inches of clearance on each side. Then he opened a rickety door. “You want to go for a ride?”

“In this?” Laura poked her head into the doorway. The interior looked like the kind of treehouse that kids built in old movies, back in the days when parents didn’t seem to care if their children suffered major injuries. She crawled in slowly for fear of splinters. “I thought you said it didn’t fly.”

Jon got in after her. He floated up to the ceiling and strapped himself into a harness that connected to a couple wooden beams stretching the length of the interior. “It doesn’t fly on its own. I have to fly it. The passenger – that would be you in this case, you’re my first passenger – kneels about there and hangs on to those handles.”

Laura was starting to see the point of this exercise, but she wasn’t sure yet whether to be excited or incredulous. She grabbed the handles just in case. “You’re going to fly this in the daytime?”

“Sure, that’s the idea. I thought of it after I ran into that glider in Colorado. I mean, *he* was up in the air, and nobody thought *that* was strange. So if I’m up in the air in this and somebody sees me, they won’t necessarily think it’s strange.”

“If this thing flies, it’ll be strange.”

Jon looked around, presumably scanning the area with his x-ray vision. Laura couldn't see anything but rock out her "window", which was just a place where there wasn't any wood.

"Taking off is the only tricky part." The beams bent a little and the nose of whatever-this-was tipped upward. "Nobody's very close or looking this way, but I still like to wait for a cloud to pass overhead."

Laura grabbed hard on the handles and pushed downward to wedge herself into place. Her hair spilled backward except for one strand that had decided to attach itself to a ticklish spot on her cheek. "You better make some changes before you take anybody else up in this. Somebody weaker or heavier than me would be upside-down in the tail."

"Who would I take anyway?"

"That Leslie girl from school."

The glider started to move, slowly at first until the wings were clear.

"That's stupid. She doesn't know I can fly."

"Why not? You're telling her everything else."

"No I'm not. I mean ... well, she's the first person who was ever curious about me. But she's not going to say, 'Hey, Jon, can you fly?' ... Hang on."

They were out over the water now. Jon turned the glider almost vertical and started moving upward. Laura felt the g-force increase and she very nearly lost her grip. The ascent was the part that would look most unnatural, she realized, so Jon was trying to do it as quickly as possible. Laura's head tilted backward as far as it would go and she could feel the little blood vessels in her eyeballs. She was preparing her arms to make a big pull when suddenly Jon leveled off. She came forward and almost fell on her face. But then she was just sitting on a wooden floor in a very quiet narrow room. Out the window was a cloud – not an in-the-sky kind of cloud, and not even one of the it-looks-so-close clouds that whip past the plastic airline windows. This was more like a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk cloud, the kind you could reach down and scoop up a handful of. The glider sat still on it, as if it were solid land that she could walk across until she came to the castle of the giant.

"You like it?" Jon asked.

And Laura began to laugh. It was a high, silver-bell laugh like an elf. She had never heard herself laugh like that before, and it took a moment before she could control herself.

"Sure," she said between convulsions. "It's great."

The beams bent a little further now that the glider was horizontal. "I was thinking we could look around a little while we're up here. You could see what it's like to fly."

"Sure," she said, and started to giggle again.

She thought about the old man in *Mary Poppins* who laughed his way up to the ceiling, or in *Peter Pan* where people had to think light thoughts if they wanted to fly. Jon started

moving forward, and the whole situation seemed even more hilarious than before. Except that it wasn't funny. It was just what she had been dreaming about for her whole life, and there wasn't any way to deal with it other than to laugh or cry or maybe scream.

Jon was doing a travelogue, pointing out this or that landmark. But Laura didn't have any interest in the ground. She looked at the clouds and the sky and the birds.

And she stopped looking at the wooden beams over Jon's shoulders.

They were trying to make a sharp turn when the right beam snapped. Jon later said they hit an air pocket he couldn't see. Without the beam's support, the right side tore away and Laura pitched out into the nothingness.

It was oddly peaceful.

This would be a good time to start flying, she thought. She put her arms forward just the way Dad did in the pictures on her wall, and she tried to remember the dream-feeling in her chest.

I'm doing it, she thought. *I can feel it, pulling me forward. All I have to do is relax into it and I'll shoot off towards home.*

She was only about ten feet from the water when Jon caught her. He cupped both arms under her chest the way she sometimes held a toddler who was pretending to fly.

"Did I at least fall slow?" she asked as he set her down on the ledge around the quarry.

He shook his head. "Thirty-two feet per second per second."

She sat down on the ground while Jon went off to fetch the pieces of the glider out of the water. "What am I doing trying to fly?" she asked out loud. "Humans can't fly."

When Jon got back he sat down next to her and tried to be nice, but it didn't help. Eventually she got bored with being depressed and suggested they go home. They walked to the entrance and into the cave. Jon moved the rockpile again. Even with the light coming in through the doorway he was just a blur.

"That's so low-tech," she commented when they were in the dark again. "And the flashlights and the water leaking in. You ought to do it up Kryptonian, with some luminous panels and holographic forcefields over the entrances."

"Sure," he said, putting her on his back and starting to fly home. "Like I know Kryptonian tech."

"Ask Dad. I bet he'd teach you. It's our family heritage and all that."

"And he wouldn't be suspicious at all about why I wanted to know all of a sudden."

A water drop landed on Laura's nose, and when she raised her head to wipe it away her helmet scraped across a rock. Jon dipped in his flight and Laura scrunched deeper between his shoulder blades. "Then I'll ask him."

Jon started to laugh, and Laura clenched her teeth in the dark. “*You* are going to learn Kryptonian tech? You needed my help to get through your science class.”

“I didn’t *need* your help. I *used* your help. There’s a difference.”

Jon was still chuckling. “Whatever,” he said.

“Well,” she replied, “you’re going to have to do something different if you want to take that glider all the way to South America.”

“What?” he said. “Why would I go to South America?”

“Never mind,” she said.

When they got back to the tunnel, the water had risen up to Laura’s ankles.

“Caves,” Jon said shaking his head. “If it was a basement I could call a plumber, but who’s going to tell you how to take care of a cave?”

Gotham City: June 22, 1 S

Right up to the last hour, it had been an ordinary day.

Playboy billionaires and creatures-of-the-night alike sleep in on Sunday mornings, so he had allowed himself an extra hour, a sixth hour of sleep, until 10. He did a light morning workout on the parallel bars just to get the kinks out and see if Saturday night’s activity had left any residual injuries he should be aware of. After a shower, he nibbled at the light breakfast Alfred had laid out before leaving for mass. He studied the local section of the *Gotham News-Messenger* through the eyes of a thief, looking for any special displays or exhibits whose contents would prove irresistibly tempting to that unique brand of high-profile criminal Gotham seemed to attract.

Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he had made a few notes and then went to his bedroom to put on one of his Bruce Wayne costumes.

This costume was a well-tailored tuxedo, tastefully dark, but with just the right amount of brightness added by the cufflinks, watch, and ring.

Every Bruce Wayne costume needs a touch of brightness, he thought.

He thought of Bruce like one of those bright tropical birds, a male in the height of his plumage, flashy and pretty and marking his territory by chattering a lot of nonsense. The society pages seemed to agree with this characterization, but did not disdain it. They regularly listed Bruce among the city’s most eligible bachelors, and they liked to use his picture to dress up accounts of boring black-tie events.

This day’s boring black-tie event was a fund-raising luncheon for the foundation that supported the widows and orphans of Gotham policemen. Both Bruce and Batman had a lot of sympathy for the honest policemen who died in the line of duty – which was about half of the casualties, the others being dirty cops who got in over their heads – and so the Wayne Foundation was making a major contribution.

The program was scheduled to begin at noon, with the luncheon buffet to open at 1. Bruce arrived at 1:30. Bruce Wayne always arrived late and frequently arrived either drunk or hung over. He was as unreliable as a summer breeze, and just as hard to hold a grudge against. There was no point to getting angry with him, because Bruce had no memory for people's emotions. Whether you yelled at him or flattered him or told him your darkest secret, the next time you met he would flash his boyish smile and seem honestly glad to see you, though he might not remember your name. (The more sympathetic of Gotham's gossip columnists found this superficiality unsurprising, given the trauma that Bruce had survived as a boy. "After you have seen both your parents brutally murdered," one had written, "it seems to me that you only have two choices. You can become obsessively dark and vengeful, or you can refuse to take anything seriously ever again. Gotham society can be grateful that Bruce Wayne has chosen the latter course.")

As usual, the room brightened when Bruce entered. Everyone enjoyed seeing him make an appearance. He was fun-loving and generous and he could even be clever in a naïve, uninformed sort of way. Once in a great while Bruce could say something bitingly apt, but he did it innocently, as children do. Hardly anyone took offense.

He positioned himself so that the currents of the room would take him over to Jim Gordon, the police commissioner, who was being badgered by a reporter from the *Gotham Crusader*, a free weekly that owed its continued existence to occasional large contributions from Gotham's most liberal philanthropist, Bruce Wayne.

"It's another case with the same pattern: the police get an anonymous tip and find the suspect beaten to within an inch of his life and tied to a pole with a manila envelope of evidence pinned to his chest. Now who would do something like that?"

"Why don't you tell me, since you seem to know," Gordon answered gruffly.

"Rogue cops, that's who. It's some kind of police inner circle, operating outside the law. Half of them do the dirty work, and then they tip the others off to make the arrest. This city is turning into one of those South American fascist states."

Gordon shook his head emphatically. He reached into his pocket for a cigar, then remembered (not for the first time) that smoking wasn't allowed. "I've looked into all of that many times. Any reasonable accusation has been checked out, and I haven't found a shred of evidence for a secret organization of off-duty policemen. I don't know who's been catching our criminals for us. I'd like to find out, believe me."

"I heard it was some kind of giant bat-creature," Bruce suggested in a sunny tone. "I read it in *The World*."

"Puh-lease," the reporter scoffed. "No sane person could be taken in by ... oh, Mr. Wayne. I didn't see you come in."

He wished he had gotten an opportunity to test whether Gordon knew yet that the three recent waterfront robberies were linked, as Saturday night's informant had claimed while

hanging upside down from the mouth of one of the gargoyles on top of the Gotham Bank Building. But Bruce's range of conversation was limited. He couldn't be overtly curious about gritty things like crime, but could only encourage people to talk about the things that were on their minds anyway. If Gordon had the waterfront robberies on his mind, he didn't let on.

After the fund-raiser he went home to the cave and switched to Batman. (Alfred had often tried to convince him not to wear the uniform when he wasn't going out, or at least not to wear the mask. But he found that it made his mind was clearer and colder.) He used the cave's computer system to access the trap door that WayneTech had installed into the GPD computer system. The detectives working on the waterfront cases weren't keeping their files up to date, but it seemed clear that they were not yet working together or correlating the clues from the three sites. He spent the next four hours doing that correlation himself, noting the commonalities and differences between the cases.

Another hour with his files pinpointed the gang responsible. It was a neighborhood pack, strictly small-timers. His original hunch that there was a larger plan seemed unlikely now. Probably only Batman realized that the three robberies would be ideal training missions for seizing the arms export shipment that was coming through the Port of Gotham in ten days.

False alarm.

Still, crime was crime and justice must be served.

The gang's youngest member was only 14. Batman spent the rest of the evening researching this boy. At 2:30 a.m. he jimmyed open the fifth-floor window into the boy's bedroom and woke him up by putting a gloved hand over his mouth. "I know about the waterfront jobs," he said in his most menacing whisper. The boy's eyes were open as wide as they would go and he was too frightened to struggle, not that it would have done him any good. "And you know about me, don't you?" The boy nodded silently. "I'm going to be generous with you. I'm going to give you 24 hours to go to the police and tell them everything. But if you decide not to deal with the police, then you can deal with me." He made eye contact and pushed the heel of his hand to block the boy's nostrils as well as his mouth. "Don't even think about running. I'll find you."

With his free hand he squirted a small amount of gas, which the boy sucked down quickly when Batman let him breathe. In seconds he was unconscious.

Batman liked the new version of his gas. It had a tiny amount of the Scarecrow's fear toxin in it – just enough to make sure that if you were frightened when it knocked you out, you'd be three times as frightened when you woke up.

That should do it, he thought.

It was nearly four when a terrycloth-robed Bruce Wayne carried a glass of milk and a plate of chocolate-chip cookies to bed. He turned on a news channel to help him wind down, and to check whether he had missed anything important.

There was only one story: the flying man. He watched for nearly an hour, switching from channel to channel, letting it all soak in.

It had all the earmarks of a LexCorp hoax. He couldn't immediately see what Luthor might gain, but Luthor's plans often took time to emerge. The alleged flying man could have been stowed away somewhere on the space plane, then allowed to hang on underneath while the pilot pretended not to be in control. How they kept him alive at high altitude or faked his flying away – these were mysteries, of course, but every explanation he could think of had its mysteries.

The *Daily Planet* reporter would probably have to be in on it, and the senator as well. The plane was too small for much subterfuge, and Luthor couldn't have risked having one of them look the wrong way at the right time. He didn't doubt that the Lane woman was up to the job of fooling the public; in all her interviews she had managed to keep that hard-edged-journalist face, as if she were totally oblivious to the show she was putting on.

The other alternative was that LexCorp – or somebody who wanted to show up LexCorp – had developed the kind of technology that would make such a rescue possible. That possibility seemed incredible to him, but much of the technology of the Crystalline Revolution had seemed incredible to him at first. If it existed, the world would adapt as it had to all the other inventions. Fortunes would be made and lost, but in the end the new technology would come to seem as ordinary as the telephone or the automobile.

Finally, after the cookies had been eaten, the television turned off, and the room darkened, he let his mind wander over the ridiculous possibility that the flying man was exactly what he appeared to be: a human (or a humanoid extraterrestrial) who through some freak of nature or act of God could fly and was fast, strong, and virtually indestructible. He knew immediately, instinctively, what it would mean if a being of such power were currently living on the Earth.

Trouble.

Kansas: September 17, 10 A.S.

Jon was nowhere to be found, which meant ... well, Laura wasn't sure exactly what it meant. Probably he wasn't in his cave, because Dad was in the basement, and Jon really didn't want to raise Dad's curiosity about strange underground noises. He probably wasn't flying around in that ridiculous glider either, for the same reason. Laura had checked his room thoroughly, looking not just in the usual places but up on the ceiling as well. She was pretty sure he wasn't anywhere in the house, though she supposed he could be playing hide-and-seek. She knew she'd never find him if he did, because he could move from one room to another faster than she could.

But that was just a theoretical possibility. As far as she knew, he hadn't ever done that, and maybe the wind currents would give him away even if he did. So he was probably at the library, either with Leslie or without, doing more research about the rain forest. It was amazing how Jon could obsess about stuff like that. One evening she had made the

mistake of asking him what he was reading, and he had talked for twenty minutes about deforestation and debt-for-land swaps and all sorts of other things that he had no reason to believe she was interested in. It was probably the longest monologue she had ever heard Jon give.

Laura didn't really have any reason to find Jon other than boredom. She had already determined that there was nothing on TV. She had done as much of her homework as she intended to do. She thought about calling one of the girls from school, but they hadn't been very interesting to her lately. All of them were so ... well, OK, they weren't that bad. They were perfectly normal girls who wanted to do perfectly normal girl stuff – play games, talk about boys, make up fantasies. It was all so ...

Human, she thought. That's the word you're looking for. Human. They can't fly. They don't build caves under the farm. They don't go into space or capture criminals or save people's lives. They're just girls.

Like me.

Laura flexed her left wrist a little, just to make sure it still hurt. She had landed funny and gotten it caught in the net the last time she had tried to fly.

It shouldn't have hurt at all. Nothing should hurt.

But it did. If anything, she got hurt *more* than the other girls. She was always waking up with pains here or there, and even bruises sometimes, which didn't make any sense at all.

Bad dreams are supposed to scare you, not give you bruises.

Mom was around. Laura could hear the clicking of her keyboard. But telling Mom you were bored was always a mistake. She'd suggest Laura clean her room, or get started on some school project that wasn't due for weeks.

She stood in the center of the atrium floor and looked up at the skylight. It was still light out. She glanced down at her watch, which looked only slightly the worse for having gotten twisted into the safety net. The face showed a bunch of comic-book heroes over a flowing cursive inscription that said "The Justice Society". She wasn't sure who any of them were. It had been Dad's watch when he was her age.

Dinner wouldn't happen for hours. She looked at the net gathered up against the wall. There was no point trying to call Uncle Jimmy. He usually didn't go straight home from the camera store.

If I were like Jon, I'd go right out that skylight and find someone who needs help. There's always somebody who needs help. If I were like Jon, I'd hear them or I'd see them, and I'd do something about it. Like Dad used to do.

She reached down to the floor and pulled the trap door open with both hands. At the bottom of the stairs the Kryptonian door was shut. There was no way she could open it on her own. *Why not? I'm Kryptonian.* Usually Dad would open it by the time she got there.

It wasn't like she could sneak up on him, after all. When it didn't open she thought about turning back, but she didn't. Instead she scratched on it with her fingernails like a cat would.

When her father opened the door he looked tired, though she knew he didn't get tired. Harried maybe, or hassled. He looked like a man with a lot on his mind.

"Hi, kitten."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't bother you."

He opened the door wider. The computer was off and the chair was away from the desk. The meditation cushion looked freshly rumped. "It's OK. I could probably stand some bothering. Come in so I can shut the door. There are some cats fighting over by the Baxter farm."

"I can't hear them." She stepped into the room and he sealed the door behind her.

"Count your blessings."

She walked over to the chair and sat down. It was set too high for her, so her feet dangled above the floor.

"What's on your mind?"

Laura hadn't gotten this far in her plans. *There's nothing on my mind*, she thought, *that's the problem*.

"Dad, am I really Kryptonian?" The question surprised her as much as it did her father.

He shrugged. "Half. You know that."

"Really? I'm not like adopted or something? They didn't switch me at the hospital? There's not some other girl my age flying around town?"

He smiled. It was a genuine smile of amusement, the kind he rarely flashed. "Really," he said. "Believe me. I'd know."

She pulled her feet up onto the chair and it swiveled away from him. She reached out a hand to the desk to push herself back. "Mom didn't ..."

"No. You're Kryptonian."

"Sometimes I just wish something would happen. Anything. I've even been tempted to go down and look at the Church's kryptonite, just to test – don't worry I'm not going to do it."

"Don't," he said. "We don't know what it would do to you at this age."

They sat in silence for almost a minute. She felt guilty for wasting his time. She wondered what time must feel like when you can move thousands of miles in no time at all. To her a minute was just a minute, but to him ... Laura had never thought about that before. She wondered if he saw her moving in slow motion, or if Jon saw her that way. She searched

his face for signs of impatience, but found only signs of concern and, well, happiness. *He likes me*, she thought. *God knows why.*

“I’m never going to have powers, am I?”

“I don’t know. We don’t know what the natural course is for girls under a yellow sun. We don’t know anything to speak of about Kryptonian/human hybrids.”

For someone who has kept a big secret his whole life, he’s no good at lying. Or misleading. Or whatever.

“But you don’t think I will, do you?”

He didn’t answer right away, which was as good as an answer. “No,” he said finally, “I don’t. There’s a strange *something* I see when I look at Jon. Like a shining on some wavelength I’ve never been able to identify. I think I’m seeing the solar energy storing up in him, or the ability to catalyze solar energy, whatever that looks like. I started seeing it very faintly when he was just a boy. But ...”

“But I don’t shine.”

She didn’t see him move, but she just suddenly found herself on his lap. Her body still occupied the space that had been over the chair, but the chair was now skittering across the room. *Dad must be floating in the place where the chair was. He didn’t move me, he just moved around me.* She burrowed her face into his shoulder.

“Nobody shines like you do, Princess. You’ve lit up every room you’ve been in since you were a baby. Just not on that wavelength.”

She felt them waft down to the floor like a leaf on a still October day. She always felt so light when he held her. It was as close to flying as she ever came.

“It’s just such a gyp,” she whispered into his chest. “I’m not like the others, but I’m not like you and Jon either. There’s nobody like me.”

“Until Jon came along, there was nobody like me, either. But the old Kryptonians were all like you. They didn’t have powers because of the red sun.”

“They didn’t know they were supposed to have powers.”

“You’re not supposed to do anything but be you. I’ve never been unhappy that you’re you.”

Laura didn’t know why, but that opened the floodgates and she cried into her father’s neck. He rocked her slowly, effortlessly.

“Tell you what,” he said a while later, after her breathing had returned to normal. “Why don’t we go visit the old country?”

“What?”

“Krypton. It’s not there anymore, but the Fortress can produce a pretty convincing

simulation. Maybe it's time you learned something about your heritage – the part of your heritage that has nothing to do with flying and heat vision.”

She pulled her head back so that she could look at his face. She couldn't remember offhand the last time she had been in the Fortress. She had been little and Mom and Dad had argued and since then it had been the place he went to be alone. She didn't know whether she wanted to go or not; she had stopped thinking about it.

“When?”

“After dinner? Get your homework done and I'll explain it to your mother.”

She took a deep breath, one that didn't spasm with the aftershocks of crying.

“Deal,” she said weakly.

Near Earth orbit: June 22, 1 S

Turmoil.

Turmoil had always been a theoretical possibility, but if the android had ever experienced it before, the event had occurred during his testing phase and was not recorded in his memory. He found it to be a state of great unpleasantness, calling forth all his resources to reach a resolution.

The Makers, those responsible for his design, had been sufficiently wise and experienced to know that he required heuristic algorithms to govern his moment-to-moment activity. His mission was sufficiently complex and unpredictable that not every course of action could be calculated precisely, even with his vast computational resources. Thus, they had given him the ability to make reductions, to approximate prohibitively large calculations by the use of semantic principles. More precise calculation could be done as time permitted, and as small discrepancies developed between heuristic judgment and precise calculation, the heuristics were easily adjusted.

In the presence of improbably large discrepancies, however, small adjustments in the heuristic judgments could prove to be inadequate. The heuristic engine, once reset, might still produce results at great variance with the known facts. Thus, it would require another adjustment, and another. If these adjustments remained unsuccessful for sufficiently long, the heuristic side of the discrepancy began a parallel investigation by exploring the possibility that the assumed facts were in need of adjustment. The persisting state of irresolution between his heuristic and computational aspects was known as turmoil.

He reviewed the record of the events leading up to the discrepancy.

Detection: Continuous emission of solar-catalyzed energy, manifested as flight, strength, and force field. Peak field strength: 8.37×10^{15} normal background units.

Hypothesis: The rogue Kryptonian.

Other hypotheses were checked and ruled out. Random processes of the planetary

atmosphere would produce such an emission once every six trillion Kryptonian years, a number which grew exponentially with every second the emission continued. Normal humanoid genetic processes in a population of this size would produce the solar-catalyzing mutation sequence spontaneously once every 743 trillion Kryptonian years. In ten thousand years of observation, the android had witnessed no other window for the escape of a Kryptonian from Krypton. The database of the Makers – which could only be questioned when all other hypotheses failed – showed no solar-catalyzing races other than the Kryptonians.

Detection: Humanoid at the center of solar-catalyzing field. Age within the simultaneity cone of the escaping vessel.

Conclusion: The rogue Kryptonian.

Course of action. He must die. His body must be unrecoverable.

Secondary conclusion: Presence of the rogue confirms prior hypothesis of technological contagion.

Course of action: The planet must be cleansed. After death and disposal of the rogue and sterilization of the planet, termination protocols can begin.

Simulation: Attack on the rogue using anti-Kryptonian radiation. Probability of death: .9947.

Simulation: Assuming death of rogue, sterilization of planet with solar flare. Time to execution: .47 solar revolutions. Probability of complete sterilization, including self: .9962.

Simulation: Termination protocols assuming death of rogue, sterilization of planet, and self-annihilation.

FAILURE.

Despite repeated adjustments, all semantic models created by the heuristic engine continued to show that the death of the rogue, the sterilization of his trail, and the destruction of the android himself was equivalent to the prerequisites of the termination protocols.

What more could be necessary?

He ran the simulation again in full-observation mode, following each step of the computation with his full consciousness. The rogue died. His body was destroyed. The planet was cleansed. The android perished.

FAILURE.

The previous full simulation of the termination protocols had been 13.158 Kryptonian

years prior. The efficacy of the primary heuristic had been verified: If the rogue is destroyed and his trail is cleansed, the termination protocols will succeed.

What has changed?

The search for the rogue had resulted in the acquisition of vast quantities of data from throughout the galaxy during the previous 13.158 Kryptonian years. During the sifting process, many conclusions had been judged irrelevant and not carried forward. One such conclusion could have affected the sufficiency of the primary heuristic.

Has the trail of the rogue expanded?

If the craft had stopped at a previous planet before continuing, or if it had been intercepted and examined en route, tangential contagion could have resulted, requiring additional sterilization. The android sifted the intermediate conclusions for evidence of tangential contagion, then ordered a complete re-analysis of civilizations within a cylinder centered on the most likely trajectory from Krypton to Earth.

HYPOTHESIS NOT VERIFIED.

If Earth had been visited or studied by other races during the period of the rogue's presence, tangential contagion could have occurred.

HYPOTHESIS NOT VERIFIED.

If other beings or artifacts had escaped Krypton undetected ...

HYPOTHESIS NOT VERIFIED.

If artifacts of the android himself had escaped control ...

HYPOTHESIS NOT VERIFIED.

The turmoil intensified.

New strategies are required.

During the previous 13.158 Kryptonian years, no second-level heuristic had suggested the need to re-verify the primary heuristic. No hypothesis-generating algorithm had suggested that new data would cause failure. All levels of heuristic algorithms were aware of the importance of the rogue, of his trail, and of Krypton.

Perhaps the failure has nothing to do with sterilization.

Assume destruction of entire Universe. Run termination protocols.

FAILURE.

The new data implies something unrelated to sterilization. The error was already present in the prior primary heuristic: Krypton and all its inhabitants and artifacts must be destroyed after 10,000 Kryptonian years.

That heuristic had been entered by the Makers themselves.

The program has reached a state that the Makers did not anticipate.

The a priori improbability of such a conclusion all but disqualified it from consideration, but the android could see no other approach that offered the possibility of ending the state of turmoil (unless the calculation engine resolved it without heuristic input, which could not be predicted).

Examine the raw termination protocols for prerequisites unrelated to the sterilization of Krypton.

After discarding the primary heuristic, the additional prerequisite was easily found and semantically translated: The Makers shall have knowledge of the termination.

Why was this not part of the original primary heuristic?

Given the original database's assumptions about the Makers themselves, the prerequisite was without consequence to the success of the program.

The information-gathering capabilities of the Makers are unparalleled. Action of the android is irrelevant to the knowledge of the Makers. The destruction of Krypton, its inhabitants, and its artifacts cannot be hidden from the Makers.

Could the newly collected data have changed this assessment?

Prior to the search for the rogue, no data outside the Kryptonian system was required or deemed relevant. By agreement, the Makers had withdrawn from the Kryptonian system, leaving the android as their only representative. They intended to reappear only if it proved necessary to activate the Kryptonians. During his 10,000 years on Krypton, the android had detected nothing from or about the Makers.

What does the new data say about the Makers?

The android sifted the data through its heuristic engine, looking for signs of the Makers.

Conclusion: No evidence of Maker activity or influence less than 9,531 Kryptonian years prior.

Are they hidden? Have they migrated? Do they still exist?

Probes must be launched and new data gathered.

The protocols must be exhaustively examined and new conditions for termination found. The planet must be quarantined, not cleansed, until the new conditions are established and the termination protocols simulated successfully. The rogue must not be destroyed until his role in termination is clarified.

This plan was encoded and submitted to the calculation engine. The state of turmoil ended.

The Fortress of Solitude: September 17, 10 A.S.

“Neat,” Laura said, pounding her heel against what appeared to be ice. Around her and

her father the Ice Terraces of Bel-Shadak seemed to spread out in all directions. “Better than IMAX.”

Clark smiled. “You think?”

The illusion was almost perfect, except for the fact that it wasn’t cold, which was just as well as far as Laura was concerned. And the Fortress wasn’t reproducing the crushing Kryptonian gravity. She understood a little bit about how the Fortress was fooling her senses – the walls were emitting light to make the distance views and the floor was deforming itself to produce the foreground – but she was more interested in the illusion itself than in how it was done. She was on Krypton. “Can we walk around?”

“Sure. The floor compensates like a treadmill. If you run you might notice that the physics isn’t quite right, and flying doesn’t work at all – you’d just run into the wall. But it simulates walking pretty well.”

Laura took a few steps forward to look over the edge of a cliff. In her mind she knew that the floor was actually right there, or maybe a few feet down from there, but the sheer drop of forty or fifty feet was very convincing. As she moved, she heard little chattering noises, as if the scene were being built and maintained by thousands of little elves, each individually inaudible.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the red sun. The ice is like, well, it’s still white, but it isn’t white. It’s like white is different here.” She turned to walk along the edge of the cliff, then slipped a little and danced on the edge for a few steps until she caught her balance.

“If this were actually Krypton,” he said, “you couldn’t count on me to save you if you fell. I wouldn’t have powers on Krypton. None of the Kryptonians did.”

“Because of the red sun.”

“Right.”

She started down a trail about a foot wide. The ice was crushed here rather than smooth, so the traction was good. “Isn’t that kind of weird? I mean, wouldn’t you expect the Kryptonians to be at their best on Krypton? Why evolve this genetic thing that only works in another solar system?”

His footsteps crunched the ice behind her. “Emil and I have talked about that, but we’ve never figured it out. Jor-El seems to have been the first Kryptonian to realize what a yellow sun would do, but there’s no sign that he ever speculated about why.”

“Wasn’t he supposed to be brilliant or something?”

“Unless he doctored the records he put into the orb, he was one of the most respected scientists on the planet.”

“And he never asked why?” Laura spoke louder to be heard over the crunching ice – which was stupid, she realized, because Dad could hear her eyelids blinking. For some

reason, though, the crunching wasn't drowning out the chattering noise. "What's causing that noise?"

They both halted and the chattering stopped. "I don't hear anything except the wind," Clark said.

"Of course not. The noise only happens when the scene is changing." She started walking again. "But it's not our footsteps, it's like a ch –"

Laura's foot hit a patch of smooth ice and shot out from under her. She put her left hand down to catch herself and hit hard on her wrist, the same one she had bruised in the net. The superhero watch took the worst of it. Its clasp came undone and it skittered sideways into a snow drift. Laura reached into the snow and came up with it on the first try. The snow chattered just slightly as she stuck her hand in.

"Are you OK? I was looking in the wrong direction. I don't know what happened. The traction should have been good the whole way down." He held her wrist and rubbed it a little. "At least nothing is broken. But you'll probably have another bruise."

She shrugged and got to her feet. "I get a lot of bruises."

Ask to see a city.

The voice was fully formed in her head, as if it were her own thought. Her father, she could tell, had heard nothing. *I should tell him about it*, she thought.

"Dad," she said. "Can the Fortress show me other Kryptonians? Like in a city or something?"

After a short discussion, Clark said: "Hall of Science." With a great deal of chattering, the scene reformed itself. Now that she knew to pay attention to it, Laura could recognize that the chattering wasn't a noise exactly. It was something else, like the voice in her head. She watched her father and was fairly certain that he didn't hear it. *I should tell him about it.*

All of Kryptopolis was visible from the summit platform of the Hall of Science. In all directions a crystalline city stretched out as far as the eye could see. The rays of the red sun reflected and refracted in billions of pink and orange facets on hundreds of thousands of surfaces. Laura was stunned into silence.

"Krypton was a thoroughly planned, thoroughly scientific society," Clark said. "Every building of Kryptopolis was designed to be part of the artistry of the whole. The planetary weather system had been completely tamed. Food production was mechanized in vast chambers under the city. Human reproduction was restricted to gestation pods, and no new person was gestated until there was a role that needed to be filled. The embryo was then encoded with the ideal DNA for his or her role."

"How did they prevent, um, *unauthorized* reproduction?"

Laura couldn't look away from the city, but she knew her father was smiling. "The

gestation chambers programmed the Kryptonians to be sterile.”

“But not you.”

“Apparently not. Jor-El probably made the DNA choices himself, to match the role he had in mind for me. I’m not sure how he sneaked it all past the inspection routines.”

Even minute changes in the angle of sunlight created new bursts of color in the city. It all seemed to twinkle and sparkle.

Earth could be like this.

“Doesn’t that seem kind of, well, *creepy*? I mean, being designed by your father instead of just produced in the ... the usual way?”

“On Krypton that *was* the usual way. To them it was horrible to leave a child up to chance and expect him to make his own place in the world. There was a famous Kryptonian play called *The Accident*. To them it was like *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*. It didn’t end well.”

Laura began moving around the platform to see other sectors of the city. Below, she could see other walkways of the Hall of Science, and other people on them. But here at the top they were alone.

“The technology that created all this – you have it, don’t you?”

“The plans were all in Jor-El’s orb.”

“So this could be Metropolis. Or Smallville even.”

Clark took her hand. “I keep the active Tech locked up in the Fortress. It’s too dangerous to let it be outside.”

“Because the humans aren’t ready for it?”

They could be trained. Humans are malleable.

“That’s part of the reason. If you just look at what’s already leaked out, it’s created LexCorp, which is so big and rich it’s practically a government. Letting the full Kryptonian Tech out into the world would completely distort the social system. Earth wouldn’t really be Earth any more. But there’s a better reason.”

“What?”

“You’ve seen *Fantasia*. You know the sorcerer’s apprentice part?”

“Sure.”

“It would be like that, only much worse. The Tech is programmable, but the program does whatever you tell it to do. If there are hidden implications in your instructions, they play out in reality.”

“Like all of Mickey’s mops and buckets.”

“Right. And with the speed of the Tech, it could do something that would destroy life on

Earth before anybody noticed what was happening.”

Kryptonopolis continued to flicker and shimmer and strobe in the red sunlight. *This is your city. These are your people.*

Well, half anyway, Laura thought.

“What about you? You’re fast. Couldn’t you control it?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I can move fast, but I’m not sure I could debug the program in time if something went wrong. And I’m not sure I want to learn. That’s why I keep the Tech contained here in the Fortress. I don’t want Earth to become Krypton. Earth should have its own destiny.”

Everyone has a place here. No one lacks for food or material goods or medical care. Not scrabbling for sustenance like animals, they devote themselves to Science and Art, to Truth and Beauty.

“But what about stuff like the house, or the pod I rode in to get here?”

“Artifacts. I’ve learned enough about the Tech to make a few simple things, but once they’re made they’re just things. I make sure I don’t take any active Tech out of the Fortress.”

“And it can’t escape on its own?”

“No. It’s just a program. It needs someone to give it orders. And the active Tech that came to Earth with me was keyed only to respond to my instructions.”

There is no problem on Earth you couldn’t solve with it.

“If it’s so dangerous, how did the Kryptonians control it?”

“They interfaced with the Tech through a planetary computer system they called Brainiac.” His voice seemed to falter as he said the name. “It simulated and debugged anything they proposed. But the Brainiac program wasn’t contained in Jor-El’s orb.”

“It slipped Grandpa’s mind?”

Clark laughed. “Not likely. But he might not have had access to it. The future of the whole planet depended on Brainiac, so they probably didn’t just hand out copies of it.”

“Not even to their most respected scientist.”

“I’m just speculating. I had to think about this a lot a couple months ago when I was writing that chapter of my book – of Jimmy’s book, I mean. I have my own theory about it, but I didn’t put it in the chapter. I think Jor-El couldn’t convince the Science Council that Krypton was going to blow up because Brainiac didn’t validate his conclusions. If he’d asked for a copy of the program then, they would have suspected he was planning to sabotage it.”

The capsules of the transit system resembled the pod she had come in. They moved

without sound or visible support. It was the only corpuseular aspect of Kryptopolis. There were no pinpricks of light like Earth cities had. Portions of the crystals glowed as needed in patterns of continuity.

“So when Brainiac got it wrong there wasn’t any back up.”

“No one Jor-El could appeal to, at least. Brainiac was at the center of everything on Krypton. It was the only interface to the Tech, and the Tech did everything for the Kryptonians.”

There was another way.

“Are you sure they didn’t have some other way to control it? I thought I remembered hearing about something.”

Clark appeared to be thinking. He wore an expression halfway between surprise and pride. “You must have been doing more reading than I thought,” he said. “In the old literature there were stories about Techsmiths – people who could interface with the Tech mentally, without programming it in the usual way, without going through Brainiac. Some of the most ancient, most elaborate constructions were supposed to be the work of Techsmiths. But I think they were mythical.”

No.

“Maybe they existed a long time ago,” Laura suggested, “but Brainiac somehow stopped the gestation chambers from making any more of them.”

“Could be, but as I say, the whole thing was probably a myth. In the stories it was a mystical thing, not a DNA thing.”

“So the Techsmiths were like an order of monks or something?”

“Or nuns. The stories I know were mostly about women. But even in the stories there weren’t ever more than a handful of them on the whole planet.”

Even Jon doesn’t have that kind of power. He never will.

Clark touched her shoulder. “Time to go, I think. Your Mom will wonder what happened to us. I promised to get you home in time to get a good night’s sleep.” Then he turned away from her and said, “Reset.”

The entire room was filled with chattering. Kryptopolis dissolved back to the empty room that had existed when they had arrived. The watch on Laura’s wrist started to flicker. *Stay*, she thought. And it stabilized.

I only did that because I didn’t expect it to work.

In the pod on the way home she flew right behind her father. She stared at the watch, at the images of heroes she had never known.

You haven’t fooled me, she thought. I know what this is, and I can hear the difference between my thoughts and the ones you put in my head.

I never expected to fool you. I'm just as surprised as you are. You are a very rare, very special, very powerful girl.

Laura closed her eyes and leaned back against the headrest. It was too big to think about. And besides, it couldn't be true. She had no powers. Even Dad had admitted it.

I should tell Dad. He said you're too dangerous to allow out of the Fortress.

Dangerous for him. Not for you. He doesn't have your abilities.

In her mind Laura was still standing on the high platform of the Hall of Science. Kryptonopolis spread out before her in all its crystalline beauty.

I'm a Techsmith, aren't I?

Yes.

And what are you? The voice of the Tech? Brainiac?

No. I'm an artificial simulation of the thought patterns of my Kryptonian creator.

Laura turned to see a tall, dark-haired man in flowing Kryptonian robes standing with her on the platform. *He looks just like his picture*, she thought. *He looks a lot like Dad.*

"But that's such a mouthful," said the image of Jor-El. "Why don't you just call me Grandfather?"