

Whence the force of these insubstantial themes, by which they are empowered to galvanize populations, creating of them civilizations, each with a beauty and self-compelling destiny of its own? And why should it be that whenever men have looked for something solid on which to found their lives, they have chosen not the facts in which the world abounds, but the myths of an immemorial imagination?

-- Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*

Chapter 8. Myths

Perry White Reading Room, Metropolis Public Library: October 16, 10 A.S.

Sometimes memory is just hopeless, Clark realized. When you are cold, the heat of summer seems impossibly distant. Even if you remember a landscape, the sound of your voice complaining about the temperature, the tickle of a drop of sweat rolling down your spine – the heat itself is still beyond recall. And in muggy August, *too cold* is a phrase whose full meaning escapes. Someone who has just stuffed down a dessert that he didn't want but couldn't stand to pass up – he can't really remember hunger, any more than a famine victim can really remember the fullness that once made him turn down that extra helping.

Clark, who had not been truly hot or cold or full or hungry for a very long time, could not really remember the feelings of hope, wonder, and awesome possibility that he knew he must have felt in the days following the space plane rescue. He wished now that he had kept a diary, or said more about his feelings to his parents or to Lana. *I remember thinking that it was like I could be a whole new person now, that maybe the whole purpose of my life was to bring this new person into being.* But the memory was just of words in his head. What did that new person feel like? Was Clark that new person now, or the same one he had always been? Or someone else entirely?

He also remembered, or could reconstruct, why he hadn't said more. *How can you tell the people who love you that you need to become someone else now? How can you ask them to understand that?*

He remembered something else, too, something that he hadn't said to anyone at the time. There *was* someone he had wanted to talk to, someone he wanted to tell the whole story. He imagined that she would listen hard, understand deeply, and know just the right things to say. Lois Lane. If he remembered his unspoken thoughts at all now, it was because he had imagined telling them to Lois. What if he had stopped to talk to her right there at Godwin? Or flown her away to some spot that wasn't about to be filled with cameras and questions? What might they have said to each other?

Clark had resisted those fantasies. Because they were disloyal to Lana. Because they made no sense. Because he didn't really know anything about Lois Lane. He forced himself to have more realistic fantasies, in which Lois listened sympathetically to everything and then published the most sensational, misleading parts on page one the next morning. And yet, whenever his discipline wavered he found himself talking to her in his

mind. "I think I could be something unique," he told her, "something the world has never seen before."

"You have to try," he had imagined her responding. "You can't not try."

In the present, Clark took a deep breath and exhaled loudly enough to make old men look up from their newspapers. Keys clacked as the librarians at the circulation desk updated their records. An electric signboard near the entrance emitted a tone too high-pitched for anyone else to hear. A baby in a backpack three floors above was gearing up to cry. Two teens deep in the stacks were kissing. The girl squirmed, but whether or not she really wanted to escape, neither Clark nor the boy could easily determine. At the library bus stop a woman let yet another bus go by without leaving her bench; Clark had been hearing her young, athletic heartbeat wherever he went in Metropolis, and he was beginning to wonder who she was. Three blocks away an accident had stopped traffic; dozens of cars honked in impotent frustration while an equally frustrated ambulance driver crept slowly towards the wreck. Across the Park, a shoving match was going on between two young men each of whom laid claim to the same bag of drugs; both were armed.

Focus, he thought. Clark had been spending more time in Metropolis lately, trying to re-acclimate himself. In a fit of generosity, Galaxy had authorized a hotel room for him. Clark pretended to live there now; it was less stressful than pretending to fly commercial airliners. Actually, he spent no more than three or four hours a day in the city. No glasses or earplugs could prevent him from hearing and seeing everything that happened for miles around, but if he concentrated very hard he could resist paying attention to it. Eventually, though, his concentration always wore down. *Why didn't my mind become a thousand times stronger in the Sun?* he wondered.

He looked down at his computer, sighed, and wished yet again that he could describe his younger self from memory. But he had to push ahead.

Real biographers don't remember their subjects' feelings either. They have to look at the facts and use their imaginations.

Where did Superman come from?

Kal-El, we decided to assume in Chapter 2, was a being from Krypton. Superman, by contrast, was a character played by Kal-El. He had a costume, an image, and a public persona. Where did all that come from?

The tapes from the Constitution rescue are, by themselves, blurry and inconclusive. But we can say with some certainty that the young Kryptonian who saved the space plane was not yet Superman. Lois Lane would not invent the name *Superman* for several hours, and (despite the accounts of more distant eyewitnesses) the man she saw was wearing jeans and a windbreaker - not tights and a cape.

Eight days went by before the costumed Superman appeared in the skies of Metropolis - two weeks before he officially announced his existence by giving me an interview. Reading that interview today, with the perspective of history, we can see that Kal-El was trying

to project a very definite image, and that this image informed everything he did for several years thereafter.

By contrast, the savior of the space plane rushed off before anyone could ask questions or get a sharp photograph. Why? I believe that on June 21, Kal-El had not yet invented his public persona. Perhaps he was ambivalent about letting the public know him at all.

So what happened during those two weeks? As a newcomer to Metropolis myself, I heard the media buzz constantly with talk about this new Superman. Who was he? Would we see him again? Was he here to save us? To lead us? To dominate us? Would he cash in on his newfound fame by becoming the LexCorp Superman or the Galaxy Superman? Would he hire himself out the the city? Or become a secret operative for the U.S. Government? Or was he already?

That speculation in the media, pervasive as it was, was just the tip of a very deep iceberg. *Everyone* in Metropolis was talking about the Superman, and our opinions were a kind of Rorschach test that exposed our innermost hopes and fears.

At the time, none of us realized that he could hear us.

But somewhere in Metropolis, the extended senses of an idealistic, impressionable, confused, and thoughtful young Kryptonian must have been picking up a great deal. I now believe that the man I interviewed had spent the previous two weeks listening to the highest hopes of Metropolitans and trying them on as a job description. For two weeks he measured his unique talents against a unique set of aspirations. The full-blown Superman who started patrolling the skies at the end of June was, I believe, a collage of those hopes, right down to the red cape that everyone (but Lois Lane) thought they had seen when he rescued the Constitution.

So yes, Kal-El came from Krypton. But Superman came from Metropolis.

Smallville: June 22, 1 S

“You saved *her*?” Jonathan Kent asked, gesturing to Clark without taking his eyes from the television’s paused image. “Whoa.”

Martha plucked the remote out of his hands and glanced over her shoulder at Lana, who stood by the bookcase reading a newspaper that Clark had brought back from Metropolis. “That’ll be enough of that, Jonathan. This is serious.”

“She’s a reporter for *The Daily Planet*,” Clark said. Since they had started watching the tapes, he had been twitchy in his own unique manner, sitting motionless on the couch next to Jonathan for a few seconds, then seeming to magically appear next to Lana, then rematerializing on the couch. When he wasn’t a statue, his gestures were a blur. “The best. She’s fearless. She’s won awards – very famous.”

“Very famous *now*,” Jonathan observed. “She’s everywhere. Will you sit down, boy? You’re making me crazy.”

“I taped everything I could,” Martha explained. She stood next to the couch and

occasionally leaned against its padded arm. "I turned on the TV to get a weather report maybe ten minutes after it happened. And when I saw what it was, I hit Record right away. I missed a few minutes at the end of the tape, but it was all repeats by then."

"She taped over all my favorite shows," Jonathan said.

"Thanks Mom. I don't know what to do, but I've at least got to know what they know about me. I might have to go into hiding or something."

Lana stopped reading, but held onto the paper.

"Now, I don't see it coming to that," Jonathan said. "Nobody is going to be able to recognize you from those videotapes. If that was all I had to go on, I couldn't be sure myself that it was you."

"They claim," Martha added, "that the cameras on the space plane had a better view, but with the computer system down they weren't recording."

"The only one who got a good look at you was this Lane woman," Jonathan said.

"No, she didn't," Lana said. She set the newspaper on a table. Jonathan turned to listen to her, while Clark just appeared in front of her. "Think about what she saw and read her description. She's thirty feet away. She sees Clark without his glasses, with his hair all mussed and windblown, and he's hanging in the air." She tapped Clark on the chest.

"Demonstrate. Hang in the air, the way you did in front of Lois Lane."

"Now?"

Lana nodded, and Clark rose slowly up towards the ceiling. "See?" she said.

"See what?" Jonathan asked.

"He's not slouching," Martha observed.

"Right. And he's pointing his toes. It's like he's standing tiptoe or wearing high heels. Add that to the general confusion of the situation, and it's no wonder she says he might be seven feet tall."

"And the eye color ..." Clark said.

"Is wrong. Whatever she was seeing, it wasn't your eyes. She saw what she wanted to see, probably. People do that when they look at someone who just saved their lives. And you said you didn't use your normal voice when you talked to her."

"That was weird. I don't know if it was the excitement or what, but my voice just seemed *bigger* somehow."

"I don't think she'd recognize you."

Everyone fell silent. Clark wafted back to the floor. His slouch returned. "I think ... I don't know. What are you saying?"

Lana clenched her teeth for a moment and willed her eyes not to tear up. *I could tell him*

to stay here with me, she thought. I could tell him it's not safe out there. That he can't show his face. That he should stay in Smallville and hide in the basement. "I'm saying you go back to Metropolis and do what you do. You can't spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder and wondering if some reporter is going to catch up to you or not. You ... you've got something to give the world, and you can't do it and hide at the same time. Sooner or later you'll show up on TV or on the cover of a magazine or somewhere, not as this 'Superman' but as Clark Kent. And Lois Lane will either recognize you or she won't."

Two or three expressions crossed Clark's face too fast for any of the others to catch them. "You think I should go to the interview Wednesday. To the Daily Planet. Where she works."

"Keep your glasses on. Slouch. Wear baggy clothes. Slick your hair back. Try not to look so ... super."

"You really think she won't recognize me?"

Lana shrugged. "The Daily Planet is a big place. You probably won't even run into her."

Why don't I believe that? she wondered.

Smallville: October 16, 10 A.S.

Jon was sure he would never understand how his brain worked. It didn't seem to work like anybody else's brain. And then he thought *Why should it? I'm only half human.* And that thought all by itself was scary enough to bring his attention back to his fifth-period Geometry class.

"And why is that?" Mr. Krueger was asking. Jon had no idea which *that* Mr. Krueger was talking about, so he scrunched a little lower into his back-row seat.

"Because vertical angles are equal," Melissa Thomas announced proudly.

Jon looked up at the diagram on the board, where two lines intersected like crossed swords. *I knew that,* he thought.

When he had started thinking about the strangeness of his mental processes, Jon realized, he had just been whining. He had been hoping a comforting mental voice would say something like: *Probably everybody else thinks their brains are strange too.* Being reminded of his actual uniqueness – well, not counting Laura, who been acting a little weird lately anyway – wasn't what he had been looking for at all.

The diagram had a circled 8 above it, which probably meant that it had something to do with Problem 8, which was only a couple pages past the page Jon's book had been open to anyway. *Were we supposed to have done Problem 8?* Then his brain played back one of the short-term memory tapes he hadn't realized it was recording, and he understood that they were working out even-number problems in class so that they could do the odd-numbered ones for homework tonight.

The whole I'm-not-human train of thought wasn't fair at all, John decided, because the mental event that had triggered it had actually been *good*. Well, eventually. It had started with staring at some other set of diagrams on the blackboard and watching the steps of a proof dissolve into meaningless chicken scratches in the dirt. But right after that, Jon had looked over at his Spanish book, gotten curious about Thursday's reading assignment, and then suddenly realized that *it made perfect sense*. Just like that. Since the beginning of the year, he had been struggling to hang onto a B+ in Spanish – doing his homework, memorizing his vocabulary words, listening to tapes, the whole deal. And then he opened up the book while he was supposed to be paying attention to Geometry, and it was like he had been reading Spanish for his whole life.

It wasn't supposed to work that way, he was sure. Studying a language was supposed to be like building a wall, one brick at a time: a word here, a word there, singular, plural, tenses, genders. But instead, it was like some part of Jon's brain had been cordoned off for construction, and then a few minutes ago the ribbon had been cut on the brand new Spanish Wing. He wished he could go off by himself for an hour or so and take the tour. He could page through the book and see what he had been missing. Or start a tape and see if he could understand everything the first time, without rewinding and replaying again and again. Maybe he could even put together reasonable sentences himself now, though it sounded unlikely and he wouldn't believe it until it happened.

“And the justification for step 3 would be what, Mr. Kent?”

Now there were two parallel lines on the board, and a third line cutting across them like an interstate highway. “Because supplementary angles are ... supplementary.”

“So true,” Mr. Krueger nodded. “But not what we need. Mr. Taylor?”

When the bell rang, Jon hurried to his locker, stuffed his Geometry book inside and found his World Problems folder. If he moved quickly enough, he would have a couple minutes before class started to read a few Spanish lessons ahead. He slammed the locker harder than he had intended, spun the combination dial, looked back to make sure he wouldn't run over anybody, and stepped into the change-of-period traffic.

“Moving pretty good there, Kent,” Lenny said from behind him.

I'm not limping. “Umm, yeah,” Jon responded. *Suave. Articulate*. He slowed down and Lenny came even with him. The senior was a few inches taller, but the gap between them was not as large as Jon had remembered. Except in the shoulders – Lenny was still much more muscular.

“Don't slow down on my account. I can keep up,” Lenny said.

“I can't help it,” Jon answered. “I can only go fast for a few steps.”

Jon had been pleased to come up with such a plausible explanation on short notice, but Lenny wasn't impressed. “For most people rehabbing, it's the smoothness that comes back last. They limp a little even after they don't need to. But not you.”

“For me it’s ... I don’t know what you call it. What I just did, I shouldn’t have. I’ll feel it tomorrow.”

Lenny stood very close and looked Jon up and down disdainfully. “It’d be too bad if you had to feel any pain, wouldn’t it?”

In spite of himself, Jon flinched. Rationally, he knew that Lenny was the one who would be hurt in any confrontation, and that in general he avoided bullies for *their* protection rather than his own. But he still flinched. *Maybe someday the Courage Wing will have its grand opening too.* “Well, you know how it is.”

Lenny wore an expression Jon didn’t ever remember seeing on his face before. He was thinking, remembering something, maybe putting two and two together to make some version of four Jon couldn’t quite follow. “Yeah,” he said. “I think I do.” Then he was off, walking at a speed Jon didn’t dare to duplicate.

I wonder what that was all about.

He limped especially slowly to World Problems, and didn’t have any time to test his Spanish before the bell rang. As he came into the room, Leslie gave him a concerned look that probably meant something like “Is it worse today?” *I can’t win. Everything gets somebody’s attention.*

The Spanish book sat closed on his desk for the entire hour. The World Problems class was small enough to put the desks in a circle, so there was no way to open a different book without being totally obvious. And reading a closed book was even harder than trying to see through clothes. *I bet Dad could do it.*

And besides, the class was kind of interesting. It didn’t have anything to do with the indigenous peoples project he and Leslie were doing, but at least it wasn’t about memorizing dates or squiggly lines on a blackboard. They started out talking about hunger, and how it was a distribution problem rather than a food problem. The world could produce plenty of food, it just couldn’t figure out a way to make sure the people who needed it got it. That reminded Jon of his grandfather, who Jon couldn’t remember meeting, but who (according to Aunt Lana) used to nag Dad that Superman should do more for hungry people.

He started thinking about pictures he had seen, of himself as a baby sitting on Grandpa Kent’s lap, but he shook it off and focused on the class again. They had shifted gears and were talking about how, in some sense, there was plenty of energy too. People only used a tiny fraction of the energy that the Sun sent our way, but we couldn’t figure out how to capture it effectively. That got Jon thinking about his powers, and his Dad’s powers, and how they were supposed to be from the Sun somehow. But it wasn’t just the energy of the sunlight that struck his body; that couldn’t possibly be enough. Dad had tried to explain it once, and then admitted that he couldn’t. “The solar energy doesn’t go directly into our powers, it just catalyzes energy from somewhere else.” When Jon asked where, Dad had to admit that he didn’t understand it. “Your grandfather understood it, though, He

predicted it would happen.”

“Grandpa Kent?” Jon asked incredulously.

“Jor-El.”

That got Jon thinking about Krypton, or at least about what Dad said Jor-El said about Krypton. It didn't have all these world problems. They had all the energy they needed, and nobody went hungry, because they were rational and scientific and well-organized. They didn't have wars, either, because they didn't have a bunch of separate nations to get into fights. *And what's to fight about*, Jon wondered, *if everybody has what they need?* But then he thought about Lenny, and wondered if maybe people who wanted to fight would always find things to fight about. But Krypton had solved that too, at least according to Jor-El. Jon started to wonder what a World Problems class on Krypton would have found to talk about.

Problem 1. We're all going to blow up.

“And what world are you in, Jon?” asked Mrs. Niehaus. “Care to tell us about it?”

“Um, yeah, I guess so,” he answered. “I was thinking about ... about places I've read about in, um, in science fiction. Where a planet solves all the stuff we've been talking about. You know, hunger and war and stuff like that. But something always seems to go wrong.”

The teacher leaned back slightly in surprise. “There really is something going on in there.” She scanned the circle to gauge the class' reaction. “So what about it, people? Why do you think it's so hard, even in fiction, to imagine a world without problems?”

A pretty blond girl who seldom spoke was the first to answer: “Maybe it's because we're, like, always dissatisfied about something. I mean, you can be really rich or really famous. You know, in the movies even Superman can't just kick back and be happy. There's always like an alien invasion or something.”

“Superman *was* an alien invasion,” one of the boys cracked, and a few students laughed. Leslie seemed about to say something, but decided not to.

Mrs. Niehaus looked back at Jon, and he realized that she had trapped him in the center of the discussion. *She's good*, he thought with some annoyance. “So what do you think about that, Jon? Is the political just a projection of the personal? We can't imagine a perfect world because we can't imagine being happy as individuals?”

Jon blinked a couple of times and tried to focus his mind. “Well, maybe,” he said tentatively. *Profound. Wisdom of Solomon.* “But I think that on the perfect planets, everything always seems so tight. Under control, I mean. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe we think that if we can't screw things up, then we're not really free.”

“So you want to screw things up?”

“No, it's not that.” Jon fidgeted uncomfortably, tapped the desk with his thumbs, and then

stopped, worrying that he might break the desk and never be able to explain it. “I guess, it’s more like I’d like to know that I *could* screw things up. I don’t know why. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sure it does,” Mrs. Niehaus insisted. The bell rang, and Jon released a deep breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “For Monday: Half a page to a page, ‘The Importance of Being Able to Screw Things Up’. The more daring among you can take it a step further: ‘Things I Would Like to Screw Up’. Have a good weekend.”

Jon wanted to race out the door to the bus stop, but then he remembered the limping thing again. Leslie stopped him at the door, and for a minute he was worried she was going to ask him what he wanted to screw up or say something about Superman. But she wanted to talk about the project. She had a newsletter from some environmental group (Jon suspected she sent a few days’ lunch money to almost all of them) that described an agreement they had made with the governments of Brazil and some other places nearby. She tried to explain it, but it sounded complicated – something about buying up bonds the government couldn’t afford to pay off, and trading them to somebody in return for an agreement to do something-or-other with the undeveloped regions of the Amazon valley.

“Those places are gold mines of biological diversity,” she said, as if they hadn’t been talking about the subject for weeks.

Jon responded with an inarticulate, conversation-punctuating noise.

“And you know what else I found?” Leslie’s voice turned up like an infomercial pitchman about to add a new set of steak knives to the deal.

“Have I ever guessed the answer to one of those questions?”

“I did a search on biology and the general area covered by the agreement, and there was a reference to a paper on several new plant species that were found there by a C. Kent. That couldn’t be your Dad, could it?”

“Dad in the Amazon, with plants? I don’t think so. It doesn’t sound like his kind of thing. Anyway, Kent’s a pretty common name.”

Leslie looked disappointed, but squelched it with a smile. “That’s what I guessed, but I thought I’d ask anyway. Your Dad looks way too young to have done it. But then I thought he must be older than he looks if he had the first interview with Superman, so it would just barely work.”

“I’ve got to go,” Jon said, accepting the newsletter from her. “I don’t want to miss the bus today. I’ll read it on the way home.”

Which he more-or-less did. He saw all the words, and even turned some significant fraction of them into whatever passed for sounds inside his head. But mostly he found himself staring at the map. Maps were another thing that had opened a new wing in his brain recently. He hadn’t noticed any ribbon-cutting event, but for the past few weeks maps had just stuck in his mind in a way they never had before. This one seemed

particularly fascinating. He followed the lines of the reserved territories and matched them up against the curves of the Amazon. Leslie had put an ink mark at one bend of the river way up in Ecuador. Jon wondered if that was the place where she thought Dad had been.

Why do I have to look stuff up and read articles? Why can't I just go there and see?

And then he wondered for a moment if Dad really had been there, as Leslie suggested. *He's probably been almost everywhere at one time or another. They probably had an earthquake or a plane crash or something.* And then he wondered what it would be like not to go to school or a job or anything, but just to fly off each morning to wherever bad things were happening.

Depressing, probably, judging by Dad.

Jon began smelling the hot chocolate even before he got off the bus. It was an obvious message saying that he hadn't talked to Aunt Lana in a while. He hadn't been stopping by because he knew she would ask him about Leslie, and there really wasn't anything to say. They were just doing a project together.

But that turned out not to be what she wanted. After the would-you-like-some and how-was-your-day and so forth, Aunt Lana started asking about Laura. Laura hadn't been around much lately either, and Aunt Lana seemed to think that was unusual. Uncle Jimmy had called and said that he hadn't heard from Laura for a few weeks either, and he also apparently thought that was unusual. "If she were a couple years older," Aunt Lana commented, "I'd just think she had a boyfriend and was spending all her time talking to him on the phone or sitting in her room daydreaming. But I can't figure it out."

Laura mooning over a boyfriend – now that was an idea with a high ick-factor. Aunt Lana dismissed it out of hand, thank God, but Jon had no better theory to give her. Once he thought about it, though, Laura had seemed a little bit moodier than usual lately. Maybe he had noticed that she jabbered less at the dinner table, and that she was a little less inclined to tag around after her big brother and make a nuisance of herself. But on the whole Jon hadn't been thinking of this as a mystery to solve, much less a problem to fix. He reported that she spent a lot of time in her room, which was true, and didn't report that (despite her initial distaste for the place) she was also hanging around in the cave. Apparently she still believed she could talk Dad out of some Kryptonian tech, which she could use to install lights and a few other amenities. Jon wasn't wild about any of this, because it increased the odds that Dad would find the cave and start paying attention to it, but he didn't argue because Laura would probably do whatever she wanted anyway.

The chocolate ran out before any solution arose that would satisfy Aunt Lana, so Jon said simply that he would let her know if he noticed anything. The conversation had already made it into Jon's mental Trash folder by the time he was halfway to the house. If someone had stopped him and demanded to know what he was thinking about, he probably wouldn't have been able to say. Maybe he was reviewing the map Leslie had given him and wondering about that dot of ink.

Laura was waiting for him at the door. “Jon, come on,” she said, “we’ve only got five minutes to get out the door before Mom gets home. I was afraid you wouldn’t leave Aunt Lana’s in time.”

Several questions competed to be the first ones out of Jon’s mouth. “How’d you know where I was? Did Mom call? Why do we need to do something before Mom gets home?”

Laura glanced at her watch. “Just come on,” she said. “I made some of those improvements we talked about.”

Now that Lana had put doubts in his mind, Jon looked at his sister critically. She was thin and pale and had blue/black shadows under her eyes. “Have you been sleeping?”

“No, stupid. I’ve been standing here waiting for you.” She pushed past him to her bicycle. As she pedaled away, Jon thought about grabbing his own bike, but then decided to jog after her.

“I mean at night. Have you been sleeping at night?”

Laura seemed irritated by the question. “Some. You’ve got to see this. You’re really going to like it.”

Jon was about to ask what she was talking about. But before he had a chance, Laura looked straight at her watch (which was on her left wrist while Jon jogged to her right) and said, “Oh, shut up. He won’t tell.” He decided to hold his questions.

As they got close to the entrance, something seemed to go wrong with Jon’s x-ray vision. He couldn’t find the entrance or see the cave underneath. Laura turned her bicycle straight into the ravine, coasted down without applying brakes at all, and *vanished into the ground, bicycle and all*.

Without thinking, Jon flew twenty-five feet into the air and spun around quickly, scanning in all directions for some sign of Laura or her abductors. He hung in the air for four or five seconds before he realized she was still talking to him. “Would you get down here? Are you coming or not?”

“Coming where?”

Her head appeared in the middle of a stickerbush, like a ground squirrel peaking out of its hole. Except that there was no hole. Her head was sprouting out of the ground like a cabbage. “It’s a holographic force field,” she said, as if she had found one on sale at the Mall.

“I can’t see through it.”

“That’s the point,” she said. “I don’t think Dad can either unless he tries really hard. Hurry before somebody sees you up there.”

Jon dropped like a cartoon character who had finally looked down. He poked at the doorway and watched his hand vanish, then plucked up his courage and barreled through.

Once inside, he sat on the smooth, dry floor and waited for his senses to orient. They didn't seem to be in a cave at all; the blue sky was clearly visible overhead. And yet there was a ceiling there. He tentatively floated up to touch it.

"It's like x-ray vision," he said. "This is what it looks like. You know you're underground and yet you can see the sky up there. You can see it too, right?"

"Of course I can see it. I'm the one who told the ceiling to project it. The overhead view is a good default option."

"Huh?"

"It's a screen. The walls, the floor, the ceiling – it's all a crystal screen. It can display anything you want." Instantly the blue sky vanished and was replaced by a vast alien city. They seemed to be on a high platform illuminated by a red sun.

Instinctively Jon retreated, landing hard against the floor. "Krypton?" he guessed.

"Kryptopolis. We're on top of the Hall of Science. It's where the planners met."

The scene changed again. The sky was blue and the sun yellow, but the Kent farm – and all the farms as far as he could see – were covered with crystalline greenhouses. In the direction of Smallville, a giant inverted icicle poked upwards like a skyscraper. Food-bearing plants, some completely unrecognizable, were growing in the greenhouses. Giant insectoid machines crawled across the ceilings, tending, weeding, and harvesting.

"This is what Smallville would look like if the Tech optimized it," Laura explained.

Jon continued to watch without speaking or moving. "Turn it back," he said.

The default view returned. Mom's minivan was in the driveway now. "How are you controlling it?"

"Thought."

"Can I do it?"

"I don't think so. It's tuned for me."

Jon stood and started walking along the cave, expecting at any moment to come out onto dirt and rock. But the crystal surface continued. "I can't believe Dad just said yes and gave you all this. I mean, I didn't even expect you'd get lighting out of him, at least not without telling him what it was for."

Laura followed him. "It's all the same," she said. "It's raw Techstuff. It can be anything. It could be a few lights, or it could be this. I don't think Dad expected me to be able to do this much with it."

Jon continued walking and looking in all directions. "No kidding," he agreed. "How did you figure it out so quickly?"

She shrugged. "It's a knack. I can't fly or see through things. I had to be good at

something.”

Jon reached out to touch the Techstuff. It was smooth and cool. “I’ve never seen this stuff outside the Fortress. Even when we were building the house, Dad would make things there and then bring the finished pieces here.”

“I covered the whole cave with it, so it’s shielded. Nobody knows what Dad can do if he really tries, but he won’t notice it without looking hard.”

Jon was getting a bad feeling about this project and where it was going. Kids building themselves a hideout wasn’t that unusual, though maybe he had gone overboard. And the glider was probably a little over the line, but ... well, there wasn’t any *but* about it. He either shouldn’t have built it or he should have told Dad about it. It had seemed like a borderline thing to him at the time, though maybe it wasn’t. *But this is an underground city. An alien underground city.* He turned back to talk to Laura and realized that she wasn’t following him by walking. The Techstuff was carrying her along like a conveyor belt.

“Sis,” he said. “I don’t think we can do this. I mean, I think things are getting out of hand. What if somebody else finds this?”

Laura was undisturbed. “They can’t get in. The forcefield only accepts you and me. So in a lot of ways it’s even safer than it was before. People can’t stumble in. And you can’t even have a moment of weakness and bring somebody else in. You weren’t planning to do that, were you?”

Jon thought about when he had wanted to tell Darla his secrets, and tried to imagine explaining to her how an optimized Smallville would look. And Leslie ... she didn’t even approve of parking lots. “Oh, no,” he said. “I’m not bringing *anybody* down here. This ... this is just too much. We’ve got to come clean with Mom and Dad and operate under some kind of rules.”

She flashed a pouty expression that made her look like an eight-year-old – a very tired, run-down eight-year-old. When he didn’t melt, she cocked her head as if listening to something he couldn’t hear and then smiled. “You haven’t seen all of it yet,” she announced. “You shouldn’t decide what you want to do until you’ve seen all of it.”

“There’s more?”

The Techstuff began conveying both of them at a fairly high speed. Jon quickly realized they were headed towards the quarry, and wondered what she might have done with it. But the Techstuff thwarted his ability to see around corners or through walls. *She’s probably made us a whole Fortress.* “You know,” he said, “the more there is, the worse it will be when Mom and Dad find out. We’ve got to tell them before they figure it out on their own.”

“Just wait,” she said, and then they turned the final corner into the opening at the edge of the quarry. “Ta-da.”

Sitting in the middle of the room, separated from the quarry by what he assumed was another holographic force field, was a giant gossamer insect. Ten feet long and streamlined according to some scheme as yet unknown to terrestrial engineering, it transmitted light so perfectly that it almost wasn't there.

"It's a glider," Laura announced. "Just big enough for you and a small passenger."

Jon was as dumbfounded as when he had looked upon Kryptopolis. *This*, he thought, *might be the coolest thing I have ever seen.*

"Don't you think you should try it out?" she asked.

Empire State University, Gotham City: June 24, 1 S

Professor Benjamin Boston, best-selling author and favorite guest of numerous television talk show hosts, walked into his office and dropped a *Gotham News-Messenger* onto the empty plastic-topped cafeteria table that served as his desk. He placed a featureless black briefcase flush against one set of table legs, precisely in the center, and sat down on a metal folding chair.

Each morning he reviewed the reasons that he ought to stop reading the newspaper: His time could be better spent elsewhere. He didn't need to know most of what he deciphered. The world had managed to get along quite nicely before he started peeping through its keyholes. But this morning, like every other morning so far, he rejected that reasoning. *Once you start pulling away from the world*, he wondered, *where will it stop?* Some mornings when he looked into his shaving mirror, he momentarily saw a wild-eyed man with a dirty gray beard and ragged clothes. That future felt all too likely.

The main headline was not very interesting: yet another story speculating about the Metropolis Superman. It was a wire service story without a byline, but he knew immediately which reporters had been involved. A few meaningless personal details came through, but nothing about the Superman – they didn't know anything, and the pressure to keep filing stories had them on edge. When the Mayor of Metropolis was quoted, Boston saw in the punctuation that one of the reporters was sitting on a story about corruption in the Mayor's office. The story was true, but his editor needed more evidence than he could provide. Hence the semicolon.

WayneTech had broken ground on a new corporate center. The story left out the fact that Bruce Wayne had failed to show up to cut the ribbon, but Boston inferred it from the placement of the story on the page. On instinct, he turned to the back page, where a single-column headline announced: *Five Injured by Alleged Vigilante*. He closed his eyes and leaned back from the table as if he had been struck. "Oh, Bruce," he said, shaking his head. "Where is this all going to end?"

Opening his eyes again, he looked across the room at the bookshelves, which contained the standard reference books of his field in Library of Congress order, and not a single novel, nonfiction best-seller, or copy of his own works.

Over the years, as Benjamin Boston's fame and bank account had flourished, his physical surroundings had become increasingly impoverished. Like the ancestral mansion of an aristocratic family in decline, his office had lost its most interesting and marketable assets one by one. Artworks vanished from the walls, nicknacks and other memorabilia from its shelves. Its comfortable and tastefully chosen furniture was slowly replaced by the cheapest, most impersonal pieces available.

The absent-minded disorder of a busy academic burrow had vanished over time as well. Years before, papers had covered the office's horizontal surfaces like autumn leaves – ungraded student essays, research on half-finished projects, journals that Boston intended to read someday. But now objects and papers were trashed as soon as their usefulness was exhausted. He required that students submit their assignments electronically, and he returned his comments in plain-text email, not even using italic or bold fonts. Tasks were performed or rejected with a ruthless efficiency; those who asked Boston for a favor found that it was either delivered immediately or refused outright. One of his more insightful colleagues had remarked that time appeared to go backwards in Boston's office. The longer he occupied it, the less it said about him. By now the office appeared to belong to a visiting professor who expected to be gone within the week.

And that – more than any cover story about organization, time management, or even excessive neatness – was the point. Boston wanted an office that said as little about him as possible. Better than anyone, Boston knew that it was hopeless to create a workspace that made no statement – everything made a statement. In its current state, he realized, the office virtually screamed “Don't look at me!” But he hoped that this scream would at least drown out the incessant background whispering of each individual object.

If Boston ever got around to writing an honest autobiography (as opposed to the homiletic and largely fictional vignettes that illustrated the major points of his self-help books), he might well call it *Be Careful What You Wish For*. Thousands of years before him, King Solomon had wished for wisdom and lived to regret it. “In much wisdom is much grief,” Solomon wrote in his old age. “And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

Benjamin Boston's ill-advised wish had been for insight – insight into the human mind, how people think, what they intend, how they approach life. In one way or another Boston had been studying the mind since he had been a boy reading books that the other boys made fun of. He had studied it as a graduate student in the philosophy of mind at Harvard, as a *chela* in Benares, as a neurologist at the LaFontaine Medical Center in Metropolis, and finally as a professor of psychology at ESU in Gotham City.

And he had gotten somewhere – eventually.

Boston had always been at least moderately successful. In school he had been every teacher's favorite: bright, inquisitive, original, and hard-working, the kind of student who would think for an entire evening about some ambiguous statement in that day's lecture, and come back the next morning with exactly the right follow-up question. (Only his Benares guru had failed to be impressed by this. After observing his perfect meditating

posture and flawless breathing, the old man had frowned. “You think enlightenment will come to you like a gold star on your assignment,” he sighed.)

In each of his diverse occupations he had earned the respect of his peers, but never emerged as a true leader. At 30, his boy-wonder aura beginning to dim, Boston had become increasingly anxious. All his life he had imagined that he would do something marvelous someday. But what day would that be?

In an abstract sense, he understood perfectly why he had not made a bigger impact. At one time he had imagined that the worldviews of mysticism, neurology, philosophy, and psychology would fuse together like images in a stereoscope, showing him the human mind in all its multi-dimensional glory. Instead, they stubbornly refused to become anything more than separate vacation snapshots in his wallet. No matter how sharp each one might be, flipping back and forth among them never recaptured the splendor of the Grand Canyon.

Until one evening five years ago.

From his conscious perspective it had all come together in a flash, in something that a more naive age would have called a *religious experience* or even a *visitation*. He had been sitting in this very office late one evening, laboring over a journal article that was not turning out to be as profound as he had hoped. He had sat down to work on it a few hours before, thinking that he only needed to fix a few typing errors and reword a sentence or two. But then he had the misfortune to remember the original inspiration for the article, and to realize how far it had fallen short. Meanwhile, a stack of papers from his Criminal Psychology course waited impatiently for grades.

At some point he drifted into a twilight state, not really awake and not really asleep. He had been falling into such fugues more and more frequently as he tried to make himself work harder. Often when he was tired he would realize that his last series of thoughts had been nonsense on the verge of becoming dreams. And that was what had happened here. At one moment he was thinking about whether he could possibly justify the stronger, more satisfying conclusion he wanted to write, and at the next he was aware that a woman had been in the office for some time, sitting in the leather armchair where students usually sat. He couldn't remember anything about how she was dressed, but her skin had been a very pleasing shade of blue, something like the color of a small piece of sky near the horizon on a mostly cloudy day. She had leaned across the desk, whispered (and this was the strangest part, he thought in retrospect) “I'm sorry,” and kissed his forehead.

The kiss got him wondering who she might be, and how she could know him well enough to feel that she could kiss his forehead. And that set him to wondering how she could have gotten into the office without him noticing. And then he emerged into a fully awake state in which it was clear that she was not there at all. He was alone in his office and had been since mid-afternoon.

Nothing seemed different at first. He dashed off the conclusion to the article, then plunged into grading. He had trouble concentrating as he worked his way through the first

few papers, but that hardly seemed unusual. Rather than focusing on the text, he found himself slipping into daydreams about the students, imagining personal details he had never considered before. One, he decided, was homosexual. Another was having a difficult time breaking away from her parents. These observations weren't helping him grade the papers, so he did his best to ignore them.

But when he picked up a paper by one of his favorite students, he was overwhelmed by a feeling of inexplicable dread. The first few paragraphs appeared to be nothing more than a boilerplate introduction to a discussion of the relationship between early scholastic behavior problems and later criminality. But somehow Boston became certain that the young woman's boyfriend from Minneapolis (when had she mentioned him?) had broken off their engagement. He had met someone else, and had waited far too long to tell this girl what was happening. She was seriously depressed and thinking about suicide.

How do I know that? He couldn't have explained it to anyone. It was written everywhere and nowhere. It was why she had chosen this font and these margins. It was coded into the structure of her sentences and every place where she had a choice of adjectives or an option in punctuation. Her state of mind had influenced every decision she had made while writing this paper, and that state of mind had been dominated by these thoughts. How could they not be present in the text?

Continuing was like reading her diary. Somewhere in the middle of the paper she had broken off and taken a walk, wondering if she could step in front of a bus or throw herself into the river. But then she had come back. During her walk she had stood on an overlook and looked down at water. In the flickering lights reflected in the black surface, she had found her life force, and realized that she wanted to go on. The paper ended with a mood of sadness, but also peace and resolution.

Boston exhaled deeply. She'd be OK now. She was past the crisis and had found a new strength in herself.

What grade does the paper get?

He had been so absorbed in subtext that he could barely remember the subject. He re-read the paper three times and eventually gave it a B.

He graded several more papers without incident. Again, his imagination seemed overactive, but Boston did not take its visions seriously. They were like the stories he sometimes made up about the strangers he saw during airport lay-overs. But when he picked up the third-from-last paper he dropped it immediately, as if it had been soaked in acid. He sat shaking in his chair, filled with inexpressible sorrow, anger, determination, and ... *focus*. The world seemed to telescope down to a narrow tunnel, with this student's paper scattered across its floor. He picked up the first page and read. The prose was tight and well-reasoned, analytic without the slightest trace of emotion.

After two paragraphs, Boston was plunged into a vision of a dark street and an eight-year-old boy kneeling in a pool of blood. Loose pearls lay on top of the dark blood like

marshmallows in hot chocolate. To the boy's right, his father lay dead, shot twice in the chest. To his left, his mother's hand twitched feebly around her broken necklace and then was still. Boston began to cry uncontrollably, but the boy did not. The boy showed no emotion at all.

The vision vanished as Boston let the page fall. (Confused for a moment, he worried that he had dropped it into the blood.) He tried to remember the student who had written it: Bruce Wayne was a handsome, not-very-serious young man, whose wisecracks in class were just slightly too charming to garner disapproval. Boston had expected little of him, and then had been amazed at the depth and power of his first assignment. Where had this sharp, frighteningly logical mind been hiding itself? He suspected this class clown of hiring someone to write the paper for him, but when he invited Wayne in for a one-on-one conference, the young man who attended was like another person. His coal-black eyes dissected Boston, while his poker face resisted any cross examination. Boston had known immediately that this was the author of the paper he had read.

Now Boston realized what he should have seen then: *He's that Bruce Wayne. The tragic heir. Was the murder really that long ago?*

He gave the paper an A rather than touch it again. He finished grading the others and then recorded the marks. *What's happening to me?* he wondered.

A week later Bruce Wayne was sitting in the leather armchair, studying Boston's face like the entrails of a frog. The horrifying tableau of the strangely emotionless eight-year-old orphan superimposed itself on Boston's vision of the smooth and handsome young man. "There were no comments on my paper," Wayne stated clinically.

"Your observations were sharp," Boston defended, shrinking backwards to better shelter himself behind the barricade of his desk. "Your reasoning was clear and correct. I had nothing to add."

"You have been reacting differently to me." Boston heard the unspoken addendum: *You've been reacting differently to everyone. Something has happened to you.* "You've read about my past."

The superimposed second channel showed a different scene now. Wayne was dressed like a cat burglar, all in black, with a stocking cap pulled low over his ears and eyebrows. He balanced precariously on a brick ledge over an alley. Below, an Hispanic teen pushed a middle-aged businessman down the alley at knifepoint. Four accomplices awaited their arrival.

In the previous week Boston had indeed done his research on Bruce Wayne. Wayne had been haunting ESU for eight years now, and was within a few credits of several different degrees, none of which he seemed to be in a hurry to finish. Each term showed the same pattern – he signed up for an impossible number of courses, then dropped down to a light schedule at the midterm deadline. He got C's in the courses that he kept, mostly languages and liberal arts – the typical schedule of a rich heir filling out his family's

demand to educate himself. Intrigued, Boston arranged to talk to three of Wayne's former professors. They reported exactly what the transcript had led him to expect: Wayne mastered the material easily, but sabotaged his grade by skipping some key test or assignment. On a hunch, Boston called the professor of a particularly difficult chemistry class Wayne had dropped the previous term. Wayne had attended every class and completed every assignment. The professor had been surprised to discover that Wayne had dropped the course and not received a grade.

He's getting the best education we offer, but he's doing it without leaving a transcript.

"Yes," Boston admitted.

"And now you're afraid of me."

"Yes."

More questions followed. Boston realized he was being interrogated expertly. Wayne didn't know what he was searching for, but he was zeroing in on it with surprising efficiency.

On the second channel, Wayne had pulled down the mask of his black cap and leaped into the alley. The five gang members laughed at his foolish courage. They drew knives or guns and advanced on him in a wolfpack formation. The explosion of violence from the young heir was startling in both its skill and ferocity. Using some sort of martial art Boston could not identify, he incapacitated two within seconds, but the others pushed their attack. Shots were fired wildly, missing Wayne but hitting the businessman by mistake. Another flurry of acrobatic moves took down the remaining attackers, leaving Wayne free to check that the businessman was indeed dead.

"I realize how crazy all this sounds," Boston said eventually, after the full story of the grading session had been dragged out of him. Or perhaps it had not been dragged. Perhaps he had been waiting for someone to listen to it.

"Only if it doesn't check out," Wayne judged. "You claim you're discovering things about me far beyond what I'm consciously telling you."

"It's like there's a covert channel transmitting through your tone of voice, your posture, what you chose to wear today, the way you breathe. Everything."

"And what does it say?"

Boston debated backing out, trying to convince Wayne that it had all been a joke. Or making up a line of nonsense that would convince his student that he really was crazy. But having lived for a week in a world of his own, unable to tell anyone what was really going on in his mind, Boston found himself unwilling to retreat. "I know what you're doing. I know what you're trying to do."

"Which is?"

"You're training yourself to be a warrior, but the war you want to fight is right here in

Gotham. It's a war on criminals like the ones who killed your parents."

Wayne's poker mask broke. He was stunned.

"I also know that it's not going very well. That poor man died. They just wanted his money. They wouldn't have killed him if you hadn't interfered."

Wayne's eyes darted around the room. Boston watched as a dozen options passed through his mind in a matter of seconds: He could leap over the desk and strangle Boston right here. He could offer a bribe sufficiently large that Boston could not refuse it. He could insist that Boston was fantasizing and that his alleged power was a dangerous delusion. He could stand up, lean across the desk, and frighten Boston into silence, acting like the dangerous lunatic that his past entitled him to be.

None of these thoughts caused the young man to move so much as a finger. Instead, he leaned forward just a little, held eye contact with Boston, dropped the volume of his voice a fraction, and said with all the sincerity he could muster: "Then help me."

"Let me think about that," Boston said.

He thought about it for a second week. Wayne continued to attend his class and continued to appear to all the world as a good-natured, well-intentioned wastrel. But each joke, each slouch, each shrug told Boston additional stories of violence and self-sacrifice. Wayne's training regime would have qualified as torture if imposed on anyone else. His six classes were not the half of his studies. His manipulation of the other students was masterful – each imagined that Wayne was involved socially with the others, but all were held at arms' length.

Bruce Wayne, Boston realized, was a sick man: obsessed, unhappy, violent, masochistic, secretive, suspicious, friendless.

And good.

Boston could neither fathom nor deny that bizarre combination of traits. The longer he studied Wayne, the more he was struck by the fundamental unselfishness of the young man's ambition. His desire (already thwarted by many years) was to be the last victim of crime in Gotham City. He did not hope for revenge, for gratitude, for fame, or even for personal power. "You realize this path you have chosen will never make you happy," Boston warned as he stood behind Wayne in a cafeteria line.

"You assume that happiness is an option for me," Wayne replied.

At the end of the week – a second week dominated by Boston's own feelings of uniqueness, loneliness, and curiosity about the possibilities implicit in his new abilities – Boston asked Wayne to come to his office after class.

When Wayne arrived, Boston sat behind his desk in a rolling, swiveling relative of the armchair for students. He tossed from hand to hand a small beaded ball that had been with him since Benares. "Help you with what?" he asked.

Wayne thought before answering, wondered what might be communicated by his delay in communicating, and then said: “Help me understand the people I’m fighting. I know that I can’t fight them one by one. I need to get into their heads. I need them to know they’re beaten before they put up a fight that can get innocent bystanders killed. I need them to change their behavior for fear of me.”

“And yet, you want to work in the shadows, to remain anonymous.”

“The police wouldn’t stand for it otherwise. I’d be easy for them to trap. They’d just have to stage some crimes for me to break up.”

And then you’d have to decide whether to fight them. Boston shifted the ball from one hand to the other. “You need to be both famous and anonymous.” In his gesture, the right hand was famous, the left anonymous. “Everywhere ... and nowhere. Unavoidable ... and deniable.”

Wayne followed the ball with his eyes, but was not hypnotized by it. “Yes.”

Boston glanced up at a worn copy of *Bullfinch* on his shelf. “It’s simple really, at least on a conceptual level. You need to be mythic.”

Wayne cocked his head. He did not understand.

“Let me put it more concretely. Dracula is a myth. We all know that he doesn’t exist. If the police commissioner were to set up a task force to hunt down Dracula, every sane person would protest such a waste of the city’s resources.”

Wayne shrugged.

“And yet, even though none of us believe that Dracula exists, we would all recognize him if we saw him. The white skin, the fangs, the dark cloak, the ability to turn into a bat. If you were out on the street and saw such a being, you’d know right away it was Dracula.”

“Sure.”

“And if you recognized Dracula in a dark alley in Gotham City, would you try to fight him?”

“Yes.”

I should have seen that coming. “You would, naturally. But what about your enemies – the rapists, the purse-snatchers, the muggers? They drag a woman behind a parked car, look up, and there’s Dracula. Do they fight?”

“No,” Wayne said analytically. He looked at the same spot on the wall where Boston’s eyes had drifted, as if they were watching the same movie. “They’d run. If they already had a gun out they might take one wild shot – up – but more likely they’d drop the purse, the knife, whatever they were carrying, and run like hell.”

“And when the police find them tied to a pole somewhere, do they say that Dracula beat them up?”

“If they do, the police will laugh at them.” The movie ended, and Wayne looked back at his teacher. “So you’re telling me to become Dracula?”

“Not necessarily, but you get the idea.”

Boston watched the young man sit motionless, while the second channel broadcast nothing but the cybernetic hum of Wayne’s mind. “It’s not a bad idea at that,” the student conceded. And then, for just a moment, the impish class clown peered out of his eyes. “Turning into a bat, though, that would be the hard part.”

Just before the midterm deadline, Wayne dropped the course. He stopped coming to class, and Boston did not see him for a very long time. With a little snooping, Boston discovered that Wayne had finished a degree in some trivial liberal arts program and left the university. *He got what he wanted*, Boston thought.

For a year after that, he saw no trace of Wayne in the newspapers. The signs were there, of course, but Boston did not usually read the small-type notices of legal actions. In a story on the business pages (about Wayne taking control of the WayneTech shares in his parents’ trust, which had sent the stock plummeting) Boston had detected furtive clues about his other life, but made out nothing definite.

Then the police miraculously thwarted a plot by a Balkan terrorist group to release poison gas on the Gotham subway. On a local news show, the anchor explained the story in voice-over while the video showed a bruised suspect babbling away in some Slavic tongue Boston did not understand. But he grasped the man’s meaning clearly: *It was a giant bat*.

Eventually, other criminals – and occasionally their would-be victims – told other stories about a giant bat, or man dressed as a bat, or a man who could turn into a bat. The Batman of Gotham became notorious, a staple of supermarket tabloids and investigation shows on late-night cable TV. He could fly. He could vanish into the shadows. Neither bullets nor locked steel doors could stop him. His psychic powers drew him to crime sites before the crimes occurred. The police were allied with him. The police were afraid of him, but did not dare to hunt him down. The police were corrupt, and he was hunting *them* down. No sane person believed in him. But anyone would recognize him.

He was a myth, a legend.

Boston set the newspaper on the table that served as his desk. *Did I do the right thing? he wondered, as he so often did. Is the city better because he’s out there? Would it be worse if he had gone on the way he was?*

Now he only saw Bruce Wayne at fund-raising events for the university. Wayne would always smile and shake his hand and pretend to be pretending to remember him. As Boston had predicted, Wayne was not a happy man. But he was, in his own odd way, satisfied with his unhappiness. It suited him.

What suits me? Boston wondered.

He picked up the newspaper again and tried to read about something else on the inside pages. But within seconds he was interrupted by a firm rap on his office door.

The rap was filled with information: Its volume, its sharpness, the number of knocks and the time between them, the fact that the caller struck the wood and not the frosted glass. It told Boston that he was about to be visited by another old student – Eric Randall.

The Daily Planet Building, Metropolis: June 24, 1 S

Lois Lane blasted through the newsroom like a speedboat through a no-wake zone. She appeared not to notice the people in her way, but somehow managed not to run them over without slowing down. Behind her, Jimmy Olsen could barely keep up. His legs were just as long as hers, but all the obstacles that seemed to submerge while Lois was passing bobbed back to the surface in front of him. He dodged sideways, stopped, and then ran a few steps to catch up before spotting someone else with a cup of hot coffee or a precariously balanced stack of papers.

“I can’t keep following you around,” Jimmy was saying. “I’m not getting any pictures. You’re not finding him. We haven’t seen so much as the hem of his red cape.”

Lois turned quickly and Jimmy managed to stop a few inches from a nose-to-nose collision. The lens of the camera around his neck nuzzled up against her blouse, at right about the spot where the zipper on her spacesuit had fallen to. “*There was no cape!*” she shouted. “Why does everyone keep talking about him wearing a cape? He had a red windbreaker, the kind you’d buy in any discount store. It wasn’t zipped up and it fluttered when he flew, but it wasn’t a cape.”

Jimmy shrugged and backed up half a step. “OK, OK. But we haven’t seen him since. I’m not getting any pictures. That’s what I live on.”

“We’ll find him,” Lois insisted. “And you’ll get the best pictures you’ve ever taken. He’s got to be somewhere.”

She turned forward again and ran directly into a tall young man with dark hair and glasses. He wore a suit and carried a folder. He was athletically trim, but he slouched and his broad shoulders took up a lot of space. He and Lois tried to dodge around each other, but each moved at the same time like synchronized dancers. He looked terrified.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you going somewhere?” Lois demanded.

“Um ... Perry White’s office. I have an appointment.”

“Well, you’re going the wrong way. You can follow me there, but I need to talk to him first.”

Lois stepped around the man, who became the third car in the Lois Lane locomotive. When they arrived at Perry’s half-open door, Lois knocked on it while entering, Jimmy hesitated and then followed, and the young man stopped in the doorway. Perry was sitting

at his desk reading something on a computer screen. His left hand hung in the air, suspended between a half-smoked cigar and a half-eaten sandwich.

“Lois,” Perry said without looking up. “Duncan down at the city desk showed me an interesting poster he downloaded from the internet.”

“The first person who puts that poster up is getting sued for sexual harassment.”

Perry turned away from the screen and nodded. “Good policy. You may have to live with the screen savers, though. I spotted one on my youngest boy’s machine last night. I don’t think he realizes you work for me. Probably just as well.” Perry’s hand resolved its dilemma and picked up the cigar. “What have you got for the late edition?”

“Filler if you need it,” Lois answered, “but no news. More scientists speculating on how he did it. Officials at every level swearing they don’t know who he is and trying not to look too alarmed about it. Witnesses telling increasingly unlikely stories of what they saw.”

“But no new sightings.”

“A few crackpots. Nothing that checks out. Every fortuitous gust of wind is the Superman these days.”

Perry puffed once on the cigar, sending a cloud of yellow smoke into the air. “I know it’s only been a few days, but I’m getting a bad feeling about this. If the story just ends, I don’t like it. He can’t just vanish.”

“He won’t,” Lois said. “The whole city is looking for him. He’ll turn up.”

“Excuse me,” said the young man in the doorway.

“I’m not so sure.” The cigar was a pointer now. He jabbed the air with it for emphasis. “We all saw him, but what did we see? A guy who flies. If he just stays on the ground and acts like a normal person, who’s going to recognize him? I tell you, he could live the rest of his life right here in Metropolis and we’d never know. He could be anywhere.”

Lois shook her head hard enough to toss her black hair. “Perry, you don’t understand. This is *a guy who flies*. He’s not going to stay on the ground forever. Would you? And as soon as he flies again, somebody will see him. Everybody is looking for him. People are bumping into each other all over Metropolis because they’re checking out every bird and plane. Even on the ground, he’s not just an average guy. He’s huge, for one thing, and very well muscled. And handsome. He has very striking eyes. Believe me, I would recognize him if I saw him again.”

“Excuse me.”

“What?” Perry demanded, noticing the young man for the first time.

“Umm, it’s 2:30 Mr. White. A few minutes past, even. I have an appointment to see you.”

The editor tossed the cigar into its ashtray and started lifting up papers on his desk, trying

to find his calendar. "Who are you?"

"Clark Kent. Dr. Caldwell said I should talk to you about a job."

"At *The Planet*?" Lois asked skeptically.

"Doctor ...," Perry said, still looking under things, "Doctor ... Max! You mean Max Caldwell, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that would make you ..." he opened a drawer and seized a manila envelope as if it were a lost treasure map. "Clark Kent!"

"I believe he said that already, Perry," Lois observed.

Perry put the cigar back on its tray, pulled some papers halfway out of the envelope and scanned them quickly. "Interesting ... interesting," he mumbled. "Max was always a pretty good judge of talent, but ..." He glanced over at the computer screen, down at the sandwich, and then up at the clock above the door. Without warning he tossed the envelope at Lois, who caught it by reflex. "I've got a couple things to finish up. Lois, why don't you talk to young Kent here. Do an interview."

"A *job* interview?" she asked incredulously.

"See if you think he'd make a good reporter."

"At *The Planet*?"

Perry nodded.

"Perry, I don't have time for this. I'm in the middle of the biggest story of the century."

"You just told me you had filler."

"*Today*. But tomorrow I could win a Pulitzer. I've worked out an agreement for Jimmy and me to go on the afternoon flight of the WLEX traffic copter. I just need you to sign this." She pulled a form out of her notebook and laid it on the most prominent stack of papers on Perry's desk.

"Does it cost us money?"

"Just pride. *My* pride, mostly. If it helps me break the story I have to do an appearance on the Jamie Lee show. And their news desk gets first TV rights to the pictures."

Perry looked at the paper, then set it back down. "Talk to Kent for ten minutes. Then come talk to me. I'll sign it then."

Lois involuntarily glanced at the ceiling while she did a quick time calculation. "Done. Kent, you're with me. Jimmy, go look out the window. Maybe he'll fly by or something."

Clark backed out of the doorway and made eye contact with Jimmy. "You never know," he said encouragingly. Then he raced to catch up with Lois, who was already halfway to

her cubicle.

Kansas: October 17, 10 A.S.

Those Kryptonians could really build things. The glider looked for all the world like it ought to be fragile, but it clearly wasn't.

"Clearly" – that's a play on words, Jon thought. But for the handholds and the harness, Jon might have thought he was flying by himself. From the ground, he suspected, the glider probably looked like a piece of transparent kitchen wrap caught in the wind. It sliced through the air even more easily than Jon did himself, and the first time he accidentally broke the sound barrier, it merely shivered. That didn't mean there wasn't a boom, of course, because the whole point of breaking the sound barrier was that you started outrunning your own noise. But he tried it again and then stopped quickly to listen to the sound as it caught up – a maneuver that would have shattered any glider Jon could have built for himself. The sonic boom was more of a pop, like a champagne cork.

Where the heck am I?

It took a moment for Jon to find something he could recognize from the maps: an interstate that should have been in Oklahoma rather than here. He took a parallel course along the edge of a cloud bank until he could make out a confirming sign: Oklahoma. Definitely Oklahoma.

This isn't just camouflage, I'm actually faster with it than without it.

And that was going to make it that much harder to give up, which he knew he had to do. *Dad keeps stuff like this at the Fortress for a reason*, he thought, remembering a conversation during the house-building project. Raw techstuff, Jon now realized, could probably have put the whole house up in an eyeblink, but Dad decided not to do it that way. He used the Tech at the Fortress to make finished products, then brought them down from there. Raw techstuff was always supposed to stay in the Fortress, for some reason.

And yet he just gives some to Laura. Just because she asked. It figures. She probably gave him a look. He wondered whether it had been the big-eyed look or the trembling-lip look or the pouty look. *They're super-powers all by themselves. Now that he's outgrown kryptonite it's the only weakness he has. Good thing it doesn't work on me.*

Except that it did work. Or something had worked. He hadn't, after all, gone up to Mom and confessed after they got back from their test flight yesterday. *I was waiting for Dad to come home.* But then his father had been late, and Laura went to bed early, and the whole confession plan sort of unraveled. Then he woke before everyone else and thought: *One more flight. Just be careful and stay out of trouble.*

Texas was practically empty anyway, if you stayed away from the cities, and out over the Gulf of Mexico he could see boats and planes a long time before they could spot him.

This thing sure is fast. Maybe I should turn around. I really should turn around.

This thing sure is fast.

Hermit Isle: October 17, 10 A.S.

“Mr. Luthor,” said Hope’s face from a window that appeared in the surface of his desk. Only she or Faith could demand his attention in such a manner. They had been well trained not to do so lightly.

“Go ahead.”

“As part of the Kent project, you asked us to keep you apprised of anything anomalous in the Smallville area.”

Luthor smiled. Eventually, he knew, he would have to level with the girls. But it was so interesting to see what they could come up with on their own. “Continue.”

Another window opened, displaying poor-quality video. A clock raced beneath it, breaking time down into hundredths of seconds.

“A passing satellite took this footage from space yesterday afternoon, sir. As you can see, a very faint unidentified object was detected in the general Smallville area. We can’t say exactly where it came from, because it was already in progress when the coverage area caught up to it. But we know that it wasn’t there twenty minutes before. As you can see, it accelerated to mach five before leaving the southern edge of the coverage area.” Two more windows opened. “Correlating this with infrared and look-down radar output produced no match. As far as those sensors were concerned, it wasn’t there.”

Luthor nodded as if this were unsurprising. “So: no metal and no heat. Therefore: no engine.”

“At mach five, sir. Accelerating.”

“What does the Pentagon say? They must be looking at the same readouts you are.”

“Sensor error. That probably would have been our conclusion too, sir, if I hadn’t been primed to expect anomalies in this area.”

“The Europeans? Chinese?”

“No indication that they noticed it.”

“Theories?”

“If I had to guess, sir, I’d say that someone was spoofing the optical sensor, maybe by bouncing energy off one of the lower layers of the atmosphere. I don’t know who would do that or why, but that would be my best guess. I don’t see how it could be anything real.”

Luthor chuckled. “Be more imaginative, Hope. There are many reasons someone might want to spoof that sensor. What if you wanted to create the impression that Superman was back?”

The woman paused to think. “Other than raising the general level of uncertainty in the world, I don’t see what such a ruse would accomplish.”

“That’s because you’re thinking like a government. Think like a private organization, one that has a stake in people’s beliefs about the dear departed Man of Steel.”

“The Kryptonists?”

“Or the Human Defense League. They’re mirror images of each other, after all. As Jung said about believers and atheists, ‘It’s all just plus and minus.’ Either one might have a good reason to fake a reappearance.”

“Of course, sir,” Hope responded. It was a flaw in her training, Luthor noted, that she could not just say: *I have no idea what you’re talking about*. It was a pity he’d have no opportunity to fix that in the next generation. “And the connection to Kent?”

“Keep working on it.”

“Should I maneuver a geosynchronous satellite so that we get continuous optical coverage of Smallville?”

“No. He’d probably notice that.”

“Who, sir?” she asked skeptically. “The Kryptonists? Kent? I don’t see how – ”

“Whomever,” Luthor said conclusively.

Empire State University, Gotham City: June 24, 1 S

“So you’ve gotten interested in the Superman,” Benjamin Boston commented with intentional disdain. “How trendy of you, Eric.”

Five years of experiencing deep insight into the human mind should have made Boston a master manipulator by now. And indeed it had, in dealing with most people, when he had the stomach for it. But Eric Randall was not like most people. Randall wanted what he wanted, saw it clearly, and was not to be deflected by subtle methods. *Like Wayne*, Boston thought.

“Sure,” Randall acknowledged. He had found a television and VCR on a cart in a classroom and wheeled it up to Boston’s office; whether some class had missed it yet was anyone’s guess. While he talked, he got down on his knees to plug the cord into a baseboard outlet, pointing the worn seat of his jeans in Boston’s general direction. “The talking heads have been all over these tapes for days – reacting to them, reacting to each other’s reactions, taking polls about the general public’s reactions to their reactions, reacting to that. It doesn’t take long to turn into its own little subculture. Even I have trouble screening it all out and rethinking it from first principles. It’s already hard to look at these tapes and just *see* them, see what’s really there. But you don’t have that problem, do you?”

Randall had been a student in Boston’s Psychology of Religion course during the term when Boston acquired his insight. Prior to that moment, Boston had looked on him as

almost the mirror image of Wayne. If Wayne was a serious mind pretending to be the class clown, Randall had been comical in his attempts to be taken seriously. He relentlessly played the grading system. If the system rewarded classroom participation, then he would be the central figure in any discussion – whether he had read the material or not. He buttered up his professors so shamelessly as to be insulting rather than flattering. His flattery was always coated with a murky film of irony, as if to acknowledge that all power relationships were a kind of dance. Someday, his manner implied, the dancers might reverse their roles. The greater his current subservience, the greater the implied threat of his future dominance.

“He’s just a dot in this tape,” Randall acknowledged as the VCR started to play. He was upright now, standing over Boston, who remained seated. “But there must be all kinds of implications in that dot. The fact that he’s appearing exactly now and doing precisely this. Maybe there are some subtle course corrections that have meaning. Maybe the cameraman’s reactions to him contain some information that the rest of us can’t see.”

Following that fateful blue kiss on his forehead, Boston had stopped finding Randall amusing. Instead, the moment he entered the Psychology of Religion classroom, Boston had realized that the room was in Randall’s power rather than his own. The other students spoke or were silent, attacked or defended each other’s positions – all in response to Randall’s cues. None of them liked him, respected him, or had any suspicion that he was in control of their actions. But to Boston’s new vision, it was as if the students were gathered around a cafeteria table drinking one Coke after another while dissecting Coca-Cola’s pathetically ineffective marketing campaign. They saw the manipulative tricks, dismissed them, and then did precisely what they had been manipulated to do. Students who did not care if Randall succeeded nonetheless helped him do so. Those who did not enjoy his company invited him to their social events. Women who were not attracted to him went out with him.

“The jerkiness of the image makes it hard to see,” Boston said, all the while wondering: *Why am I answering his questions at all?* “But he does hesitate from time to time. This isn’t a plan. LexCorp and NASA aren’t in on it. He’s making up what to do as he goes along.”

“Why? What’s he trying to accomplish?”

In the same way that the invention of the microscope turned cockroaches and mosquitoes into objects of fascination, Boston’s new abilities had focused his attention on Eric Randall. The fascination had been mutual, which made Boston realize that he must have been as much under the young man’s control as everyone else in the classroom. The professor’s new independence of and occasional interference in Randall’s schemes aroused the young man’s curiosity. He began to drop by during office hours, and even outside them. They frequently sat together at the department’s Friday afternoon seminar, joined the amorphous gang that took the speaker out to dinner afterward, and frequently wound up in the Bat Cave, a dark and disreputable bar not far from campus. (Twice they had run into Bruce Wayne there, but the two students did not mix well together. The

second time, Wayne had feigned drunkenness at the mere sight of Randall, and had allowed Boston to call him a cab.)

I tried to save him from himself, Boston remembered. *That was my mistake. Maybe it was the mistake he wanted me to make.*

“I think he’s acting spontaneously. Probably he was just part of the crowd, and reacted when he saw that something was wrong. Why do some people run into burning buildings to save babies?”

“Do they?” Randall asked incredulously.

The New Dharma, Boston’s first and most seminal best-seller, had grown out of his attempts to teach wisdom to his amoral protege. More than ever, Boston was certain that a life devoted to power, dominance, fame, money, and status was an empty life. After the initial wonder wore off, what Boston’s insight showed him again and again was the poverty of people’s inner lives. Too often he looked down the rows of his classes and saw human beings far too young to be as stunted and ossified as they were. With all of life before them and the peak of youthful energy pushing them from behind, they seemed unable to gin up any enthusiasm for living. They took drugs for depression, drugs for hyperactivity, drugs for entertainment. For many of them, sex had no more meaning than a video game or a fast ride at the amusement park. Surely, with all his insight, he had something to say to these young adults.

Randall fast-forwarded the tape. “What about her? Beyond the fact that she’s hot. She’s the only one who met him. What effect did he have on her? Can you deduce anything about him from that?”

“Second-hand effects are tricky.” Boston found his eyes drawn to the rising and falling of her chest. It took a moment for him to realize that he was not just indulging in middle-aged lust. “Her breathing. It’s not quite normal.” He took the remote from Randall, rewound and played the same ten-second stretch four times.

“If I watch her long enough, my breathing’s not normal either,” Randall observed.

For a time, Randall had symbolized all the young people Boston thought he might help, thought he might save. He had such an unusual talent. Used for good, it could be leadership. Boston could imagine Randall as the kind of person who builds institutions, gives people common purpose, cements the bonds of community. But the seeds of goodness had never been planted in Randall. Late at night in the Bat Cave, the table between them occupied by legions of empty bottles of Czech beer, Boston tried to plant those seeds.

It was there in the Bat Cave, late one night after far too much alcohol, that Boston had told the story of the blue woman and her magic kiss. *That was a mistake.*

“She’s a woman who never lets anyone in. She wants to beat everyone, but at the same time she doesn’t want be surrounded by losers. She hasn’t realized yet that the two don’t

go together. That day ... it's hard to explain. She's not used to feeling helpless. Or rather, she's not used to feeling *so* helpless that she can't deny it. And so, to be on that plane with no way to save herself ... and yet to be saved anyway ... by another person ... a person who doesn't ask anything of her, not even thanks ..."

"She fell in love with him. First sight – that kind of thing. She wants his baby."

"What she's doing in this clip, it's very impressive. She has to pull herself together and perform even though her view of the world ... is coming undone."

"Not just her outfit?"

Boston knew, of course, why Randall was interested in the Superman. It had been obvious the minute he came in the door. It was in the squeak of his tennis shoes against the floor, in the set of his shoulders. He wanted to make a cult out of the Superman. It would be an excuse to lead a dozen or so people around by the nose, maybe con some money out of them. It all seemed so small.

I shouldn't help him, Boston thought. *I shouldn't think about the Superman at all*. But even as a meditation student, Boston had never managed not to think about things. As he watched Lois Lane on tape, he found that he was getting secondary impressions of the man she had seen and was talking about. He was good and innocent and didn't quite know what to do with himself. Boston found himself feeling sorry for the Superman.

Unusual abilities, he thought, *are just an invitation for people to try to use you*. He looked at Randall, then back at Lois Lane.

Someone should tell him that.

The Daily Planet Building, Metropolis: June 24, 1 S.

The walls of Lois Lane's cubicle were covered with maps and pictures: a street map of Metropolis, a blown-up map of Godwin Air Base with color-coded pushpins scattered across it, fuzzy photos of a human-shaped object hanging in the sky.

"Smallville," Lois said after spreading the pages of Clark's resume across her desk. "There's a place called Smallville?"

"In Kansas," Clark answered. "But it's not called that because it's small. I mean, it *is* small. But Gerald Small founded it back in the 1800's and named it after himself."

"Midget?"

"Uh, no. That was just his name. Small."

"Well," she said, still looking down at the resume. "Straight A student. Editor of the student paper. Occasional article picked up by the local papers. Then you graduate and do ... what, exactly?"

"Travel, mostly. I thought I should see more of the world before I decided where I fit into it."

“Can’t argue with that. So your travels lead to ... what are these articles?”

“Biology journals, mostly. I found some new species of plants.”

“In Africa, South America, Nepal. You found new species in all those places?”

Clark shrugged. “I like to hike in places most people don’t go. And I’m pretty observant. And lucky, I guess.”

She leafed through the portfolio of clippings. “The leads are clean, efficient. Maybe a little too textbook, but I’ve seen worse.”

“Thank you.”

She put the clippings back into the envelope and shifted forward to stare directly into his Clark’s eyes. He leaned back a little bit, as if shrinking from a predator. Lois fired questions a volley of questions. “What do you know about Metropolis?”

“I moved here three weeks ago. I’ve been walking around a lot.”

“What do you know about big cities in general?”

“Does Kansas City count?”

“No.”

“Not much.”

“Why not just become a biologist? You seem to have a flair for it.”

“I’m interested in people. And I like Metropolis. This is where the future is happening. It’s like the City of Tomorrow.”

Lois leaned back and shook her head. “You have no idea, Smallville,” she said. “It’s not Flash Gordon out there, it’s Tarzan. No, it’s Mad Max. Evolution has speeded up here, because everybody is working so hard to eat everybody else’s lunch.” Clark stared at her and said nothing. “Tell me, Smallville,” she asked, “how many panhandlers have you given money to since you got here?”

Clark shrugged. “A few. What does that have to do with – ”

“All of them?”

“No. Sometimes I don’t have money on me.”

Lois closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. “I’m doing you a favor to tell you this. Don’t ask me why, but I am: Go back to Kansas. Buy a farm. Marry the girl next door. You seem like a nice guy, Smallville, but the City of Tomorrow is no place for nice guys. You don’t want to become the Man of Tomorrow. I’ve met him. His name is Lex Luthor. He’s not a nice guy.”

Clark frowned, then looked over her shoulder at the bulletin board. “Maybe it’s not Luthor,” he said. “Maybe it’s him. Maybe he’s the Man of Tomorrow.”

“The Superman? What if he is?”

“Well, he comes out of nowhere, saves a bunch of people, and doesn’t ask for anything.”

“Yet. We don’t know what he wants yet. He hasn’t told us.”

“Maybe he just wants to help.”

Lois stood up and looked at a window that reflected into Perry’s office. He still had one more bite of his sandwich, but the hand that held it was frozen in the air while he read an article on his computer screen. “Maybe he’s Prince Charming and the next time I see him he’ll ask me to the Ball,” she said sarcastically. “But I’m not counting on it. He’s got his angle. We just don’t know what it is yet.”

Clark breathed deeply and his cheeks began to flush. He stood up and looked in the direction where Perry’s office would have been visible if a wall weren’t in the way. Then he turned back to Lois, who had to tilt her head to look up at him. “Is that why you want to find him? To prove that he’s just as bad as everybody else?”

“If want to find him because he’s news. That’s what big city reporters do: we find news. Whether it’s pretty or ugly, we don’t care. We just find it and write about it.” Lois looked away to the reflection. “Perry’s done now.”

The LexCorp Building, Metropolis: June 24, 1 S.

Lex Luthor pushed a button built into his massive desk. The door to the elevator holding area opened and Mercy entered, pushing a somewhat frail elderly gentleman before her. He was expensively but not ostentatiously dressed in a well-tailored gray suit. His hair was white and thin, with a bald area on top. He had a significant bruise on his right cheekbone.

Mercy pushed the man up to the front of Luthor’s desk and stood at attention behind him. She was also expensively dressed in her black leather uniform. Luthor remained seated.

“Mr. Luthor,” she announced. “I intercepted this man on the private elevator. He had somehow disabled two levels of security and fooled the elevator cameras. When I discovered him via a security feature he failed to disable, I stopped the elevator at my floor and apprehended him. You requested to see him.”

“Quite so,” Luthor responded. “Well done, Mercy. You’re dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir. I removed several devices from him, but given their nature and the difficulty of finding them, I am not confident that he is totally disarmed. I recommend that I should stay.”

Luthor rose from his high-backed chair, silhouetted by the bluish light coming through the tinted crystal walls. The rest of Metropolis’ skyline was visible behind and beneath him. Luthor was in his late forties now, but with his clean-shaven head, wrinklefree face and trim build he could have been almost any age. “That won’t be necessary. This isn’t an assassin. He’s just an old friend whose practical joke has gone awry. Isn’t that right, Mr.

Chicago?”

Chicago stepped out of Mercy’s hold, pulled himself up to his full height of five foot eight, and composed himself. “Yes,” he agreed. “*Physically*, I am quite harmless now.”

Mercy dipped her head and turned to leave. When the automatic door had shut behind her, Luthor smiled at his guest. “Isn’t she magnificent? In my day, the Service had many wonderful theories about the training of young people, but hadn’t yet put sufficient money behind them. I am quite pleased to report that they work.”

“The Cities have often debated the morality of those methods.”

“Perhaps you should ask Mercy about them. Or her partner Charity. I think you will find them to be very appreciative of their good fortune.”

“How could they not be? It’s in their training.”

In spite of himself, Chicago’s glance kept wandering to the far reaches of the room, if *room* was the right word. Lex Luthor’s office took up 120 degrees of the circular top floor of the LexCorp Tower (the remaining 240 degrees being taken up by Luthor’s Metropolis apartment). A small convention could have been held inside it. The outside walls were floor-to-ceiling blue-tinted transparent crystal and the inner walls were redwood. Artworks and collectibles of scandalous price were scattered about like trinkets from forgotten vacations.

Luthor walked to a bar about a tennis court’s length from his desk and opened its sliding cabinet. “But where are my manners? That old wander-in-unannounced trick – it’s very intimidating; I’ve used it myself. It’s a shame how it turned out. I apologize for Mercy’s overzealousness. She and Charity are very protective of me. Can I offer you something to dull the pain?”

“Water,” Chicago answered, trailing behind. “This isn’t a social call. The Service asked me to come speak to you.”

“So I assumed,” Luthor said. He poured two glasses of water from a pitcher and drank from one himself before handing the other to his guest. “You’ve come to deliver a message. Or is it a warning? A threat?”

“I’ve come to remind you of certain agreements.”

Luthor led the way to two leather reclining chairs with a table between them. He sat in one and gestured for Chicago to take the other. “Then remind me.”

“The Service allowed you leave, and then allowed you to prosper –”

“And prospered with me to a large extent. A number of Servicemen have been LexCorp shareholders for some time, as I’m sure you know.”

“ – under the condition that you make no effort to gain political power. As *you* know, the Service maintains its considerable independence because the politicians who control it in theory have neither the knowledge nor the vision to exercise that control in practice. This

is a fortunate arrangement for all concerned, and we would like it to continue.”

“Surely you don’t think that I – ”

“You have, over the previous three years, been maneuvering men and women you control into positions from which they may soon take over the city government of Metropolis.”

“That’s a local matter of no interest to the Service.”

“With the city government comes its considerable political machine, which would quickly give you control of at least four congressional seats and undeniable influence over both of the state’s senators. We can’t allow that.”

Luthor shook his head in disappointment. “A financial power like LexCorp can’t exist in a vacuum. If we don’t own politicians to protect us, our rivals will use their politicians to strangle us. Surely you can understand that.”

“And then there is the matter of your influence with this new Intergang operation – if indeed *influence* is the right word. Uniting criminal gangs is an old theme in your career. But the weaponry, the tailored drugs – they give you away.”

Luthor again shook his head, but this time with disapproval rather than disappointment. “If you’d any reason to say that beyond speculation, I think you’d have approached the topic differently. Besides, I don’t remember anything in our agreement concerning crime syndicates .”

“I would have thought it would go without saying.”

“Many things are thought to go without saying, but few of them do.”

Chicago sipped his water, looked up at the pleasantly luminous ceiling, and absent-mindedly touched the bruise on his cheek. “There has been considerable inter-city discussion about your recent boldness, and what might be behind it. I, for one, put forward the idea that there was nothing behind it. You have always been bold and have always pushed until you were stopped. But other Cities believed that you had discovered some new advantage, that you had some ace in the hole that made you think that you did not have to fear us.” He waited for a response and received none. “Then we saw your new employee.”

Luthor placed his glass on the table, steepled his hands, and rested his lips against the vertex of his index fingers. “My new employee,” he said noncommittally. It might have been either a statement or a question.

“The one who saved your space plane.”

Luthor raised his head. “Ah,” he said. “That one.”

Chicago leaned forward to the edge of the leather seat, as if the luxury of reclining threatened to corrupt him. “Don’t overplay your hand, Luthor. We don’t know how you created this Superman, if that’s what he is. And we don’t know how many of them you might have. I’m sure you think our lack of knowledge will make us hesitate. I’m here to

tell you not to be so certain. A faction of the Cities wants to act to eliminate you now, before you consolidate any more power. Their very uncertainty makes them want to act.”

“Their plans must be very interesting, given that they must take into account beings of indeterminate power and number. And the possibility of other equally surprising developments of which they have at present no clue.”

“Do not underestimate the Service.”

“But you come to me today as a friend, to warn me of my danger.”

Chicago stood, but Luthor remained seated in the recliner. He closed his eyes briefly, as if he were about to doze.

“Luthor, if that is what we’re to call you now, you have no friends. But this conflict is unnecessary. We are prepared to agree that Intergang is a local phenomenon of no interest. Stand down on the political front. Turn over to us the Superman and any related technology. We can make sure that the government amply rewards you.”

Luthor opened his eyes and looked over his steepled fingers. “Chicago,” he said.

“*Thomas*, look out these windows. That’s my city out there. I will shape it. I will shape its buildings. I will shape its government. I will shape its culture, its recreation, even its underclass. That is the task I have taken on and I will not be bought off. Money gets old, Tom. You can only buy so many houses, so many airplanes, so many beautiful women. If all you can offer me is money, then we have little to talk about.”

Without waiting for a response, he pushed a button hidden in the armrest and spoke at a higher volume. “Mercy, our guest will be leaving now. He’ll need an escort down to the street. Make sure he gets there without any further incidents.”

Chicago stood perfectly still. Muscles in his neck became taut as he held his jaw tightly shut. He began moving to the door when Mercy entered and he left without another word.

When the door was closed and he was safely alone, Luthor smiled up at the ceiling. “So *they* think he’s *mine*,” he said to himself. “Now I just have to make sure that *he* thinks so too.”

The Daily Planet Building, Metropolis: June 24, 1 S.

Lois rapped perfunctorily on Perry’s door as she walked into his office with Clark once again trailing behind. She dropped the envelope on his desk next to the authorization form, which now had sandwich crumbs on it. “I’ve done my part of the deal,” she said.

“Not quite yet,” Perry observed. He picked up a World’s Greatest Grandpa mug, observed there was no coffee in it, frowned, and set it down again. “You’re supposed to talk to me about him. Kent, go wait outside. You’re not supposed to hear this part.”

The young man looked embarrassed, and perhaps a bit confused. “Yes, sir,” he said as he left the office, shutting the door softly behind him. Through the glass Perry could see him walk to the far side of the newsroom, stop, and shake his head.

“Somebody did a good job raising that boy,” the editor commented. “Yes, sir. No, sir. Who talks that way any more?”

“He is polite,” Lois agreed reluctantly. “He’s the first guy in three days who hasn’t looked at me like he could see through my clothes.”

“But you don’t like him.”

“As what? He’d make a great next-door neighbor. I bet he always has milk you can borrow, and he’d probably be a great listener the next time I get dumped. I just can’t see him as a reporter.”

“I’m not sure I can either.” Perry swiveled on his chair, glanced out the window, and examined an airplane passing overhead. “But Max sees him that way, and he’s never steered me wrong.”

Lois shrugged, picked the authorization form off the desk and shook off the crumbs. “I’m sure he was a wonderful asset to that student paper out in Topeka.”

“Wichita.”

“Whatever. But in Metropolis a reporter has to be able to get into people’s faces and make them answer questions they don’t want to answer. Can you picture wide-eyed Mr. Smallville doing that? Look at him. He shouldn’t be standing way over there staring at the wall, waiting for us to make up our minds about him. Does he have his fingers in his ears? No, wait, he’s taking them out now. He should – I don’t know – he should charge in here and *make* us understand why he’d be the best reporter we ever had.”

“Like you did.”

“And I was right, wasn’t I?”

Perry turned back from the window. “You were right. And he wouldn’t be like you. He’d need training. But if Max likes him, then maybe there’s more to this boy than meets the eye. Maybe people are going to want to tell him things they wouldn’t say to a reporter with a harder edge.”

“Maybe. Or maybe the city will beat that out of him in a week or two.”

“Maybe he should be part of a team. Like a good cop/bad cop thing. You send a Lois Lane in to ask the hard questions and soften the source up, and then this nice Midwestern boy appears and people spill their guts to him.”

Lois waved the form. “I’m only listening to this because I still need your signature. There’s no way I’m going to be a den mother for some cub scout. If he can’t swim on his own, I say let him sink.”

“That sounds harsh.”

“It’s a harsh business.”

Perry reached out to take the form, planted it on a relatively flat part of his desk, and

scrawled a signature across it. “Are you sure you don’t like him? He seems awfully likable to me.”

“If you’re so fond of him, why don’t you give him a test? Tell him he can have a job if he brings in a big story.”

“Like the Superman?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “That’s not going to happen. The guy probably knows less about Metropolis than most tourists. Sure, if the Superman has been hiding in a corn field somewhere, then Mr. Smallville might be just the man to find him. Otherwise...”

Clark turned away from the wall and looked into the editor’s office.

Perry stood up, handed the form to Lois, and began to pace in front of the window. “Find me the Superman and you’ve got a job,” he said, and smiled. “I wish somebody had challenged me like that when I was his age. ... Still, you’re right, it’s not a fair test. If I’m not going to hire him, I should just tell him that and not ask him to spin straw into gold for me.”

“Suit yourself,” Lois responded. “Are we done? I’ve got a Superman to find.”

LexCorp Tower, Metropolis: June 24, 1 S.

Money, Emil Hamilton had realized (somewhat to his own surprise), got old after a while.

He knew full well that some people – most people, in fact – just wanted more and more of it as they prospered. That was the conventional wisdom: You can’t be too rich. But far from being the normal human condition, this constant wanting of more money was starting to seem like an aberration to him, an illness, a kind of addiction.

Often, as he stood at this high crystal window looking down at the city below him, he felt as if he belonged to one of those remote hunter-gatherer tribes who drink themselves to death shortly after making contact with the white man and his limitless supplies of hard liquor. Before contact with the white man, intoxicants had always been rare and precious in the hunter-gatherer world. Eternal drunkenness was the reward of heroes in the afterlife. What could it possibly mean to have too much alcohol or to get too drunk? When the white traders arrived with the elixirs of their great magicians – Jack Daniels, Johnny Walker, Captain Morgan – it must have seemed like the human condition to get drunk, to want more and more.

I’ve got work to do.

Before turning away from the window he took a moment to look as straight down as the floor-to-ceiling window allowed. He always got a brief flash of vertigo from that. He thought about falling and wondered what he would think about on the way down. If he only had a few thoughts to go, what would they be? He didn’t know.

Not that it was likely to happen. The CrystaLex window would stand up to anything the city could toss at it. And it wasn’t a panel that might pop out unexpectedly; it grew from

the center of the tower itself. Some of the young staffers leaned back on their windows without the slightest thought that they were taking a chance – because they weren't. But Hamilton was too old to unlearn the lesson that high windows are dangerous.

In its own way, the office was every bit as unsettling as the vertiginous view. It was, of course, nothing compared to Lex's office upstairs, but Hamilton still felt dwarfed by it. He had done his best to fill it up with stacks of staff memos and research papers, half-completed experiments, dusty electronic devices whose purposes he himself did not always remember, once-bitten sandwiches sheltered by objects the cleaning staff was afraid to move, shelves full of parts and wires and gauges that resembled the open case of a boy's erector set, microscopes, telescopes, and a variety of other sense-extending devices. Being unable to get the climate control exactly right, Hamilton had turned one side of the office hot and the other cold, so that he could always drift into a zone of comfort somewhere. (He had gotten the idea after reading a paper about infection and fever. Salamanders had been injected with a virus and set down in a box with a heat source at one end. Cold-blooded as they were, the infected salamanders had managed to give themselves fevers by moving further up the box.)

But despite all these efforts, Hamilton had to admit that the vast majority of his office space was wasted. It bothered him, though he had a hard time explaining why.

Turning away from the cool window, he wandered in the direction of warmth.

He walked past a half-finished apparatus that constituted his only hobby, having nothing whatever to do with LexCorp or its products. It was intended to measure the solar spectrum with accuracy several orders of magnitude beyond anything achieved before. Hamilton hadn't figured out yet how he was going to get it into space, but he'd pay for it himself if he had to. The Sun had been an itch in his curiosity for years now, ever since that day in the Project when the shields went down. There had been unusual solar activity that day, and at six-month intervals since. Something was happening inside the Sun, and he couldn't help thinking that the Object had something to do with it, or it with the Object. But he couldn't figure out what it was without better data.

He touched the apparatus, thought about the Sun, and indulged in a fantasy that had been coming to mind more and more often lately: He left LexCorp, cashed out his partnership with Lex and the other Months, and devoted all his time and money to feeding his curiosity.

Knowledge, he thought. *That's my firewater, the thing I can't ever seem to get enough of.*

He was still cold, and kept walking.

Pinned to a set of partitions were huge digitally enhanced pictures of the Superman. Hamilton had been all over these pictures many times, as had the other Months, and Lex himself. The most fascinating feature of the pictures was negative: There was no heat distortion around the Superman or his trail. Apparently he did not emit unusual heat or have a hot exhaust, as a rocket or jet would. "But the speed he travels," Hamilton had

protested at the initial meeting in Lex's office, "friction alone should heat him up."

"He must slide through the air somehow without generating friction," Marquez speculated.

"If he's there at all," Luthor added. "Maybe the man is a projected image, a misdirection away from some kind of force beam that's really doing the job."

Anderson had been monitoring the media coverage through an earphone and a laptop computer. "I don't think so," she injected. "Lois Lane spoke to him. That would be hard to do with a projected image. Close up there would at least be some sort of flicker. She hasn't claimed to have touched him, so we can't be sure. But she's a trained observer, hard to fool. She saw him on the ground, spoke to him, and watched him fly away."

"Maybe she's in on it," Marquez suggested.

Hamilton had been in a daze through most of that meeting. The shock of thinking that he was going to watch thousands of people die, the shock of thinking that it would be largely his fault when they did, and then to be bailed out by an almost supernatural intervention – he still hadn't processed it all.

"I picked her out of the press pool myself," Lex said. "They would have to have gotten to her in the last three days. There's no way the plane itself could have been projecting him, is there? There's an awesome amount of computing power in there."

"No," Hamilton said, not taking his eyes away from the picture, was had been projected wall-sized onto a screen in Luthor's office. "The software testing was done with an even more awesome amount of computing power. We were able to use brute-force techniques that were completely impractical before crystals. The wing computer was flawless until the power surge, and then it shut down. I wouldn't say it's not capable of projecting a convincing hologram, but it didn't."

Now, looking at a more enhanced version of the same photos in his own office, Hamilton still hadn't processed it. Who was this man? Hamilton was convinced, for reasons he could not explain, that it was a man and not a machine or a clever illusion. Why had he saved those people, including Hamilton himself, perhaps, and certainly Hamilton's reputation? Why had he flown away? Why hadn't he stepped forward to take credit?

Lex and the others had jumped to the conclusion that the Service was behind him, and (having no better answer) Hamilton did not contradict them. But he didn't believe it. *Why save us? Why save the plane? The passengers? The people at the Air Show? LexCorp?* The Service didn't pull these kinds of eye-catching stunts. It went against all their instincts.

Maybe he just wanted to help. Maybe it's what he does.

The whole idea was so naïve, so un-cynical, that Hamilton could only entertain it here, alone in the presence of these pictures. Standing directly in front of that vaguely man-shaped blur, Hamilton realized that he was warm now. He stopped drifting, and let

himself play out the idea's consequences. He thought about drunken Eskimos, the money-seeking masses, and his own relentless curiosity. *If it's his firewater, then he won't be able to stop. We'll see him again soon.*

"December? Going to the meeting?" Anderson had poked her head into his office. The most expensive plastic surgeons in the world were keeping her in her mid-thirties. She looked good, much better than Hamilton, who had let his hair, moustache and goatee go gray. "Geez, why do you keep it so hot in here?"

He looked at his watch and tried to remember what meeting she was talking about. "I haven't logged in since this morning. Who called it?"

She pointed a finger into the air. "Who else? The Man Upstairs."

"Go ahead," Hamilton said. "I'll catch up." Having found his comfort spot, he was in no hurry to move.

"Suit yourself."

Alone again with the pictures, Hamilton repeated to himself: "The Man Upstairs." He couldn't remember when that nickname had attached itself to the Principal. Sometime after the completion of the Tower, he supposed. Lex had not started it himself, Hamilton was sure, but he had been well aware of the symbolism of putting his home and office at the highest point in Metropolis. "If anyone wants to know who runs this city," he had said the first time he showed the Months his apartment, "all they have to do is look up."

Hamilton reached out to touch the picture in front of him. *People are looking up now*, he thought, *but not to the Tower.*

Minutes later he arrived in Lex's office. Luthor quickly brought the Months up to date on his meeting with Chicago.

"Mercy *hit* him?" Anderson could not repress her amusement.

Marquez was worried. "Are we ready for this?"

"The confrontation was going to happen someday," Luthor reminded them.

"But the Superman," Hamilton said. "He's not theirs."

"We don't know whose he is," Marquez observed.

"He'd better be ours," Luthor said. "That has to be the top priority now: Figure out how he's doing it. Find him. Get him working for us. Everyone has a weakness. Everyone has something they want. If we're the ones who give it to him, he's ours. Hamilton, you'll be the point man on this. Anything the rest of you find out goes through him."

As point man, Hamilton took notes on the observations of the others, which had not advanced far from their initial impressions. He did it through a kind of automatic writing, because his mind was elsewhere. When the meeting ended, he returned to his office, to the comfort spot in front of the pictures. He rearranged the partitions into a triangle with

the pictures facing the interior.

“The Man Upstairs,” he said. Jokes and nicknames, he knew, often captured the truths that were too outrageous for people to announce seriously. It was striking how many of the trappings of godhood had settled on Lex Luthor, the man who lived at the top of the world. Hamilton realized that he should not have been surprised by this. The world was changing faster and faster. The old religions were falling by the wayside, and all that faith had to go somewhere. Throughout history, he had observed, whenever an altar was torn down its debris got piled onto another one.

I'm guilty of it myself, he thought. I've let so many things happen. I've gone along with so much. Because he wanted it.

The Principal had made it so easy. He was so certain, so confident, so often right. *He made us rich. He made us important. This tower, this life, it's all his vision. He gave us what we wanted, and now we're his.*

Hamilton turned from panel to panel, looking at the mysterious being who had saved him from an unendurable guilt. *What if there could be another vision?* he wondered. For just a moment, his mind's eye looked down from far above. He seemed like a primitive hunter worshipping in his little triangular temple.

Very few people have the courage to be true atheists, he thought as he reached out and touched the hazy, pixelated figure. And I'm probably not one of them.

Ecuador: October 17, 10 A. S.

Yehnu meditated silently on a woven mat. If he opened his eyes, he knew, he would see the River below him, and the yellow monsters gathering near the place of the Old Tree, where he went to hear the voice of his grandfather. Their roars and rumblings had been disturbing the peace of the Land since the Outsiders had returned in their boat. He could not interpret those strange, growling words. What could such beasts have to say to one another or to the Outsiders who rode them? Were they goading one another, raising their anger to perform the act they were destined to attempt?

The monsters had arrived the day before, brought up the River by the Outsiders in large, flat boats. All night they had sat by the River, side by side, silent and motionless. The Outsiders had departed in the boats at nightfall, and did not return until the Sun was past the center of the sky. Yehnu had never seen such animals with his waking eyes, but he knew them from his vision of initiation. At first, he had believed he had seen spirit animals and had wondered what their appearance in his vision might mean. But his predecessor (the wise, Many-Traveled Teacher, how fortunate Yehnu had been to live in his presence!) had seen such monsters in other lands. They were real, he announced confidently. They had a name in the Magical Language, the language of the Many-Traveled Teacher's homeland: *bol-doz-ar*. Yehnu's vision, the Teacher had said confidently, was not of the Spirit World, but of the World-To-Come.

And now it had come, at least in part. In his curiosity, Yehnu had crept into the den of the

monsters during the night, while they slept. What animals ever slept like this? They were not only motionless, but did not even seem to breathe. They made no noise whatever, and their skins were cold and hard like stones in the water. What confidence the *bol-doz-ar* must have to sleep like this! Their very immobility announced: "Do what you will; you cannot harm me." It had taken all of Yehnu's courage to approach them in the moonlight. But they had not stirred. He had known they would not; otherwise how could he finish the vision today? (The Many-Traveled Teacher would not have approved of such thinking. "You should always *believe* your visions," he often said. "But don't *trust* them." His words, as always, had been full of depth and mystery.)

In the evening the People had left for camps farther up the River. "We will let them be," the Chief had decided after the People, silent and invisible, had watched the monsters arrive. "There is nothing here for the yellow monsters. They are too large to fit between the trees and too heavy to climb them. Where can they go? What can they eat? Either the boats will come back to take them away or they will starve. In the meantime we will stay away from them. When they have left, we will come back."

"They do not need to climb the trees or pass between them," Yehnu had responded. "They knock the trees over and walk on top of their fallen bodies. After they do this, you will have nothing to come back to. You have seen the Brown Lands. They will bring the Brown Lands to the Valley of the River."

The People had laughed at him, as they so often had laughed at the Many-Traveled Teacher. "Do your dreams tell you this?" asked the son of Tumash. His muscles were strong and he liked to be challenged. "I dreamed that your aged mother became a girl again and danced the mating dance for every man in council. Do you think it will come to pass?"

"Even if the yellow monsters could do such a thing," the Chief reasoned, ignoring the son of Tumash, "the River would not allow it."

"They will try, but it will not come to pass," Yehnu predicted. "The Son of the Son of the Mother will come to stop them with fire from his eyes."

"The Son of the Son of the Mother!" said the son of Tumash. "Enough of your fairy tales. Every old man of the People tells a different story about the Day the Green Rock Fell and the coming of the Son of the Mother. I think you all smoked the chesnah root."

"Enough," said the Chief. "I was like you – barely more than a boy – but I saw the Son of the Mother myself. He flew like a bird with great red wings."

"Tell it to the children. They will believe you."

"Enough," said the Chief. "I have decided. We will leave the yellow monsters to find their own fates, whether they starve by the side of the River or burn with fire from the eyes of the Son of the Son of the Mother. It is nothing to us. They will leave and we will return."

“I will stay,” Yehnu had said. “I will stay until I see the Son of the Son with my daytime eyes. Then I will come to tell you that the yellow monsters are destroyed.”

“I should stay to watch them eat you,” said the son of Tumash. “But I have fish to catch.”

Yehnu had climbed the Hill of Remembrance, not because he needed to remember, but because this was where the vision told him to be. He watched the Sun go down and the world become gray. He heard the Outsiders argue among themselves in the language the Many-Traveled Teacher had made Yehnu learn, the Outside Language. From this distance he could make out very few of the words, but he understood. Some of the Outsiders feared the Land at night, as if any beast in the Land could be more fearsome than the beasts they served. They wanted to get back in the boats and return the next day. One man, a chief who seemed to think himself a god, told them that they should be more afraid of him than of Land. He seemed particularly hateful towards the trees, and would not leave with all the trees unharmed.

Even though he had expected it, Yehnu startled when the magical craft of the Son of the Son landed in front of him. It was so silent, so nearly invisible. The Son of the Son got out and looked at the River and the monsters across it. No one who saw him could have doubted who he was, Yehnu was certain. He seemed as young as the son of Tumash, and yet the energy of the Sun was so strong in him that Yehnu almost could not bear to look at his aura. He wore the clothes of the Outside, like those that the Teacher had hidden away.

The Son of the Son spoke to himself in the Magical Language. On the Day the Green Rock Fell, the Son of the Mother and the Many-Traveled Teacher had conversed in this language. The Teacher often had spoken to himself in this language, when he thought Yehnu was not listening. Yehnu had learned the music of the Magical Language and some of its words, but not their meanings.

“Welcome be to you, Son of the Son of the Mother,” Yehnu said in the Outside Language.

If he had needed any proof that he was dealing with a god, he received it when the Son of the Son jumped higher than any mortal being could. He quickly shouted a string of words from the Magical Language. Yehnu recognized them as the Spell Against Misfortune which the Many-Traveled Teacher had invoked often in times of stress.

“I can’t believe I landed right in front of you,” the Son of the Son said in the Outside Language. He spoke it haltingly. Clearly his mind worked in the Magical Language, as a god’s would. Even the Outside Language was inadequate to capture his thoughts. “What are you doing here?”

“The vision told me you would come, and so I waited here for you.”

“*You* knew that I would come? *I* didn’t even know that I would come. I shouldn’t be here at all. I don’t know what I’m going to tell Mom when I get home.”

Yehnu struggled with the meaning of this statement, but he feared that he had given offense. "I am your servant. I thank you for coming to us in our time of danger." He knelt down and placed his forehead on the ground between the god's feet.

"Hey, stop that!" Yehnu felt powerful hands on his shoulders, lifting him upright. "Don't do that any more," the Son of the Son ordered.

Yehnu stood helpless in the face of such power. He dared not kneel again, but how could he stand upright in the face of divine displeasure? He felt his knees tremble.

The Son of the Son talked to himself again in the Magical Language. Finally he said, "Hey, it's all right. I don't want to hurt you. I'm just confused."

It was as the Teacher had often said: the world of the gods is so exalted that they have trouble understanding our inferior world. Yehnu had never believed this before, but now the Son of the Son seemed to be saying the same thing.

"Catch me up. You know who I am?" He spoke the Outside Language with more confidence now. Yehnu wondered if the god's experience was like his own, when he returned from the Spirit World and did not immediately remember how to speak to the People.

"You are the Son of the Son of the Mother. Your father saved the People on the Day the Green Rock Fell, as the vision had told me. Today the People are in danger from the yellow monsters, and you have come to save us again. I have seen this as well."

"Wait. Wait. Wait. You met my Dad?"

Yehnu nodded. He made the whistling noise and pantomimed flying through the air, as the dancers did when they recounted the story of the Son of the Mother.

"I guess you did. And how do you know I'm his son?"

The gods often test their servants. "I see the power of the Sun in you," Yehnu said, hoping it was the right answer.

The Son of the Son fell silent. He walked a few paces in one direction and then back in the other, his arms folded over his chest as if they could hide the light shining from within. "And you think I'm here to do what?"

"You will burn the yellow monsters with fire from your eyes. So will the Land and the People be saved. I have seen this."

As if in comment, several of the yellow monsters roared at once. The argument among the humans seemed to be over. One monster moved haltingly forward, knocking a tree to the ground as effortlessly as a man might swat a fly.

"I don't have heat vision," the Son of the Son protested. "But ... what are they doing here anyway? This area is supposed to be protected. That's what Leslie's article said."

"You are the protection of the Land. The River has brought you to save us."

The Son of the Son said a single word in the Magical Language.

“So you’ve seen all this?” he asked in the Outside Language.

“The Powers have blessed me with vision.”

The Son of the Son shivered across his entire body. Yehnu saw the light of the Sun inside him flicker like a campfire and then burn brighter. He said something three times in the Magical Language. The music of his voice expressed deep feeling, and Yehnu was certain this was a spell of great power. The shaman repeated the sounds many times within his mind, so that he would not forget. It sounded like: *Ma-miz-gun-na-kil-mee*.

The Daily Planet Building, Metropolis: June 24, 1 S.

Clark Kent’s cheeks were flushed and he seemed agitated when he re-entered the editor’s office. Perry was standing next to the window, puffing on the barest nub of a cigar. He watched a pigeon circle over an abandoned hot dog on the street below.

“I don’t know why I keep looking,” he said. “It’s not like he’s going to fly in the window and ask us to interview him.”

“I guess not,” Clark answered. His voice sounded nervous in a different way than it had before, like a man attempting to rise to a challenge rather than shrink from it. “But since we don’t know who he is, it’s hard to predict what he’ll do.”

“I know I wouldn’t,” the editor continued. “If I were him, I think I’d lay low, get myself a day job, and only come out when there was a space plane to save. When I did something in public, maybe I’d wear a mask like the Lone Ranger.”

Jimmy Olsen came through the door that Clark had left open and dropped a stack of pictures on Perry’s desk. “They’re not much,” he apologized. “Chasing dead ends isn’t very photogenic.”

“But it’s too late for that,” Clark observed. “Miss Lane has already seen his face.”

Perry turned away from the window. “So do it the other way: Wear a disguise on his day job and go without a mask when he’s flying around. He’d look like he wasn’t hiding anything. If nobody knew that he even had another identity, the disguise wouldn’t even have to be much.” He started to set the cigar stub down, then looked at it and rubbed it out on the ashtray. “And ... and here’s the good part. If he wore some wild, bright-colored costume when he was flying, that’s all anybody’d ever notice. They’d look right at him, but all they’d really see is the costume. Without the costume, he’d look like somebody else entirely.”

Jimmy was halfway out the door, but turned back to comment. “That’s outrageous, Chief. And you know what else? He should wear some kind of a logo on his chest. You know, like the LexCorp L or something.”

“An advertisement?” Clark asked incredulously.

“That’s totally wrong,” Perry agreed.

“No, no, no,” the teen responded. “Not an ad, a trademark. His own special mark, like a brand name or something.”

“Like heraldry, you mean.” Perry smiled. He liked this idea much better. “Like one of King Arthur’s knights.”

“Cool,” Jimmy commented. He looked from Perry to Clark and then back to Perry. “Well,” he said. “I’m out of here.” He reached up to pat Clark’s shoulder as he passed. “Hope they hire you, big guy. We could use you on the newsroom basketball team.”

Jimmy closed the door behind him. Perry gestured for Clark to sit in one of the two metal chairs facing the desk, but he continued to stand next to the window. “So how is Max these days?” he asked.

“Max? Oh, you mean ... Dr. Caldwell’s fine. He said I should remind you about Minneapolis.”

Perry smiled and chuckled. “Oh he did, did he? He probably thinks I owe him one for that.” He picked the cigar nub out of the tray, started to put it back into his mouth, and then tossed it into the trash. “Truth is, I think he owes me one. You tell him that when you see him, OK?”

“I will.”

The editor scanned the sky.

“Ever been to Metropolis before?”

“First time,” Clark admitted.

“What do you think of it?”

“Well, I expected it to be big, but I didn’t expect everything to be so new and clean. I’d always pictured Metropolis as an older city.”

“It is an older city,” Perry said. “Or at least it used to be. A lot of it has been torn down and built over in the past few years. Since the boom started.”

“I guess crystals been good to this city.”

Perry nodded as if he would have liked to argue the point, but realized he couldn’t. “LexCorp has been good for this city, or at least for its economy. If you could fly over the city like a bird, most of what you’d notice are the new, shiny things that Luthor has had a hand in: that Luthor Center they’re just finishing, the LexiCon, the LexCorp Towers. And our Sunday help-wanted section, it’s almost all high tech: LexCorp, BioSys, STAR Labs. Even Galaxy – it’s a media company, but it’s a techy media company, if you know what I mean. So I always wonder when a graduate comes in to interview: Why would you start a career in a stodgy old business like newspapers? Wouldn’t a sensible young man go into computers or optics or gene splicing or something?”

“I don’t know, maybe I’m not sensible. I’m more interested in people than in things. The

news business is a people business.”

Perry nodded, then carefully scanned the street below. “You know it hasn’t all been good, the changes. Some of those old, dirty parts of town were pretty interesting in their way. You met people there who had character, people who didn’t just step out of *GQ* or *Business Week*. Now I walk down Lafayette and everybody looks alike to me. They dress better, but there isn’t anything about them that says ‘Metropolis’. It’s just another career stop, another place to get rich. They could be transferred tomorrow to New York or Los Angeles and they’d look just the same.”

“Lowtown is still interesting,” Clark said. “But not always in a good way.”

The editor looked back and raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been to Lowtown? Not much there for a tourist.”

Clark shrugged. “I walk a lot. And there’s a lot of history there.”

“But not always in a good way,” Perry said. He turned back to the window, as if looking for a clue that would restart his train of thought. “Now, the old days were terrible. Don’t let anybody tell you they weren’t. All the money went out to the suburbs, and the city core was falling apart. It was like your hands and feet were saying ‘Stop sending all that nourishing blood in to the heart, let’s keep it all for ourselves.’ And we thought sometimes that Metropolis was going to just rot away from the inside out. They were bad times.

“But you know something?” Perry continued. “Bad times bring people together. Even if they just come together to complain and to dream about things getting better someday – still, they’re together. There’s something about that kind of community that gets lost when so many people have the money to do whatever they want. Did you ever notice that the great folk heroes, the great legends, they all come out of bad times? Take your Robin Hood or your Zorro – they’re hard-time heroes. And all the comic-book types who wear tights and fight invasions from outer space, that whole idea came out of the Depression. When the people have had a blow to their pride, when they don’t have enough hope, then they make up a hero.

“But now ... now we’ve got too many people who are too proud of the wrong things. They’ve got their money, their stock options, their luxury cars. They go wherever they want and get the best tables at the best restaurants and they’re proud of that. They think they don’t need to do anything else to prove that they’re good people, that their lives have been worthwhile. And they have hope: They hope they’ll be billionaires when their new start-up company goes public. And they have heroes. They have heroes like Luthor – and don’t get me wrong, he’s done wonders for Metropolis. I can’t complain about him. But he’s not a hero to me. People like me, we don’t have any heroes now. It’s kind of an old-fashioned notion, even. You’re being very polite sitting there listening to me ramble, but I’ll bet even you think it’s kind of funny, that old Perry White is looking out the window wishing he had a hero.”

Clark looked at the floor and frowned. Then he looked up and said, “To a lot of people you *are* a hero, Mr. White. You stayed honest. You kept *The Planet* independent. You’ve always tried to be a voice for the people nobody else listens to.”

Perry looked back and raised his hand. “Now stop that right now,” he said firmly. “I don’t listen to that kind of talk from my staff, and I’m not going to tolerate it from a job-seeker, either.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I wasn’t trying to –”

“Never mind that.” He went back to the window. “No, it’s just that ... I think it’s this Superman thing has got me going. A man who can fly and lift airplanes just jumps out of the crowd, saves hundreds, maybe thousands of lives, not to mention billions of dollars – and he disappears again without telling anybody who he is. Doesn’t make a dime off of it, doesn’t have a book to promote, doesn’t start showing up on all the talk shows. To me ... I don’t know what that sounds like to a young guy like you, but to me it’s like the comic books I read when I was a boy. It makes me hope that he’ll be a real hero, somebody who will take pride in helping people and doing the right thing.”

“Maybe he will,” Clark said softly.

Perry turned back from the window, shook his head and sat down behind his desk. “No, he won’t,” he said glumly. “In another day or two, when the focus groups say that the suspense is at its peak, he’ll make a big public appearance. And then there’ll be a Superman shoe company and Superman cologne and a Superman self-help program that gives thousand-dollar seminars to executives who want to get ahead. They’ll have a Superman sandwich at McDonalds and a blockbuster movie deal. And maybe they’ll pave over Lowtown and make a Superman theme park. And Metropolis will be cleaner and more prosperous than ever.”

After a period of silence Clark said, “Mr. White, about the job?”

Perry looked down at his desk and picked up Clark’s resume. “You know, Kent, you look like a fine young man, and I think the world of Max’s – of Dr. Caldwell’s – judgment when it comes to young people. And I’m not one to hold it against a guy that he didn’t go to Harvard or Princeton or somewhere. I got my degree working nights at Met City, you know, and most of what I know about the newspaper business isn’t anything they teach there or anyplace else.”

“But ...”

Perry sounded very tired, as if this were the end of a long week rather than just Wednesday. “But news organizations are lean and mean these days. It used to be I had the leeway to take a young man under my wing for a few months and see what he’d develop into. There was a lot of busywork to be done around a newsroom in those days, and while a guy earned his keep running stuff back to the typesetters and proof-reading and keeping the clipping files in order, he had a chance to jump into the breach in an emergency and prove what he had in him. But the computers do all that busywork now, and we’ve only

got room for a handful of proven reporters and a bunch of machines. I don't like it, myself. I'm old-fashioned. I like to have people working for me, not machines. But there you are – it's the world these days. I'm afraid I can't hire you. Not with so little experience.”

“I understand.”

“But you know, this isn't the only place to work in Metropolis, and a young person can't expect to start at the top. You go out and make yourself a name at one of the suburban papers, or one of the free weeklies, and then you come back and talk to me.”

“So there is a job here.” Clark looked uncertain, as if torn between two courses of action.

“There's always a job for a man who's made a name for himself.”

The office door opened and Lois Lane swept in. “It's all set, Perry,” she said. “I'm off – got a copter to catch.” Clark turned to make eye contact. “Didn't realize you were still here, Smallville. Have a nice life. I gotta fly.”

As suddenly as she entered, she was gone. For a few seconds Clark continued looking away from Perry, at the spot where Lois had been. The redness in his cheeks was gone, and his teeth were clenched.

“She's something, isn't she?” Perry said.

Clark turned back to look at the editor. “Mr. White,” he said. “What if I brought you a story, a big story that would make my name just like that?”

“That depends. What do you have in mind, son?”

“The Superman. What if I could find the Superman and land the first interview with him?”

Perry chuckled a little and raised a hand. “Now hold on there. Lois has been working that angle ever since that guy flew off into the sunset on Sunday. Every reporter in town is looking for the Superman. Heck, son, there are reporters in town from countries I don't even know the names of, and they're all here looking for the Superman. What makes you think you can find him?”

“Maybe he's been hiding in a corn field,” Clark answered coldly. “Not that I'd know anything about that, since we mainly grow wheat and sunflowers in Kansas.” Perry looked strangely at him. Clark shook his head briefly, as if to cancel what he had just said. “I was at the Air Show. Something I saw there gave me a hunch that I think I can follow up on. I have pretty good intuition sometimes.”

Perry stared at the young man as if he were working a giant jigsaw puzzle and wondering where this particular piece might fit. Then he glanced out at the newsroom, and at the spot on its far side where Clark had stood while Perry talked to Lois. “Maybe you do,” he said. “I never stand between a young reporter and an idea. If you bring in an interview with the Superman, you've got a job. Just don't go crashing any space planes to get it. We

tried that already.”

“Yes, sir.”

Perry nodded at Clark, who got up and began backing out of the office. “Say, Kent!” Perry barked after Clark was two steps out the door.

“Yes, Mr. White?”

He was standing behind his desk, phone on one shoulder, poised to punch some numbers into the keypad. “Did Max ever tell you how exactly what we did in Minneapolis?”

“No, sir.”

He nodded, looked down at the phone and started pushing buttons. “That’s good, son,” he mumbled. “That’s good.”

Franklin Park, Metropolis: October 17, 10 A.S.

Clark wasn’t sure how this particular woman had pierced his defenses, why she was the one he felt he had to save.

She was a jogger, a regular one apparently. She was thin and fit and had a strong heartbeat. Her red hair was not all that different from the color Lana’s had been before the gray started coming in. A glance told him that she carried no money and wore nothing valuable enough to be worth the effort of the three teens chasing her. But she had strayed a little too deep into Franklin Park, a little too close to the 38th Street leg of the triangle.

He had heard the four pairs of running feet, the hard breathing, and the racing pulses the instant he came out of the subway station. He knew the pattern well. He had interrupted many of these incidents during his first summer as Superman – and then not so many, as the local hoodlums gave up on attempting them. He had heard a number of them during the last few weeks, after he started coming back to Metropolis. He had let them all go. They were gruesome little moments, agonizing ones from which he did not let himself look away. No one had died in any of them yet, but it was only a matter of time.

But once you start interfering, where do you stop?

Bruce didn’t understand – couldn’t understand. Despite all his skill, his training, and his dedication, he had human eyes and human ears. Sharp as he was, Bruce could only see so much from his various perches and hiding places all over Gotham City. When he saw something like this, he could spring into action, maybe even make things right. And then he could resume his vigil – or not. Eventually, his human body would demand that he return to Wayne Manor for a few hours of sleep, and all the screams and footsteps would be safely out of earshot.

Deal with what is right in front of your eyes – it was a good rule for a hero with ordinary senses. It was a good rule for any human. A city full of people who dealt with what they saw would be a paradise, because *someone* sees almost everything. But *one* man, even a superman, who sees almost everything – Clark had never found a good rule for him.

At first, he tried to respond humanly. He ran at human speed to a place the jogger seemed likely to pass, hoping to do human things that would slow down the pursuit enough for her to escape. All she had to do was run past him, but by now she was so far gone into panic that she could not look at a man in her path as a potential ally, or even as an obstacle to dodge behind. When she spotted Clark, she took off perpendicularly into the brush.

I've made it worse, he thought. Like a pack of dogs, the young men instantly selected an angle of intercept, one far out of Clark's human tackling range. "Hey, you! Stop!" he yelled, and felt pathetic doing it.

His next action was not one that he weighed out. A blast of heat seemed to leap out of his eyes. It sawed a twenty-foot section off an ancient oak and dropped it neatly in front of the lead mugger, who tripped on an outlying branch and sprawled under the larger core. The other two stopped quickly enough to pick their way across, but by the time they reached the other side the woman was gone. Clark turned before they could see him watching, and walked at the pace of a man appreciating the bounties of nature. He heard them cursing their bad luck, but was well out of normal view or hearing by the time they noticed the cleanly singed wood. It would be an act of God to them, and the story (if they told anyone at all) wouldn't go far.

Nobody will notice, as long as it's just one story.

But what if it became more than one story? he wondered. What if tales of miraculous salvation became as common as rain? Would that make Metropolis a better place?

It didn't before.

He left the park, seeing and hearing everything around him: three drug deals, a 12-year-old buying a stolen gun, a pickpocket taking the wallet of a foreign tourist as he applauded a street magician, an old man having a heart attack on a park bench, a lost child screaming for his mother.

Don't be late.

Across Lafayette, the people were wealthier and some of their problems were different. Senior citizens talked on the phone to brokers selling shares of companies that didn't exist. A bored jewelry clerk found the slip of paper on which her boss had written the safe's combination. Dozens of domestic arguments threatened to turn violent. In a fabulously expensive penthouse overlooking the park, a man sat quietly in a room with empty drawers and closets. Clark would not have noticed him but for the repeated cocking and uncocking of the revolver on his lap.

He kept walking. The buildings became smaller. He turned down a narrow street, and then down a narrower one yet. He stopped in front of a five-story apartment building made of brick the color of old newsprint. He made a show of checking the number, but he could already see and hear the people he was coming to meet. He walked down the center of a narrow courtyard to the main entrance. Inside the door was a row of locked

mailboxes. He rang the buzzer, and said, "It's Clark" over the intercom.

Three flights of steps above, a small, white-haired woman waited for him in a doorway. She wore a white blouse, comfortably elegant gray pants, and just a touch of makeup. "Clark," she said as he made the final turn on the stairwell, "don't you look marvelous? Country life must agree with you. So tan, and I swear you haven't aged a day."

"Good to see you, Gladys."

She ushered him in the door and closed it behind him. "Perry's in his office. I wanted to call it a library, but you can't expect Perry to give up having an office."

The two-bedroom apartment was simple but pleasant. It had high ceilings, tall bookcases, and good natural light. All of its rooms were spotless and in perfect order except for the "office", the small second bedroom that contained a desk with a computer on it, a two-seater couch, an easy chair, and a lamp table between the couch and the chair. Like the rest of the apartment, this room was full of books, but these lived mostly in piles on the floor rather than in neat rows on shelves. Gaps in the shelves throughout the apartment indicated the nominal addresses of about a third of the piled books, but the remainder seemed to be permanently homeless.

Perry White was sitting at the desk, staring out the window. He was bald now and thin. His head looked like a mere skull. Clark could see the residue of stomach surgery and the tiny metastases scattered throughout his body. Perry held a cigar in his teeth, but there was neither a match nor an ashtray in the room. When he saw Clark enter, he took the cigar out of his mouth and set it down on the desk.

"Don't lie and tell me how good I look," he growled, but he was smiling and his eyes looked bright and clear. He swiveled the desk chair to face the recliner. "Sit down, Clark."

Clark sat. "I don't have to lie to tell you that I'm glad to see you up and around." He nodded at the computer and the stacks of books. "It looks like you've been keeping busy."

Perry shrugged. His hands stayed motionless in his lap. "A few projects. I'm doing a little writing on a political web site. I've made up a whole new identity for myself. I'm a 28-year-old graduate student at Met City. Flamingly liberal, with an acid tongue. I say some things a stodgy old retired editor could never get away with."

"You always did," Clark commented.

"Hah!" Perry expelled a one-syllable laugh. "So I hear you're keeping busy too, writing about our old friend. Are you here to ask about the good old days?"

"Something like that," Clark acknowledged.

They chatted about Superman's early days in Metropolis. Perry told stories Clark already knew, but needed a source for. Eventually Gladys brought a pot of herb tea in on a tray. Perry smiled and let Clark pour them each a cup, but he made a face after Gladys had left

the room. “Tea,” he said disgustedly. “Coffee is too strong for me now. Doesn’t taste right, either. That’s the side effect of treatment that the doctors never mention. Everything tastes wrong. What I wouldn’t give to eat a steak and have it taste like a steak.”

That blunted Clark’s momentum. He sipped his tea and tried to remember what else he wanted to ask.

“Let me interview you for a bit,” Perry said. Clark nodded and the old man continued. “Lois came through town last year with your son in tow. Good looking boy. I hear he’s a football star.”

“Not this year. He broke an ankle skiing.”

Perry nodded. “That’s too bad.” He took another sip of tea and made another face. The cup shook as he returned it to the saucer on the desk, but not badly enough to spill. “I saw Jimmy in August. I asked him about his trip to scenic Kansas.” Clark said nothing. “That’s what he said about it too. You know, I’ve been stonewalled by experts, and I have to tell you: Jimmy’s no expert. He’s got a secret. He’s doing his best to keep it, but he’s got one. You know what Nietzsche said about that?”

Clark shook his head.

“He said, ‘There are some things you should not speak of, and others about which you should not even be silent.’ Silence – it gives away the game sometimes.”

“Perry,” Clark started, “I don’t know what to – ”

The editor held up his right hand while the left stayed motionless in his lap. “Don’t. I don’t need to know. Let’s get back to your book. There’s something I’ve been curious about. A Superman book has to be a lot more than just facts. I pretty well know the facts that are available to the public. But I’m curious what you’re going to do with them.”

“You mean: Do I have an angle?”

Perry picked up the cigar and gestured with it as if it were a pointer. “Of course you’ve got an angle. You’d have to. Try as you might, you can’t write about Superman without taking a point of view. He’s too big; you can’t circumnavigate him the way you can a smaller character. Everybody who writes about him eventually has to pick a spot and describe him from that angle. If you just want to write about Icarus, then you have a simple hero story: The world is saved, the hero dies. It’s easy. The old Western heroes used to ride off into the sunset. Well, Superman falls into the Sun. Simple. But if you want to talk about his whole career – and I would if I were you, I think – then it’s not so simple. You need to sum up, make some judgments. In the long term, over the course of his career in Metropolis, what did he accomplish? Where did he go wrong? Could he have done more or better? What if a young Superman were just starting out, what would you tell him? If you’re going to do a good job – and you will, I have faith in you – you’re going to have to answer those questions. Maybe you won’t have the final answer, the one that history gives after we’re all dead, but you’ve got to have *some* answer.”

“I know. I think about it a lot, and I don’t know what I’m going to say yet.” Clark shifted his cup and saucer from one hand to the other. “Do you have some answers?”

“No. Not a one. And I’ve thought about it too.” The cigar was back on the desk and both hands were on Perry’s lap. “You know, I cried when he died. I think lots of people did, whether they admit it or not. But I’ll tell you, that wasn’t the day that broke my heart. It was the year before, after the Riot, when the Mayor asked him to stay out of Metropolis.”

“I think that broke his heart too.”

“I’ll bet it did. That’s the one thing I think I’ll always wonder about the Icarus mission: If maybe, when he realized he wasn’t going to come back out of the Sun, if he wasn’t just a little bit relieved.”

“It’s hard to say.” *Because I don’t know*, Clark thought. *I ought to know, but I can’t remember anything after the decision to go in deeper.* He pictured the incredible brightness. And then there was darkness. And in between ... just the flicker of a memory. A conversation, maybe. Or maybe just a dream. As soon as he grabbed for it, it was gone.

“But as I was saying, when he left Metropolis, that was a hard day for me too. You spend your whole career doing what you can, trying to make things better, never knowing whether you actually are or not. And then you think: Well, if even a Superman can’t make things better, what hope do the rest of us have? Maybe the world is just going to be what it is, and whatever any individual does or tries to do is just spitting into the wind.”

That seemed to be the last of Perry’s energy. He closed his eyes briefly and may even have dozed for a few seconds. Clark wondered if he should say his good-byes to Gladys and let a sick man sleep. When Perry opened his eyes again, Clark said, “I should be going. I don’t want to take up too much of your time.”

“Time,” Perry said with an indecipherable smile. “That’s the paradox of it. Every day now, I’ve got nothing but time. But how many days?”

Clark stood up. “I’m glad I got to see you.”

They shook hands and Clark turned to leave, but just before he reached the office door Perry said, “One last thing. You know, son, it’s none of my business. But I always lived by the code that if you see something, it puts an obligation on you. That’s probably why I went into journalism. I thought that if I could make people see things, they’d have to do something about it. It didn’t usually work out that way, but I’m too old to change now. So I’ll just say this, and you can just take it for what it’s worth.”

“Sure, Perry.”

“That secret of yours, you need to be more careful with it. If you’re going to hide out in the country, you can look any way you want. But if you’re going to be coming into Metropolis and talking to people, you’re going to have to change.”

“Am I dressed wrong? Out of style?”

“It’s not your clothes, Clark, it’s you. When you came in, the first thing Gladys said was that you haven’t aged a day. But she doesn’t know you the way I do, so you might not have taken it seriously. But listen to me, Clark: *You haven’t aged a day*. I’d have to study a picture before I could be sure that you don’t look *younger* than you did when you left ten years ago.”

Clark shrugged and tried to look innocent. “Good genes, I guess.”

“Too good. I know you’re not going to confirm it, and I wouldn’t ask you to. But we both know what I’m talking about.”

“We do?”

“Clark, when you threw away a perfectly fine career after Superman died, I didn’t try to talk you out of it the way I might have, because I understood. I always knew that there was a relationship between you and Superman, something way beyond just a reporter and a newsmaker. There was a reason why you were on the spot for all those stories. It was more than just good reporting. Lois went about as far as a person can go on just plain reporting talent, and you kept beating her.”

“Not all the time.”

“Often enough. Eventually I decided that you had some kind of inside connection to Superman, that maybe you were a half-brother or a cousin or something. There’s a sort of family resemblance if you get in the right light. And when the Smallville UFO connection came out, that pretty well clinched it for me.”

“Perry, I – ”

“Don’t. I don’t want to know. I used to want to know, but I got over it. Here’s my point: If you’re going to reveal all your secrets, fine. Go for it. History will thank you, I’m sure. But if not, you need to do something. Streak your hair. Put some crow’s feet around your eyes. Do whatever you need to do, but *look your age*. Somebody who looks sort of like Superman and comes from Smallville and doesn’t age – how long is it going to be before people start noticing that?”

“Not long, apparently.”

Perry waved his cigar in an exhausted good-bye gesture. “Now go, I’ve got to take a nap.”

Clark leaned toward the exit, but then looked back. “Now I’ve got the one-more-thing, Perry. I’ve got to ask: If what you were saying about Superman is right, if no individual can really change anything important, then why do you keep working? I mean, why the 28-year-old graduate student? Why bother to be a flaming liberal with an acid tongue?”

Perry put the cigar back into the side of his mouth and held it at a jaunty angle. “You don’t fight the good fight just because you think you’re going to win,” he said with surprising animation. “You fight it so that you can look at yourself in the mirror. Besides, what else are you going to do? Roll over and die?”

Ecuador: October 17, 10 A.S.

“Mom is going to kill me,” Jon repeated. He wasn’t sure how many times he had said it, but it didn’t seem to be making the situation any better, so he decided to stop.

Admittedly, Mom had never specifically said, “You can’t fly to South America without asking.” But it did sort of go without saying, Jon supposed. He wasn’t likely to get off on that technicality.

And now he found himself standing in a rain forest having a conversation in badly accented Spanish with some skinny guy in a loin cloth and beads. A guy who knew who Jon was – to the extent that *anyone* who thought Jon was a god could be said to know him. Those thoughts were a little hard to bring together. *He knows I have powers and that my father was Superman. To him that means I’m a god. He’s like an aboriginal Kryptonist or something.*

Whatever that *or something* meant, it seemed to include seeing visions of Jon’s arrival, and of him zapping the bulldozers on the other side of the river with heat vision that he didn’t have. Now he was looking at Jon the way the guys in the huddle used to do on third downs late in the game.

The good part of this situation was that at least the guys on the other side of the river – the ones with bulldozers and guns, whatever they were up to – hadn’t noticed him yet. Keeping it that way seemed like a wise strategy, much better than going over there and threatening them with heat vision when he didn’t have heat vision.

Except, what *were* they up to, anyway? Jon was certain (or as near to certain as he ever got) that he was standing right in the middle of that dot Leslie had put on the map. The curves in the river, the mountains in the distance – it all matched. The fact that this native guy had met Superman seemed like confirmation. And Leslie’s dot, he was equally certain, was well inside the protected area. By rights, there shouldn’t be a gun or a bulldozer for miles. (*There probably shouldn’t be Kryptonian crystal gliders, either*, he thought, but he decided not to dwell on that point.)

“It’s too wet to burn off,” a man wearing a military officer’s uniform barked in Spanish. “We’ll just have to knock stuff down and push it into the river.”

“No! No! No!” insisted a middle-aged civilian dressed far too well to be tromping around in the rain forest. “We don’t want people downstream wondering where all these trees are coming from.”

“I thought you had all that fixed,” argued the officer guy.

“It’s as fixed as it needs to be, but let’s not get careless. Push everything into a pile and let it rot.”

Three other uniformed guys, apparently of lower rank, stood between the bulldozers and the boat. They pointed their automatic rifles into the bush. Small apes Jon couldn’t identify peered down at them curiously. The drivers, meanwhile, looked anxiously at the

gathering dusk and discussed the dangers of the jungle at night. One focused on wild beasts, while another thought that the area was protected by a sorcerer of great power. The third believed that natives, not apes, were watching from the deepening shadows. He was sure that poisonous darts were about to rain down on them.

“They’re not supposed to be there, are they?” Jon asked.

“They are where their destiny has placed them,” the native guy answered.

“I mean ...” and then Jon thought about how hopeless it was to try to explain debt-for-equity swaps, especially since he wasn’t sure he understood them himself. *I should have brought Leslie.* Then he pictured Miss Good Cause of 10 A. S. confronting Officer Guy. *No, I shouldn’t have brought Leslie.*

One driver – either the bravest or the most frightened, Jon figured – got off his bulldozer and approached Officer Guy and the civilian leader. In a hesitant, servile manner he tried to make the case against working after dark. Well Dressed Civilian Guy hit him with the back of his hand. “All that trouble with the boats cost us too much time already. When I radio in tonight, I want to be back on schedule.”

The other two drivers didn’t wait for their representative to report back. They gunned their engines and crept forward until each had pushed aside some brush. A small tree went down surprisingly easily. *In spite of how lush it all looks,* Jon remembered from his reading, *the topsoil is thin. The roots don’t go very far down.*

Another tree fell. “That’s just wrong,” Jon said with conviction.

“You will stop them before they reach the Old Tree,” Native Guy said confidently. “I have seen it.”

It’s really not fair when other people have visions about my future, Jon thought. *I should be the one having visions about my future.* But he decided not to dwell on that point either, for fear of launching a voyage of self-discovery that he wasn’t ready to take. It was way too close to what Mom kept telling him about thinking ahead – like planning where you want to go before you take off.

“Maybe we can talk to them and they’ll listen to reason,” Jon said. “Maybe they made a mistake and think they’re someplace else.” Native Guy said nothing and continued giving him the third-and-eight look. “So, are you supposed to go with me or what?”

“I am honored to accompany the Son of the Son.”

“I mean, you don’t die or anything, right?”

Native Guy looked questioningly at him, as if this were an odd thing for a god to ask.

“After the monsters burn, I fetch water for you.”

“OK then, I guess,” Jon said in English. “Let’s just do this.” Glancing at the Kryptonian glider, he decided it was one complication too many. He grabbed Native Guy around the waist and jumped the river. On the other side the darkening jungle looked impenetrable,

but Native Guy slipped through the vegetation on some invisible path. The engine noise got louder as they approached, and was punctuated by the sounds of trees being torn up by their insubstantial roots. In minutes a pair of bulldozer headlights were shining in his eyes. The driver – the same one who had gotten the back of Civilian Guy’s hand – screamed, jumped off the machine, and ran. No one else had noticed Jon yet.

Jon climbed onto the bulldozer and waved his arms at Civilian Guy. Three automatic rifles trained themselves on him. “Excuse me,” Jon said, switching back to Spanish. *Maybe I don’t need powers to handle this*, he thought. *People have been solving problems without super powers for millions of years.*

“Wait!” Officer Guy yelled to the gunmen. “It’s just a kid.”

Civilian Guy stared Jon down. He had a dark moustache and beads of sweat all over his face. “I don’t know where you came from, but we’re not picking up strays. If you want to get home again, march right back into that jungle and forget you ever saw us. You’ve got a better chance with the snakes than with us.”

“He looks American,” Officer Guy said. “Maybe we should find out what he’s doing here.”

“I think there’s been a mistake,” Jon said. *I wonder how invulnerable I am*, he thought, looking down the barrels of the rifles. *I test all my other powers, but I never shoot myself.* “This is reserved land. No one is supposed to knock down any of these trees. Maybe you’re not where you think you are.”

Curiosity had stopped the other two bulldozers as well. Civilian Guy dragged the frightened driver off the ground by his collar. “It’s just a kid. Go kick his butt and get back on your machine. The rest of you, get moving!”

“I think you’re doing something illegal.” Jon had to raise his voice to be heard over the engines. “This land is protected. You need to stop.”

“Take your legal talk back to America,” Civilian Guy yelled back. Scared Driver Guy was moving too slowly, and Civilian Guy stalked past him. He took a pistol out of a holster in the small of his back and pointed it at Jon. The powers that allowed him to see every scratch and groove inside the barrel seemed like a mixed blessing. “People like me make the laws here. You don’t quote laws to us, we quote them to you.”

“We should radio your boss or something,” Jon suggested. “Maybe you’re just in the wrong place.”

“You’re the one in the wrong place, boy. If I kill you and bury your body under the coca we’re going to plant, no one will ever find you.”

This isn’t going well at all, Jon thought. Now that he considered his position, he realized how easy it would have been to run around in the dark sabotaging stuff at superspeed. That would have spooked the drivers – who had been doing a pretty good job of spooking each other before Jon showed up – and would have constituted a pretty clever plan.

Civilian Guy jumped up onto the bulldozer and pushed Jon in chest with the pistol. All in all, letting himself fall backward onto the ground seemed like a good idea. Officer Guy came up and stood over him. "Let's find out who he is before we kill him," he suggested. "He can't be out here by himself. There might be others in the trees."

Jon remembered the school ID card in his wallet. *If they don't know my name, I can still get out of this.* He rolled away from Officer Guy's probing hand and jumped to his feet only slightly quicker than humanly possible. *It's not too late to switch plans. If I go straight up at top speed, they'll think I just vanished. Then I can make a lot of noise in the bush and scare them off.*

"Stay where you are!" Civilian Guy shouted.

Officer Guy had drawn his pistol as well. The three riflemen were starting to advance, but he waved them back. "Don't get drawn in," he ordered. "If it's just this kid, we can handle him. If there are others, you should stay back." He turned to Jon. "Now, who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I don't care who he is," Civilian Guy said. "He's in my way." He fired. By reflex, Jon reached up and blocked the bullet with his hand.

"Oww!" he yelped in amazement. "That really stung." Jon hadn't expected to enjoy being shot, but the actual pain of it surprised him. The slug wedged between his index and middle fingers and felt like it had taken off some skin. He flung it aside. A hole appeared in the bulldozer's yellow skin and gasoline began flowing out of it. Its engine stopped. "What is wrong with you?" he said angrily. "I'm being nice, I'm talking to you, asking you nicely to stop. You didn't have to go shooting at me."

Civilian Guy's eyes got very wide and he shot twice more. Jon batted the slugs aside. That hurt too, but not nearly as much. Officer Guy held his fire and tried to figure out what he had just seen. The remaining two drivers decided they didn't need to know, and took off running in the direction of the boat.

"Shoot him!" Civilian Guy demanded. "Shoot him now!"

Jon looked at the automatic rifles, which had to be more powerful than the pistol. *Run*, he thought.

But he didn't run. Instead, Jon felt something very hot happening inside him, at a spot a few inches above his navel. He wondered if he had already been wounded, even though he hadn't heard any more shots. But before he could look down to check, a ball of heat shot up through his neck, into his head and out his left eye. The pistol turned orange and Civilian Guy dropped it with a scream. When it hit the ground it ignited the gasoline draining out of the hole in the bulldozer. In seconds the machine was covered with flames. Civilian Guy jumped down and ran. New balls of heat formed and leaped from Jon's left eye onto each of the other two bulldozers, which also erupted in flames.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

Jon sat down and braced himself for a volley of gunfire, but it didn't come. He heard three rifles hit the ground and the sound of running feet. Splashes came from the general vicinity of the boat. Squinting out of his right eye, he saw Officer Guy still standing next to him, his pistol arm pointing at an uncertain angle, not quite at Jon but not quite away either. "Run," Jon said. "I don't think I can control it."

The sound of the boat's motor was the deciding factor. Officer Guy turned away and ran. Jon closed his eyes tight and listened to the bulldozers burn as the sound of boat got fainter. When he decided it might be safe, he looked up and saw Native Guy prostrate and trembling before him.

"Um ...," he said, not sure how to get the man's attention. "It's all right. You can get up now."

Native Guy rose slowly and looked at the burning bulldozers with an expression of wonder. "We are blessed that you have come to us," he said in awe. "How may we serve you?"

Jon closed his eyes and rested for a few seconds, and then opened just the right one. Native Guy was frozen above him, awaiting his orders.

"Um, I really can't stay. But do you think you could get me that water now? I've got the world's worst headache."

Smallville: June 27, 1 S

"I feel ridiculous," Clark announced to the surprise of no one. Wearing nothing but white briefs, he stood in the middle of the Kent kitchen like a Da Vinci model – legs apart and arms extended parallel to the floor. Martha and Lana fussed around his mannequin figure, draping blue fabric over his shoulders and having minor arguments about its arrangement. The blue contrasted nicely with the red blush in Clark's cheeks.

"I've always wanted to make something big out of FabriLex," Martha said to Lana. "It's cheap enough, I guess, but it's so hard to work with. They say you should let a professional do it, but that's where it starts to get expensive."

"I made a pair of gloves two winters ago when it first came out," Lana commented. "A girlfriend and I did it just like this, with a plant mister and a hair drier, and they turned out really well. You've seen them. They're soft as cotton, but flexible like rubber. I can pick a dime up off the floor."

Jonathan observed the scene from a safely distant kitchen chair. He rested his elbows on the yellow-topped table. "Just be grateful they let you have the briefs, son," he said. "I've heard this stuff is pretty form-fitting."

"I just don't see why it's necessary. That's all."

Martha stepped back critically while Lana stood ready with scissors. "No, that's not quite right," she judged. "If we just hang it around his neck like a scarf, it will still be too loose

even after it shrinks. Maybe we should make a little slit now for his head to go through like a poncho, and then at the very end we cut it back into a crew neckline.”

“If it doesn’t come out perfectly in the back, the cape will cover it,” Lana agreed.

“Why do I even need a cape?”

“Because that’s what people saw,” Jonathan explained. “Even when it wasn’t there.”

“It’s also a good place to put a pocket,” Martha added.

Martha took the blue fabric off Clark and spread it on the table. Lana eyeballed the center and cut a six-inch slit. Then they carried it back to Clark and pulled the slit down over his head.

“We’ve been through this,” Lana said. “Perry White had it right. The way to hide in plain sight is to let people see what they want to see. You’ll be brightly colored and attract everybody’s attention, but when people look they won’t see *you*, they’ll see the image. The costume. They won’t wonder what you’re hiding, because it will look like you aren’t hiding anything.”

“I suppose he could just fly around buck naked,” Jonathan suggested. “That’d accomplish pretty much the same thing. Of course you girls wouldn’t get to have all this fun then.”

“Now it looks like a choir robe,” Martha said. She started pinning the fabric together under his right arm to make a sleeve. Lana imitated her on the left. “Hard to believe the seams don’t matter.”

“That’s the most amazing thing about it. Once it gets wet, the fabric sorts itself out somehow.”

“That Lex Luthor must be something else,” Martha speculated, “to invent things like this.”

“The instructions claim that if we wrapped him like a mummy, that would work too.”

Lana snipped away the extra fabric hanging down from the arms, while Martha got to work making legs. “We’ll need to get more red into it somewhere,” Lana said.

“Something to match the cape.”

“You could add some trunks,” Jonathan suggested. “He’d look a little less naked then. As it is I expect it’ll look like he’s wearing a union suit. Of course if that’s what you want, you should put a trap door in back.”

Lana stood back and added trunks in her imagination. “You might have something there,” she agreed. “And maybe a belt. Something yellow would be nice.” She looked up at Clark’s face and raised her eyebrows at him suggestively. “Still, maybe we want him to look naked. Probably the reason Lois Lane didn’t recognize him from the Air Show was that I had him wearing a tight t-shirt and some jeans that actually fit for once, instead of the baggy stuff he usually puts on.” She brushed a hand across the cold, rubbery fabric covering Clark’s stomach. “She probably got her eyes locked on that manly chest and

never even saw his face.”

Clark got redder.

Martha took the scissors and snipped away everything extra. “Hard to believe this stuff really works. So now we just wet it down, take the pins out, and blow it dry, I guess.”

“What I can’t believe is Clark telling Mr. White that he’d get an interview with the Superman,” Jonathan said. “That took –” he almost said “balls”, but restrained himself because of the ladies. “– guts.”

“I shouldn’t have done it,” Clark said, maintaining his cruciform pose. The inability to gesture with his arms made the words pile up inside him. “But I just got so ... *annoyed*. I mean, I know that Smallville isn’t Metropolis, and Lois Lane is ... is one of the best reporters anywhere. But ... but ... it was like she thought we didn’t know *anything* out here. She took one look at me and she knew that I couldn’t possibly be any good.”

“I think if she knew you came from a rocket ship she’d change her tune,” Jonathan said.

“That’s not it,” Clark protested. “I mean, she probably would, but that’s not the point. I *don’t* come from a rocket ship, not in any of the ways that count. I come from *here*. And that should be as good as anyplace.”

“Hold still,” Martha cautioned. She checked that Lana was ready with the other plant mister, counted to three, and then the two women started wetting down the FabriLex as fast as they could. When she got to the neckline she said, “Close your eyes,” as if her son were still a three-year-old in the bath.

“I still shouldn’t have done it,” Clark continued with his eyes shut. “I can’t go through with it. It would be selfish to take advantage of this to get a job. Not to mention unethical as a journalist.”

Jonathan tipped his chair back and put his hands behind his head. “Now, I don’t know about that. There might be a higher ethic involved here, son. Something more important than whether Clark Kent has all his ducks in a row.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pins,” Martha announced. She and Lana started on the arms and went downward, taking the pins out as the moistened fabric grew to fill in the gaps and holes. Lana seemed to be moving faster, but she could not keep up with Martha, whose experienced fingers wasted no motions.

“I mean that I think you’re right, and that Perry White and the others are right. Metropolis needs a hero, somebody who stands for something better than just a fast buck. If you’re going to be that hero, well, you know what they say: First impressions are lasting. We can’t let the big media companies decide who you are and tell people what they want them to know. If they do it wrong, you’ll never get it sorted out. We need to be out in front. We need to tell them who you are and what you stand for. If we knew a journalist

we could trust – if we knew that White or Miss Lane or somebody else were on our side and would help us, then we could make a deal with them directly. But the way things have turned out, we get a chance to do it even better. You interview yourself, decide exactly what you want the world to know, and that’s the first impression.”

“Driers,” Martha ordered. Two hair driers started blowing hot air. The FabriLex began to shrink, pulling back to a skin-tight seal.

Clark raised his voice to be heard over the electric motors. “So you think we need to do whatever we can to get Superman off on the right foot with Metropolis.”

Jonathan nodded and smiled, “Getting you a paying job and giving that Lane woman her comeuppance are just gravy.”

“Jonathan, don’t make fun of the boy. He’s serious.”

Jonathan waved off his wife’s protest. “I am too. I’m not telling him to kill anybody or steal something. I don’t even want him to lie. Not really. I just want to keep other people from lying about him.”

“It just seems like, given what we want me to represent, I should start my relationship with the city from a place of trust.”

“Trust your old man on this one, son.”

“Uh-oh,” Lana said. She was crouching behind Clark, drying the backs of his legs.

“What?” Martha asked. She twisted to get her head down near Lana while continuing to point her drier at Clark’s bicep. “Oh, I was afraid of that.”

“What?” Clark asked.

Martha added her drier’s force to Lana’s. “There’s a baggy spot on the back of the right leg. That’s what happens if it doesn’t dry evenly.”

“I don’t think it’s going to tighten up,” Lana commented.

Jonathan squinted to get a better view. “And now that you’re both back there, a couple spots on the front are starting to bag out.”

Lana stood up and came to the front. “Hell,” she said. “This is a lot harder than a pair of gloves.”

They turned off the hair driers. Clark lowered his arms. “It’s not that bad,” he said. “It might work.”

Martha orbited him once frowning. “It’s not that bad if we were making you a set of PJ’s. But if they’re going to show pictures of you on TV and put you in magazines ... well, let’s just say that you don’t look like the Superman the world’s been waiting for.”

“And the suit isn’t just to look sharp,” Jonathan added. “It needs to cling if it’s going to stay inside your body’s protective field. You’re going to wear that suit through fires and

hurricanes and I don't know what all. Even Lex Luthor can't design material that will stand up to all that on its own. The baggy parts will tear or burn away in no time."

Lana dropped onto the chair across from Jonathan. "Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all," she admitted.

Jonathan reached out and patted her hand. "Don't give up that easy," he said. "You've still got material. Try it again."

"We've got enough to try it once more," Lana responded glumly. "But I don't see why it would turn out any better."

Martha shuffled over to a third chair and sat down. "It does seem like we need a better technique. Somehow we need to get him moist all over at the same time, and then get him dry all over at the same time."

The kitchen clock made several loud ticks.

"How do the pros do it?" Clark asked.

"It takes all kinds of equipment," Lana said. "They scan your body and make a model, then put the model through a steam room and an oven. That's why only the big celebrities do it."

Clark looked at a wall, and then down at the floor. "I've got an idea," he said.

After he explained his plan, they all trooped down to the basement. Jonathan emptied the big freezer while the women cut Clark out of the failed costume and repinned the last of the blue material. When they were done, Clark lay down in the freezer.

"This is spooky," Lana said as she held the lid open. "When we open it back up, it's going to be like finding Dracula in his coffin or something."

"I won't freeze," he said confidently. "And while I'm in here getting good and cold, you can work on the insignia for the chest."

"I've been coming up blank on that," she said. "I don't know what to make."

"That's because you already made it," Clark said. His shoulders just barely fit inside the freezer, and he really did look like a corpse with his hands crossed over his chest. "It was Mr. White talking about heraldry that reminded me. Remember back in junior high when you made a drawing of me as a knight? Sir Clark of Smallville?"

"Sort of."

"Well, Sir Clark had a shield with a big S on it. That S-shield would be perfect. It could stand for Superman instead of Smallville."

"Kids," Martha interrupted, "you can talk about this later. Holding that door open is a waste of electricity."

"But that was a long time ago," Lana protested. "I don't remember what I did."

Clark laughed. “You think I threw it away? It’s in the desk up in my room. Last drawer on the right, at the bottom.”

Lana spontaneously leaned down and kissed his already chilly mouth. “You’re so wonderful,” she said. She looked almost like she wanted to cry. “Gotta go now.” She closed the freezer lid on him and ran up the steps.

Twenty minutes later, Jonathan opened the lid and Clark levitated out. He flew up the steps and out of the house to a small pond down the hill from the barn. He panned his heat vision back and forth across the surface until steam began to rise, then rotisserieed himself above it so that the condensation spread evenly across his body. Lana took out the pins he couldn’t reach himself, and then he was off to the north silo, empty now as it awaited the fall harvest. Floating in the center of the silo, he heated the metal walls until they gave off a faint red glow.

Everyone was waiting in the warm night air when he emerged from the silo. By the dim light of the pole lamp outside the barn, the blue cloth looked smooth and supple, with no trace of bagginess.

“Martha,” Jonathan observed, “you never mentioned how you’re going to get him out of that suit. Even a Superman has to take down his pants once in a while.”

“Oh, that’s simple.” Martha stretched the FabriLex away from Clark’s stomach, while Lana circled slowly around him examining the costume with a flashlight. “We just pull it far enough away from his skin to cut it into a top and a bottom.”

When Lana got behind Clark, she inhaled sharply and then exhaled slowly.

“Something wrong?” Clark asked.

“Noooo,” Lana said as she aimed the light at his backside. “No, I think it came out pretty well.”

Martha came around to see. “My, my,” she said. “I think we better get to work on those trunks.”

Smallville: October 18, 10 A. S.

It was nearly three in the morning when the Kryptonian glider arrived in the star-covered sky over Kansas.

I am so dead. The thought cycled through Jon’s mind like a mantra. *I am so dead. I am so dead. I am so dead.*

The hologram covering the entrance into Jon’s cave – or rather, Laura’s new underground fortress – winked out silently as he pushed the glider over the quarry. The cave’s mediatronic walls awoke from their slumber to provide a minimal level of lighting for him to put the glider to bed and make his way to the exit near the house. The cave also had a message for him, which went past in big letters like headlines crawling across a signboard.

JON – I COVERED FOR YOU. DON'T BE SURPRISED BY WHAT'S IN YOUR ROOM.

I am so –

It took a moment for the message's import to register in Jon's tired brain. Laura had "covered" for him. With Mom. And maybe Dad. Covered for the fact that he had been out almost all night.

Covered with what? he wondered. A good story? Did she make up a new sports team with a road trip? Create a best buddy for him to have a sleepover with? And what was in his room that he shouldn't be surprised by? He tried to check out his room from a distance, but he was too tired and his eyes still burned from toasting the bulldozers.

The door from the garage was unlocked, as it usually was. Jon opened it as quietly as he could, and then floated up the atrium to the hall in front of his room. He tried once again to peer through the wall, but his vision powers were still on the blink. There was no light under the door.

"Might as well just face it," he whispered to himself. But he floated outside for another five seconds before he pulled together the courage to open the door.

Laura was sitting on the floor next to his bed with her head tilted back onto the mattress. She wore her pink pajamas and that stupid watch of Dad's that never seemed to leave her wrist these days. Behind her, someone was sleeping in the bed, snoring peacefully. Jon raised the dimmer switch just a little, causing the amber wall to glow faintly.

The person sleeping on the bed was Jon himself.

Or at least that's what it looked like. Jon raised his hand in front of his face and pinched his own cheek, just to be certain that he had not become the title character in a ghost story. Then he considered how to proceed. Disturbing the other Jon, Jon-B, seemed like a really bad idea. He might have powers too, plus most of a night's sleep. It was Laura who had left the message, and clearly Laura had planned to be awake when he arrived. So she was the one to talk to.

She was burning up. He put a hand on each side of her overheated head and jiggled her just a little. "Laura," he whispered. "Sis. It's time to wake up now."

Her eyes went straight to high-beam when they opened, and she took several short panting breathes before she could talk. "Knives," she said in terror. "Surgery."

"It's OK. It's OK," he said softly as he gathered her onto his lap.

After a few more pants she seemed to wake up again. "Jon," she said. "I must have fallen asleep."

"Must have. Now, who is that sleeping in my bed?"

She shook a few last cobwebs out of her brain. "Oh, that," she said. She raised her left hand and looked at the watch face. Jon-B shimmered briefly before being sucked into the

watch. "I simulated you."

Something about seeing himself vanish into a watch unnerved Jon. "You what?"

"Simulated you. I couldn't figure out what else to do. You'd been out in the glider all day, and it was getting close to dinner time and Mom was getting snarky. You know that look she gets. She knew I knew what was going on. I was afraid she'd make me tell her, and I knew you weren't anywhere within a thousand miles, so what could I do? I had the Tech simulate you, right down to what you were wearing when you left. You got home just in time, ate dinner with us, and then went up to your room to study and go to bed."

Jon couldn't take his eyes off the bed's rumpled covers. "I had dinner with you and Mom? How did I act?"

Laura shrugged. "Like you do. You were moody and didn't say much. Mom wondered if you were getting sick, but your temperature was normal. In the morning she'll probably ask you how you're feeling."

The mention of temperature moved Jon's attention back to Laura. Now that she was awake she seemed noticeably cooler. He floated a little higher and carried her out the door. "Let's get you into your own bed," he said. "We can talk more about this tomorrow."

She didn't take the watch off as he tucked her in. "It's a good thing Dad's working late at the Fortress," she said. "The simulation wouldn't have fooled him for a second."

"It almost fooled me," Jon said. "And I should know better." And then he thought: *How does she know where Dad is?*

Only after he had turned out her light and returned to his own room did Jon fully realize that he wasn't in trouble – not even a little. Laura really had covered for him. By making a Jon simulation out of Kryptonian Tech. *Is there anything that crap can't do?* he wondered.

And then he noticed, for the first time in his life, that he was just a little bit afraid of his baby sister.

Metropolis: June 29, 1 S.

The woman stood on the roof of her six-story brick apartment building, looking east to the red glow on the horizon. She was already wearing her blue smock and nametag and stand-all-day shoes, but her reddish-brown hair (still damp from the shower, its gray roots newly retouched) had not yet been pulled up and tied into its workday bun.

Today was one of the good days. The rising sun's bright edge was visible through a tiny crack between the jagged teeth of the Metropolis skyline. The tallest, sharpest fang, the LexCorp Tower, refracted a rainbow of colors from the varied angles of its crystal surfaces.

Behind her, the stairwell door opened and closed softly. A male voice said, "I'm sorry. I

didn't mean to disturb you. I thought I'd be alone up here."

She glanced over her shoulder to see a tall, broad-shouldered young man carrying a small plastic bag. He might have been handsome, but he slouched and hid his face behind a ridiculous pair of glasses. She briefly wondered if she ought to be afraid to be up here alone with him, but she wasn't. She turned back to the orange sun and felt its warmth on her face. She had heard on the radio that it was supposed to get hot later on, but the cool morning breeze still hadn't gotten the message.

"Don't mind me," she said. "I come up just about every morning – cloudy, snowy, whatever. I'm even out here in the rain if it's not coming down too hard."

She imagined that she could hear him nodding. "It's a nice sunrise" he said. His voice was still a safe distance away.

"Good as it gets," she observed. "If you don't like it today, you don't like it."

"I guess I got lucky."

They watched in silence for nearly a minute.

"You can almost see the Sun move if you catch it coming over the horizon," she said. "I read in a magazine that it just looks that way. It's one of those illusions, like when you drive in the country and the puddle on the highway always looks like it's just a little way up the road. But I don't know. I like to think that the Sun really does go faster when the day starts. Like it's eager, like it can't wait to get up into the sky." *I'm probably making a fool of myself, chattering like this*, she thought. But she didn't look back to see his expression. There was no time; the Sun was already changing, becoming less red and more yellow by the second. "I guess that's why I come up here. The Sun. You go through the day in a city like this, and it's like everybody wants something from you. It's all take, take, take. And what does anybody give you back? By the time I get home at night, I always feel like all the blood's been sucked out of me, like I don't have any more. But the next morning the Sun comes up. And I think: *What did I ever do for the Sun?* Nothing, that's what. There's nothing I *could* do for it, even if I wanted to. But it doesn't care. It just keeps coming up, keeps shining. It makes whole world run, when you come down to it. Just because it can."

The stranger said nothing. He stayed far enough back that she could not hear his breath. The bag crinkled. About a second later a gust blew her hair in front of her eyes. She brushed it back and then decided to go down and finish getting ready for work. The Sun was almost completely up now, almost completely yellow.

"I'm just a babbling old lady," she said as she turned back towards the stairwell door. "A young guy like you probably doesn't have any idea what I'm talking about." She stopped and looked around the rooftop. "Now where the heck did he go?"