

Guardian Angels

by Dandello (AKA Librarian)

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Rating: T

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Banner by bistyboo1974

Kal-El had spent most of his return journey from Krypton dreaming. Dreaming of his home in Kansas, of his adoptive mother and father - the only parents he really knew. Dreaming of Metropolis, the joy of reporting for one of the greatest newspapers in the world. Dreaming of flying, using his immense powers to help. But mostly he dreamed of Lois Lane. She danced through his dreams. She sang in his dreams. She loved him - in his dreams.

The voice of the crystal starship's Artificial Intelligence intruded into his dreams, asking him to awaken. With a groan Kal-El opened his eyes. The light filtering in from the outside was golden-white. The light felt good and some of the ache in his joints began to dissipate. The pain was a sullen reminder of his mistake - leaving Earth for Krypton in hopes that the reports were true, that by some miracle the star, the planet, and its inhabitants had survived the cataclysm.

The reports hadn't been true. Rao was now a neutron star and Krypton was a shattered mass of deadly green kryptonite.

Kal-El had skimmed the planet in the starship, hoping to catch some glimpse of its former glory. It was a graveyard without bodies. There was no glory.

His last spoken words to the AI that governed the ship were: 'Take me home.' Then he fell unconscious from the pain and sickness of kryptonite poisoning.

Now the AI was telling him it was time to wake up. Kal-El stretched himself as much as he could in the confined space and looked around. Except for the bright spot of a yellow-white star, the sky was black.

He was still in space.

The instrument console shifted to an analysis of the star system he was in. Nine planets, the third one from the star was a double. An asteroid belt, four giants with multiple moons - the second one with large visible rings.

The five inner planets were rocky. Three had atmospheres. One of the double planets had liquid water. The system was too much like Earth's planetary system for it not to be.

"Why have you awakened me?" he asked the AI.

"Scans of the target planet have given anomalous readings."

"Explain."

"The terrain and coastlines do not match those previously stored in memory. Also, there is a large crystalline mass that does not match any data I have for this planet."

"Can you identify the mass as belonging to another type of planet?" Kal-El asked. The images the AI presented on the holographic display were of an Earth whose natural continents were partially submerged. He could easily trace the backbone of the Andes, the Alps, the Himalayas, the Rockies. The coasts and lowlands, all the great coastal cities, were underwater. And off of what should have been the east coast of the United States was another continent. Only what should have been the green, brown and blue of life was a sickly pale green that seemed to glow malevolently.

"The crystalline mass bears some resemblance to the current structure of what remains of Krypton," the AI stated. It had no emotions but Kal-El thought he detected a certain level of disapproval.

"You're saying that new continent is made of kryptonite?"

"Ten percent of the mass is element 126."

"How could this have happened?" Kal-El asked. It was a rhetorical question and he certainly wasn't expecting an answer.

The AI answered anyway. "It appears as though someone attempted to initiate a Kryptonian planetary transformation protocol using a contaminated seed crystal."

"And the kryptonite?"

"Contaminants included with the seed crystal will be propagated along with the seed crystal as it gathers energy and grows," the AI explained.

"Can you tell how long ago this happened?" Kal-El asked.

"Approximately three months ago," the AI said.

The starship maintained a stable interior temperature of sixty-eight degrees while he was awake. But Kal-El felt a shiver run down his spine. While he was gone on his fool's errand, someone tried to destroy the world. And whoever created that monstrous continent was either alien or had access to advanced Kryptonian technology.

"Have we been detected?" Kal-El asked after a moment.

"It is extremely unlikely. I have detected no scans using any technology known to me."

"Plot a course to Earth while avoiding detection."

"Where do you wish to land?"

"Locate the largest concentration of population in the Northern Americas. Bring us in, but make us look like a meteorite."

"Parameters laid in. Scanning for population centers. Safety protocols indicate you should strap in. This may be a rough ride."

Lex Luthor railed at the injustice of it all. The greatest mind of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reduced to petty con games and thievery. It was all that damned Kryptonian head's fault. The AI in the form of Jor-El, Superman's long dead father, had answered every question put to it. But, as Luthor realized too late, the AI had *only* answered the questions put to it. The AI, like the computer it was, hadn't volunteered anything.

That had been a mistake and Lex Luthor *never* made mistakes.

But the long and the short of it was that the damnable AI had failed to disclose certain

vital pieces of information and now Lex Luthor was in an alley in Denver scoping out a food distribution center.

His henchmen had turned on him soon after they realized what the AI had done - when they realized that Luthor didn't have access to the promised alien technologies hidden in the crystals stolen from Superman's hidden Arctic fortress. He didn't have the promised weapons or advanced transportation. He didn't have access to cheap, clean energy. He had nothing, not even access to the millions he had bilked from the widow Vanderworth before her death. All he had achieved was the destruction of most of the population of the Earth. He and Kitty had barely escaped with their lives, abandoning the others on the barren crystal continent.

Then Kitty took off, leaving him utterly alone in the world he had planned to rule.

But that was the dead past.

It was still early in the morning and the center looked deserted. Luthor knew that looks were deceiving. The manager was already inside, getting ready for the day.

Luthor straightened his tie and strode across the parking lot. It was time to get something to eat, and then... And then he would sit down and plan out what he needed to do to salvage the situation. Lex Luthor would have his way yet despite the misleading Kryptonian AI and the flying blue-clad freak.

As Luthor stood waiting for the doors to open, it occurred to him that Superman's star ship should have arrived back in the solar system already. That had been one of the AI's final announcements - a ship of Kryptonian design was approaching Earth from deep space.

Luthor could only hope that the ship's occupant was dead. It was a pity in a way - a starship would be just the ticket for him to escape this godforsaken planet and begin again somewhere where his genius would be appreciated. But without a pilot, the ship would never land.

Lois Lane rubbed the back of her neck. She was exhausted and she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a good night's sleep. It was fourteen weeks since Lex Luthor's announcement that he'd murdered Superman by sending the hero off on a wild goose chase to Krypton more than five years before. Fourteen weeks since Luthor's ultimatum to the governments of the world to capitulate to him or suffer the consequences.

No government had agreed, but a number of them offered him asylum and money to get access to the technology he boasted he had possession of.

It was thirteen weeks since Luthor made good at least part of his threat. It took only twelve hours for his alien monstrosity of a continent to grow, displacing the oceans and flooding everything that had been at less than a thousand feet above average sea level - average according to the old maps. The initial surge had taken sea water all the way to Detroit.

It took twelve hours to destroy London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Cairo, Jerusalem, Metropolis, New York, D.C., Tokyo, Peking, Hong Kong, Calcutta, New Delhi. Twelve hours to murder more than ninety-five percent of the humans on planet Earth, to destroy irreplaceable eco-systems. The cost to human society hadn't even begun to be tallied.

But that was part of Lois Lane's job. Despite everything that had happened, she was still a reporter. She still worked for the Daily Planet, even if it was based out of Denver now.

Perry White and Bruce Wayne, the Daily Planet's owner, had been among the few that had taken Luthor's threats seriously. Wayne had evacuated as many of his employees as would go to Denver. The federal government evacuated the president and his family as well as the joint chiefs. If Wayne Industries was taking Luthor's threats seriously, then at least some

members of the government felt it was wise to follow suit.

The rest of the world hadn't been as well prepared. The rest of the world had died.

It was Lois's job to document Earth's comeback. But it was hard going. Supplies of everything was low, especially food. The destruction happened in late September, as the Midwest grain harvests were underway. California's major agricultural areas were underwater. It was the same all over the world.

Luckily, the few cities that survived, survived in good shape. Colorado's population had tripled in the week before the disaster, as did Idaho, eastern Washington, Montana, and Wyoming, Alberta and Manitoba. Spokane. The upper Columbia dams were still in place. Wayne Technologies was building low-head hydro plants and wind farms everywhere it could find a place to put them.

It was going to be a cold winter without reliable access to oil and natural gas supplies, but if they survived the winter, the remaining human population might just make it - unless Luthor started making more threats.

This was the part that was giving Lois stress headaches. Luthor had stopped making his outrageous demands less than a week after the catastrophe. A military reconnaissance team had made it to the new continent and discovered the bodies of four men who had died of exposure. But there was no sign of Luthor or his female accomplice.

The recon team brought back 'soil' samples of the continent and turned some of the samples over to Wayne Technologies for analysis.

"It's radioactive," Wayne told Lois, opening the lead box he'd brought with him to the Daily Planet's offices. "The egg heads tell me it emits an unusual form of radiation, very high frequency."

She peered at the green glowing crystal in the box. "Kryptonite?"

Wayne nodded. "Element 126. The new continent is laced with it. According to my people, the radiation may not be harmful to humans in the short term, but it's extremely doubtful that any plant life will grow normally there, even if there was top soil."

"Why would he lace it with kryptonite unless..."

"Unless he lied about Superman being dead?" Wayne completed the question for her.

She nodded, glancing over at her son, Jason, who was playing in the corner with Wayne's daughter, Helena.

"I sincerely hope he was lying," Wayne said. "We can use a guardian angel about now."

"Still no sign of Luthor?"

He shook his head. "Wherever he is, we both know he's up to no good."

The AI brought the crystal starship in over what remained of west Kansas. In fact, it tore a swath out of what had been the north field of the Kent family farm. Kal-El stumbled out of the ship, and landed face first in the snow that covered the stubbly ground. After a few moments he managed to get to his feet and dragged himself to the farm house.

It least that's still standing. Maybe Mom's okay after all.

The house was cold. Not surprising considering the weather and the fact there was no power. Kal-El rummaged through the laundry room cabinet and found the old lantern his mom kept for emergencies. He lit it and did a quick inspection of the house. There was no flood damage. In fact, everything looked like it had been packed up. The sofa was covered in plastic. The kitchen cabinets were empty except for a few cans of soup and beefy noodles.

The note was under one of the cans of soup.

Clark, Ben Hubbard and I are heading to Denver to be with his family.

It was signed simply Mom. No date, no other explanation. He had no way of knowing when it was written.

He found a can opener, opened up one of the cans and ate the contents cold. His Kryptonian bodysuit was designed to keep him warm but he was still weak and he had no idea how long it would take him to fully recover from the kryptonite poisoning.

Kal-El trudged to the upper floor, to his old room. He was surprised to find his bed and clothes were still there. In fact, there were extra blankets folded at the foot of the bed as though Martha Kent had anticipated his return in the dead of winter. She had left food and blankets for him.

He didn't bother to remove the bodysuit as he wrapped two of the blankets around him and settled onto the old mattress. He breathed in the familiar scents of cedar and lavender as he drifted off to sleep.

Kal-El was awoken by the sun streaming through the bedroom window. He waited without moving as the sun's rays began to drive the last of the poison out of his system. Normally he felt energized when the sun rose, energized and ready to start his day the same way coffee energized Lois. But now he just luxuriated in the sensation of warmth against his face and hands. It had been so long since he'd felt the simple warmth of the sun, any sun.

He didn't want to get out of bed, but he finally heaved himself up and went to the closet to get some fresh clothes. Jeans, a flannel shirt, old sneakers. It had been nearly six years since he'd worn the simple clothes of home, even though most of that six years he'd been asleep in stasis. But putting on the old clothes made him feel like he'd finally, really, come home.

His old coat was still in the downstairs closet and he put it on to head outside. The farm was far more weathered than he remembered and a part of his mind started ticking off what he could do to fix it up - a coat of paint on the house and barn, repairs to the fence, hauling away the old tractor that his dad had always intended to fix but had been left sitting by the barn when Clark left to go north to meet his destiny.

Then it hit him again - Armageddon had come while he was gone on his fool's errand.

He hurried and buried the crystal starship. His powers were back, mostly, so it didn't take long to bury the ship. But there wasn't much he could do to hide the fact that something had happened in the field, something that had left bare dirt rather than corn stubble covered in snow.

That handled, he went to the barn to look around and spotted a pile of newspapers neatly stacked in the potato cellar. Mom had saved the Daily Planet for him. He skimmed through the papers at super speed. Things hadn't improved while he was gone, not that he had expected them to. Train derailments, earthquakes, tsunamis, chemical spills, terrorist attacks - all things he had tried to help with *before*.

Then he spotted it. A front page editorial by Lois Lane titled 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman.' Kal-El read through the piece at normal speed. *Lois must have been really angry to have written this.*

"Clark?" A woman's shout broke through his reverie. He headed back outside to see his high school classmate, Rachel Barnes, looking down at him from atop a handsome bay horse. Rachel was wearing a sheriff's badge on her coat. He recalled his mom telling him that she had been elected to the post before he left to build the crystal starship.

"It is you!" the woman went on. She dismounted and ran over to him, pulling him into a hug. "We were afraid... well, you know..."

"With all the mess, it took me a while to get back," Clark explained. "Mom left a note saying she was heading to Denver with Ben Hubbard."

"Yeah," Rachel told him. "They left just before Luthor... well, just before all hell broke loose everywhere."

"I've been... well, I'm not up on current events."

She gave him a skeptical look. "I thought everyone knew about it."

"There weren't any newspapers where I was."

She didn't seem to believe his explanation but she had the courtesy not to say anything.

"Let's go inside," he offered.

It only took a few minutes for Clark to start a fire in the old cast iron stove in the kitchen. With a fire going he could boil water for coffee and warm up the kitchen and living room. He had always laughed about the old stove, but every time he'd suggested to his mom that she should take it out she'd laugh and tell him she wanted to be prepared for power outages. He'd considered it a silly excuse. They had a diesel generator to keep the well, refrigerator, and furnace fan running. And it was an oil furnace as well.

Now he was grateful his mom had kept the stove.

Rachel warmed her hands on the coffee mug and Clark knew she was studying him, trying to figure out what had changed about him from the last time he'd visited Smallville. She was nearly six years older, but he wasn't.

After a long moment, she sighed. "It started September 26. There was a major blackout in Metropolis, ended up taking out most of the eastern seaboard. That's also when the *Explorer* space shuttle and its launch vehicle crashed. The EMP or whatever it was took out the controls while it was in the air." She paused and sipped the coffee. "Then Lex Luthor, that crazy man that tried to nuke California nine years ago... He announced he would cause a bigger EMP if the world governments didn't turn over control to him. He also announced he had murdered Superman and had access to technology Superman had hidden away. He said he would use that technology against anyone who tried to stop him."

"What happened then?"

"What do you think? Everyone laughed at him. Sure, Superman's disappeared, but that doesn't mean Luthor killed him. Besides, dozens of nutcases claimed to have killed him but not one of them could show a body."

"So Luthor made good his threat."

Rachel nodded. "The EMP knocked out power all over the planet. Then the water started to rise, and there were earthquakes. Now Hutchinson has oceanfront property."

"And the rest of the world?" Clark asked.

"I don't know about the rest of the world," Rachel told him. "I know that what's left of the U.S. government set up shop in Denver. Some big industrialists took Luthor's threat seriously enough to move as much of their operations as they could out here so there is somebody working on getting power back on. Hell, even the Daily Planet's up and running. We get daily broadcasts from them on how the search for Luthor's going and what's happening in putting a government together."

"And how's it been here?" Clark asked. "I mean, given everything that's happened I'm surprised nobody's moved in here just for the shelter."

"Clark, as near as we can tell, nobody east of the Mississippi made it out alive. All the planes were knocked out of the sky, the bridges were taken out by the earthquakes and tsunamis. The people who made it out of Kansas City headed for Wichita and Denver."

Smallville got lucky. We're pretty far off the beaten track. We had a few refugees and we put them up at working farms. Wayne's got a couple families living at his place, so does John Baxter and Brad Wilcox. And Martha was leasing her acreage to Wayne and Ben so it's not like the land won't be worked come spring." She checked her watch. "I have to get back to town," she announced. "Do you think you'll be staying long?"

Clark shook his head. "Not much for me here. I think I'll head over to Denver, see if I can find Mom. I'll figure out what to do from there."

He followed her outside and watched as she went to the barn and retrieved her horse. "His name's Anachel," she said with a grin, patting the animal on the neck.

"The angel of grace," Clark said. "He was Gabriel's helper when they went to talk to Mary."

Rachel smiled. "You remember Professor Lang's lectures."

"There are angels and aliens walking the Earth?" Clark chuckled. "Yeah I remember. But tell me this, Rachel. If we all have guardian angels, where were they when Luthor destroyed the world?"

Rachel sighed. "Probably working as hard as they could to save as many as they could. Miracles don't come easy, even in a world with Superman living in it. And for one without..." She shrugged. "That is always assuming you believe in such things."

"And do you?"

Rachel didn't answer. She straightened in the saddle, looking out past the barn to the north field. Clark knew that all she could see was the bare dirt, and even that now had a dusting of new snow. He wondered what she was thinking about the bare earth that hadn't been there yesterday.

After a long moment she turned back to him. "It's good to have you back, Clark."

Luthor sat in the dingy church basement shelter and glowered at the other men in the shelter who had the good sense to stay clear of him. He had already finished off the last of the food he had 'appropriated' from the distribution center two days before and now he was dependant once again on the unknowing generosity of others. With the death of the distribution center manager, security had been beefed up at all the 'stores' making it even more difficult to get food and materials. And then the food he had cached had in turn been discovered and stolen from him.

"Impossible to get good help these days," he muttered to himself. He had planned to use the food and clothes as a bribe to get access to the university library and labs. No news outlet was reporting on what was happening on 'his' continent. He had every reason to believe that, despite the havoc the Kryptonian technology had caused, the university had at least one team looking into what was happening there.

And he needed that information.

The ground began to rumble and the building shook. It was the third quake in as many days and this one was harder and longer than the previous ones. He really needed to get to the university and see what their findings were. Earthquakes were one of the predicted side effects the AI had mentioned. But, as with so many other things, the AI hadn't mentioned how hard they might be.

"Everyone, stay calm," one of the priests ordered. Luthor tried to recall the man's name. Father Mike was the one that came to mind. He looked like a younger, taller version of the actor that played Bosley on that girl detective agency show back in the seventies.

The other men settled down at the priest's voice while Luthor jotted down some notes about the latest trembler. If he was right, and he had no doubt that he was, the earthquakes were only going to get worse until the end.

"A penny for your thoughts," Mike said. Luthor looked up to see the man standing beside his cot.

"Has anyone ever told you it's not smart to sneak up on people like that?" Luthor grouched. "It could get you killed."

The priest simply smiled and shrugged.

"You have no idea what's going on, do you?" Luthor asked. "You have no idea what these earthquakes really mean."

The man looked at him, infuriatingly benign. "I'm sure you'll tell me, Mister Luthor."

Luthor felt the blood drain from his face. If the priest knew who he was, then it was only a matter of time before someone turned him in for the reward on his head, even though it certainly wasn't going to matter in the long run. What good was a reward if there wasn't anywhere to spend it?

"I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else," Luthor managed to say.

The priest maintained his mild expression. "Mister Alexander, then?"

Luthor took a deep breath and blew it out his nose. "What do you want?"

"To talk," Father Mike said. "You look like a man who needs to talk."

"Confession is overrated as solace for the soul," Luthor stated.

"Your confession is between you and whatever higher being you believe in," Mike said softly. "As for myself, I don't believe I have the authority to grant you absolution for *your* sins."

"You assume I believe in a 'higher' being?"

"Everyone believes in something."

"And if I tell you I believe the world will come to an end in just a few days?"

"I hope you're mistaken."

Luthor studied the man through narrowed eyes. He had never liked the quietly self-assured ones, the ones who were so sure of their place, so sure of their future, so sure of everything. Chances were that the most this man had ever had to struggle was getting an A in high school algebra and turning away his seminary teachers' advances.

"What do you intend to do?" Luthor demanded, keeping his voice low.

The priest sighed and looked around the basement. "There are so few left, the past doesn't mean all that much any more."

"You didn't answer my question," Luthor hissed.

"See that man over there?" Mike asked, nodding toward a haggard man in worn slacks. Luthor studied the indicated man. He could have been anybody, a mechanic, a banker, a teacher. Anybody but Lex Luthor.

"His name is Joe Morgan. He lived in Gotham City and he was in Denver on business when his world came to an end. His mother, his son, his ex-wife, his employer... they were all in Gotham and he wasn't. Now he wonders why God chose him to live."

"And why did he?"

"Why did nine billion people die in one day?"

Luthor chose not to answer that question. It hadn't been a mistake. At least it hadn't been *his* mistake. The damned AI had betrayed him, betrayed every human on the planet. So much for the vaunted superior ethics and technology of the great Kryptonian civilization. And the

Earth's leaders, short-sighted stupid men, had refused to see the beauty, the logic, of what he offered them - Lex Luthor's benign and brilliant ruler-ship. *They* had condemned Earth's billions, not him.

Father Mike grimaced and Luthor almost suspected the other man had read his mind.

"Let's go for a walk," the priest said instead.

Outside the church there was little damage from the latest quake - surprising considering the strength of the trembler. There was even a black limousine parked on the street, gleaming in the sunlight. Luthor wondered briefly at where the owner had gotten the gasoline to run it. Supposedly supplies for frivolous uses had been cut some weeks ago. But then maybe ferrying around the master of Wayne Industries wasn't considered a frivolous use by the powers that be.

"What do you intend to do?" Luthor asked once again. He was getting tired of asking the same question. If the priest was going to betray him to the authorities he wanted to know now, so he could make his escape.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," the priest quoted.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?" Luthor asked back.

"There are those who would call that justice including, I've no doubt, our Mister Morgan," Father Mike stated. "However, that would demand that the perpetrator of this... this mass destruction die nine billion times. I doubt his mind would survive past the first dozen or so."

There was something chillingly pragmatic in the man's statement. Luthor stopped and stared at the man. Father Mike's expression was calm, maybe even a touch amused.

A trick of light against the door of the limousine caught Luthor's eye. He could see his distorted reflection in the black door panel. But where his companion should have been standing in his black clerical uniform was something tall with wings and shining armor. Something terrifying and alien.

"They say that a mortal who sees an angel's true form is doomed," the priest was saying.

Angel? The reflection was impossible. There were no ethereal beings or angels. "Is that what you are? My guardian angel?" Luthor asked, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

The creature chuckled but there was no humor in it. "Hardly. The poor being that had that dubious honor is now in the equivalent of a padded room screaming about monsters that walk on two legs."

"Then what are you?"

"An old warrior trying to keep the madness at bay for a time."

"Not fighting the forces of darkness and evil?"

There was sadness in the priest's eyes. "You assume that they're not the same."

"And the war in heaven? What about that?"

Another humorless chuckle. "The fancies of ancient writers who wished to absolve humans from their part in creating the madness."

"And what about Lucifer? Wasn't he cast out of heaven for daring to face down God and corrupting humanity?"

"He would not have considered it had he not been seduced by the excesses of humanity." The priest's face took on a stern look. "Do not blame Lucifer for what you have done to yourselves. And do not mistake your sins against your people for his against his own."

'A mortal who sees an angel's true form is doomed,' the creature had said.

"So, when do you kill me?" Luthor asked.

There was no answer. He looked and realized that the priest, or whatever, was no longer

walking beside him. Instead, a uniformed cop was standing a few feet away, frowning at him.

"Lex Luthor?" the cop asked.

"No... No, you've mistaken me for someone else," Luthor said, trying to sound authoritative.

"I don't think so," the cop insisted, grabbing his arm. "Lex Luthor, you're under arrest for suspicion of murder..."

The earthquakes were getting worse and the 'authorities' weren't saying if they knew the cause. Lois suspected they did and didn't want to cause a panic - not that the survivors of Armageddon had any energy left to panic with. Everyone Lois knew was hunkering down with their families. The city had tried to keep the schools open in the weeks after the disaster, but had finally closed them due to lack of attendance. They'd be closed now in any case for the holidays - Christmas was just a two days away.

Jason and the other Daily Planet children stayed close to their parents in the newsroom and it was the same all over. People weren't letting their loved ones out of their sights.

Lois glanced over at her former fiancé, Richard White. He still qualified as a loved one, even if he wasn't *the one*. Poor Richard. He'd been surprised then resigned, when he realized the boy he'd been raising as his own belonged to another man - one who could bend steel in his bare hands.

Jason had been the one who saved Richard's life when their car was trapped under a collapsed bridge during the first earthquake. Frail, asthmatic Jason pulled the door off the car, threw it aside and pulled his daddy to safety.

Richard would walk with a cane for the rest of his life, but he was alive, thanks to Jason.

Lois watched and smiled as Richard and Jason shared a joke. Richard was a good man and despite everything, he was still Jason's daddy.

She sighed and turned back to the story she was working on. The police were still looking for the man who murdered the manager and robbed the East Side distribution center. One would have hoped that violent crime would go down considering everything. No such luck. Last week a woman had been killed for her shoes.

A cup of coffee was set on her desk and she looked up to see Mike from the coffee shop standing there. "Short non-fat mocha, decaf, no foam, no sugar, no whipped," he said with a smile.

"You never cease to amaze me," Lois said gratefully. "Where are you even finding coffee beans, much less chocolate?"

"I have my ways," Mike said "Anything for my favorite seeker of truth."

She smiled and sipped her coffee. Mike knew exactly how she liked it.

It was strange but a cup of Mike's coffee had actually saved her life back in Metropolis, before the world ended. The day of the test launch of the space shuttle *Explorer* from its 777 launch vehicle. It was supposed to be a puff piece and she hadn't wanted to go but Perry had insisted. Then the bottom broke out of her coffee cup, spilling scalding liquid into her lap. She didn't make the launch. Everyone who did died that day when a weird power flux sent the *Explorer* and its launch vehicle careening out of control into the upper atmosphere. Both vehicles broke apart on the way back to Earth.

The newsroom phone rang and Lois heard Jimmy pick it up. In the past weeks Jimmy had bloomed into the reporter Perry had always suspected he could be.

"Denver police say they've arrested Lex Luthor," Jimmy announced, hanging up the

phone. "For suspicion of murdering the manager of that distribution center three days ago."

"They're sure it's Luthor?" Lois demanded. Other men had been picked up over the past months and been identified as the mad man, at least temporarily. A few had even claimed to have been Luthor, apparently anxious for any notoriety they could get. She didn't want to get her hopes up.

Jimmy nodded. "He was positively identified biometrically *and* by one of his former partners in crime, one Katherine Kowalski. And get this, he's demanding access to the university labs. He now claims he was trying to stop Kryptonian technology was being subverted by aliens and now threatens to destroy the planet."

"And he's the only one who can fix it?" Lois asked. She couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

Jimmy shrugged. "So he says. According to my source, he's also saying the aliens are here claiming to be angels."

"He's trying for an insanity defense?" Richard asked.

"That doesn't sound like Luthor," Lois told him. "He's too full of himself to try for an insanity plea."

"So, what's his game?" Richard asked.

Lois chuckled. "If you can't dazzle 'em with brilliance..."

"Baffle 'em with BS," Richard completed for her.

"Exactly."

As she spoke the office door opened and a tall man in jeans, a corduroy jacket, and a flannel shirt walked in. Lois paid him little attention. People were always coming and going.

Then Jimmy gasped. "Mister Kent?"

Lois's head came up and she actually looked at the man in the doorway - tall, well built, with dark hair and blue eyes hidden behind large horn rim glasses.

"Clark?"

He nodded.

"Jimmy," Lois yelled. "Let Martha know Clark's here."

Jimmy gave her a blank look, then realization seemed to hit. "Man, are we glad to see you," he told Clark as he disappeared through the door.

Clark watched Jimmy leave then turned back to Lois. "You know my mom?"

It had taken another full day for Clark to feel fully recovered from his ordeal. Rachel's visit had left him unsettled - there were so many questions he had wanted to ask and hadn't dared. He found his mom's old emergency radio. Luckily it still worked. He tuned the radio until he found a station: KDPL. The Daily Planet, out of Denver. Clark didn't recognize the name of the newsreader but one of the stories was by Lois Lane. Another listed Jimmy Olsen as a writer. Perry White was named as the Managing Editor.

At least they were alive. He wasn't sure what he would have done had he discovered Lois and all his friends from before were dead.

Lois's story was on the earthquakes that had been hitting the city. Denver wasn't known for its earthquakes, but apparently it had been hit with tremblers several days in a row. The latest one he had felt at the farm. Kansas was not well known for earthquakes either. It had prompted him to dig down and remove the sensor cluster from the starship.

Under cover of darkness, he used the array to do a more thorough survey of the planet, avoiding the kryptonite laced continent as best as he could. The readings on the new continent

were alarming. It was rooted into the ocean bottom and appeared to be actually forcing its way through the planet's crust. He wished he could use the sensors and computers in his arctic fortress, but a quick check had shown that it too was underwater. It was also little more than debris - the crystal towers were in pieces on what remained of the glacier it had been 'grown' on.

Kal-El wasn't a scientist by nature, although he was descended of a long line of Kryptonian scientists. But physics and chemistry had always bored him in school, even though he got good grades. But as he went over the sensor readings he wished he had paid better attention in class.

Then Jor-El's lessons kicked in and the readings started to make sense. He wished they didn't.

It was snowing again when Clark headed to Denver to find his mother and the survivors at the Daily Planet. He still hadn't bothered to put on the blue and red. That uniform represented hope and this was now a world where there was no hope that he could see. He wasn't going to don the Suit and give the few survivors false hope. He was Superman, not God. The dark bodysuit was more appropriate given everything.

'Miracles don't come easy, even in a world with Superman living in it. And for one without...' Rachel had said.

'It would take a true miracle to save the world this time, ' he thought as he sped west. 'Why did I leave? I might have been able to do something if I had simply been here.'

And then there was the matter of Superman's return. Considering how he had abandoned his adoptive world, would he even be welcome? Based on Lois's editorial, he doubted it.

Soon Denver was in sight. He had visited it more than once, but it hadn't looked anything like this - the city's population had multiplied due to the disaster and there was a more than passing resemblance to a third world refugee camp. There were tent cities in the major parks.

He paused above the city, staying hidden in the clouds as he extended his hearing to find Martha Kent among the millions below. Finally he found her in a small apartment that obviously housed several people, including a young child. She was asleep and beside her in the bed was a man about her age.

Mom is with a man? Who?

He looked more closely and finally recognized the sleeping man - Ben Hubbard. '*Ben Hubbard and I are heading to Denver to be with his family,* ' her note had read. The apartment obviously belonged to one of Ben's children. Equally obviously while Clark was gone on his futile mission, his mom had finally moved on, putting aside the memory of his father, dead and in the ground for the last twenty years. Had it really been that long?

He decided not to wake them. As much as he wanted to see his mom, as much as he wanted to talk to her, to let her know what he had found, it was a reunion better left to when she was alone.

He turned his attention to the other heartbeat he'd had memorized long before he left: Lois.

She was in an office building not far from the Central Business District. Many of the windows were boarded up. Many of the windows all over the city were boarded over. Denver was in even worse shape than he'd thought at first glance. Freeway bridges and overpasses were damaged. Some had collapsed while others were blocked off. What street traffic there was seemed to official, police, fire, ambulances, delivery vehicles with state and city markings.

Clark came to earth in an alley behind the building Lois was in. A small sign indicated it

was the home of the Daily Planet, a subsidiary of Wayne Entertainment.

Bruce Wayne bought the Daily Planet? Just one more unexpected change.

He spun out of the dark bodysuit into his jeans, flannel shirt and corduroy jacket. He placed his glasses on his nose and headed upstairs to the Daily Planet newsroom.

The room was far smaller than the newsroom had been in Metropolis, but there were also fewer people. He checked the room before opening the door. Jimmy was on the phone with someone. Lois was at a desk working on a computer. At another desk was a man Clark didn't recognize. The desk plate said his name was Richard White. 'White? As in Perry's nephew?' Clark wondered. About half the other desks were occupied. Clark recognized several people he had known before - Polly, Gil, Noel, Jack and Steve. The others were strangers. Perry's name was on one of the office doors, but Perry wasn't in his office.

In one of the corners of the room a play space had been set up and several children were playing there. The people closest to the play area seemed to be keeping an eye on the children.

Jimmy hung up the phone and turned to Lois and White.

"He's trying for an insanity defense?" White asked Jimmy

"That doesn't sound like Luthor," Lois stated.

Luthor?

"He's too full of himself to try for an insanity plea," Lois added.

"So, what's his game?" White asked.

"If you can't dazzle 'em with brilliance..."

"Baffle 'em with BS," White completed the aphorism.

"Exactly."

Clark swung the door open and stood in the opening, looking around the room. He took a deep breath, taking in the scents of the room - the slight ozone from the computers and printers, musty reference books, floor wax, perfume, and sweat. It smelled like a newsroom. It smelled like home.

Then Jimmy looked up. "Mister Kent?"

Lois's head came up and her eyes widened. "Clark?"

He nodded.

"Jimmy, let Martha know Clark's here," Lois ordered.

Jimmy just gave her a momentary blank look then he clapped the tall man on the shoulder. "Man, are we glad to see you," he told Clark as he disappeared through the door.

Clark stepped closer to Lois's desk. "You know my mom?"

"Yes." Lois smiled and grabbed his arm. "Look everybody, Clark finally made it back!"

The people he knew from before hurried over to join Lois, clapping him on the back and shoulders, shaking his hand, welcoming him back. The effusiveness of their greetings was a little overwhelming. He had always been the ignorable one, the invisible man everyone dismissed. It was odd and a little scary to be the center of attention when he wasn't wearing the Suit.

After a few minutes Lois shushed the others away. "We need to talk," she said quietly. She led the way to Perry's office, beckoning White to join them. The other man limped into the office and closed the door behind them.

"Clark Kent, meet Richard White. He's Perry's assistant," Lois announced. "I probably should add more, like he's a pilot and likes horror movies, but that's not exactly relevant. Richard, meet Clark, my partner a long time ago before Superman disappeared and the world came to an end."

White held out his hand to be shaken and Clark obliged. White seemed like a nice guy.

"You said you know my mom," Clark reminded Lois.

Lois crossed her arms in front of her, regarding him evenly. "Yeah, I know your Mom. She and her boyfriend live with me and my son."

"Your son?" Clark stammered. *Lois had a child?* He started to feel faint - too many shocks too close together.

"Yeah, guess what? Lois Lane is a mommy," she snapped at him. "And guess who his father is?"

Clark just shook his head.

Lois sighed and the anger seemed to drain from her. "I don't know why I should be mad at you for that. You had no way of knowing that Jor-El was wrong about our biological compatibility. Hell, I didn't figure it out until you'd been gone for more than a month."

Jor-El? She remembered Jor-El?

"Jor-El?" Clark stammered. This time it wasn't an affectation.

She ran a hand through her hair. "We thought you were dead," Lois said. "By your mom's calculations, you were overdue. Then Luthor announced he'd murdered you. That he'd sent you off on a wild goose chase to your death."

"I don't understand. Luthor told everyone he killed me?" What she was saying didn't make any sense... *unless...*

"Lois, *who* did Luthor say he killed?" Clark asked.

She didn't seem to hear him as she started pacing the floor. "When Luthor made his announcement and started making his threats, your mom called me," she said. "I didn't know who it was at first, but she said that Superman had left Earth to find Krypton. I didn't believe her and then we were in the middle of evacuating. When your mom finally caught up with me, she took one look at Jason and..."

"Jason?"

"My son," Lois explained. "*Our* son. Yours and mine. Clark, we know you're Jason's father. And we know you're Superman."

Clark's mind went blank. "You think I'm Superman?"

White chuckled. "I didn't believe it either. But he looks too much like your pictures at that age not to be your kid, and then it became pretty obvious who *you* really were when he tore the door off the car. He saved my life."

"How..." Clark was feeling faint again. He sat down hard in one of the chairs opposite the desk.

"How did we make a kid together? That should be self-explanatory," Lois stated.

"How many people know I'm your son's father?" Clark asked.

White answered. "Oh, everybody working for the Planet here, or who's met Grandma Kent."

Clark's shoulders slumped. "And how many know about my other job?"

"That's not something we've told people about, especially with Luthor on the loose," Lois said. "I'd rather he didn't know about Jason. But now that you're back, you can answer some questions, like how the hell did he get hold of Kryptonian technology and what are you planning on doing about it?"

Clark sat back, looking up at her. Those were questions he'd been asking himself and he still didn't have any satisfactory answers.

"I don't know," he said finally. "When I left, I set the security systems at my 'fortress' to

maximum. It should have required having a Kryptonian bio-signature to get past the defenses. Obviously Luthor figured out a way around that but I have no idea how. And I can't plug the AI into the fortress for an analysis because there is no fortress anymore. It's in scattered pieces under five hundred feet of water. And as for the other part... Luthor initiated what looks like a poorly conformed terra-forming program. Only the program was never meant to be used on a planet like Earth and he added contaminants that caused the program to glitch up. He overrode the safety protocols and turned it into a very slow doomsday weapon. I don't know how to stop it and there's no way to reverse the damage it's already done."

"You said it was a doomsday device," White noted.

"It was never meant to be one," Clark said. "But Luthor made it into one. The island has imbedded itself in the mantle and is ripping it apart. It's also converting magma into its mass and leaving voids. When the voids collapse, and they will, sea water will hit the magma and explode."

"And when that happens?" Lois asked.

"The planet may survive it, but nothing on it will."

"And when do you think it will happen?" White asked. "When does the world really end?"

"Forty-eight hours, maybe less," Clark told them.

"Reports are that Luthor wants access to the university labs so he can find a solution," White said. "He claims he can fix it. Do you think he can?"

Clark shook his head. "Luthor always was a blowhard. You can't rewrite the laws of physics and chemistry just because they're inconvenient."

"This from a man who violates the laws of physics on a regular basis?" Lois asked.

Clark managed a chuckle. "I don't violate the laws of physics. I just use ones that Earth scientists haven't figured out yet. But even I can't solve this problem. It's too late."

"So Planet Earth dies on Christmas?"

All Clark could do was nod.

Luthor grimaced at the restrictions the 'authorities' had placed on him. After much 'discussion', he'd been given access to the University of Denver's geology labs and two of their graduate students had been assigned to help him. Not that he needed their help - his understanding of geology was light years more advanced than theirs - but he still needed their access to the computers and the seismographic equipment.

He growled at the manacle on his ankle. He was literally chained to the desk. The security man standing at the door had key and the dour-faced schmuck hadn't fallen for any of Luthor's ploys to get him close enough that he could steal it. The students wouldn't let him directly use any of the computers, inputting the information for him instead. They were polite and attentive, but they were also adamant about keeping him away from any tools or equipment.

Their one concession, if he dared call it that, was a large white board where he was allowed to scribble his formulas without interruption. And as his own security precaution, he was writing his formulas in Kryptonian, a language much better suited for such things than any language invented on Earth.

He stepped back to review what he had already written and modified, given the new seismographic data he now had. Something was very wrong but he couldn't find the error in the equations. There *had* to be an error. He knew the damned AI hadn't given him all the information he had needed, but he had been able to extrapolate the missing information.

But the Kryptonian continent should have stopped growing. The oceans and weather should have stabilized in their new conformation. It *should* have happened that way. But despite his careful calculations, his research, his considerable thought, it hadn't.

And he didn't have access to the data in the remaining Kryptonian data crystals. As part of his 'bargaining' to get access to the lab, he'd given them instructions on how to find where he'd hidden them.

He thought it would take the blasted fools hours, if not days, to find his cache. It was found within one hour and instead of being given to him to use, the crystals had been sent to another lab.

The answers were in those crystals. He was sure of it.

The lab door opened. He didn't bother to turn around to see who it was. The interruption was simply one more annoyance in a long list of annoyances. The greatest mind the Earth had ever produced and he was chained to a desk surrounded by apes.

"Come to watch a great mind at work, or are you lost?" he grouched.

"I would love to watch a great mind at work, assuming I knew where to find one," a woman's voice stated.

Luthor turned to glare at whoever it was who dared speak to him like that. The woman was dark-haired, dressed in a business suit. She looked familiar. With her was a tall man with dark hair and glasses, wearing jeans and a corduroy jacket. The grad students were nowhere to be seen.

Then Luthor placed the woman. "Lois Lane, I love your writing," he said, forcing himself to grin. She was the last person he had expected to see. "Didn't you win the Pulitzer for my favorite article? You know the one. 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman'?"

She just stood in the doorway, arms crossed. "Shouldn't you be in prison?" she asked. "You *did* have a few years left on your two consecutive life sentences without parole."

"Well, we can thank your buddy in tights for that. He was real good at swooping down and hauling away the bad guys, but not so hot on the little details... like Miranda rights, due process, making court dates..."

"Miranda only applies if the prisoner is being interrogated," the tall man said from in front of the white board. He was putting check marks by sections of Luthor's equations. Luthor hadn't even seen him move away from Lane's side.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" Luthor demanded. "Do you know who I am?"

The tall man didn't answer but continued to study the board, checking off pieces of Luthor's work.

"I am Lex Luthor, the greatest mind in the world," Luthor announced.

"All I see is a sick old man," the tall man said. "A sick old man who decided to destroy the world when it wouldn't cave in to his greedy demented demands."

Luthor's eyes narrowed as he studied the man. Tall with black hair and blue eyes. There was something uncannily familiar about him. The man was ignoring him again and had started rewriting pieces of the equations Luthor had worked so carefully on.

"Wait a minute here," Luthor demanded. "I'm the only one on this planet who even has a clue as to what those formulas mean. You can't just waltz in here and start correcting them."

"Wrong on all counts, Luthor," the man said. The voice... the confident baritone that echoed through his nightmares. It couldn't possibly be.

"Supes?" Luthor murmured. He couldn't believe it. Superman was dead, sent to his doom

on a poisoned world by information Luthor himself had created. He peered more closely at the man. The same eyes, the same face. "Um, that's a different look for you, isn't it?" Luthor asked, trying to keep his voice from trembling. "So, how were things on the old homestead?"

"Exactly as you knew they would be," the man responded. He still hadn't bothered to look at Luthor. He pointed to the changed equations. "You didn't take into account the changes that adding kryptonite to the seed would make. The radiation corrupted the program and made the resultant mass incompatible with life."

Luthor studied the changes. The new equations made too much sense. "This can't be right," he protested.

"I wish it wasn't."

Superman put a hand inside his jacket and pulled out a crystal - it looked like one of the crystals Luthor had 'liberated' from Superman's arctic fortress. He placed one end of the crystal into another piece of crystal, this one looking more like a votive candle holder. A brief touch on one facet of the data crystal and a globe appeared in midair. The new continent sat like a cancerous growth in the middle of what had once been the Atlantic Ocean.

"The state of Planet Earth as of three AM Mountain Time," Superman said. He touched a finger to the sickly green of the new continent and it seemed to peel away, revealing the ocean floor and the damage the monstrosity was causing. It was worse than Luthor had imagined. He'd been joking when he told the priest the world was going to end. Now it appeared to be the truth.

"It's those aliens," Luthor said. "They did this. *They* corrupted the programming."

"Who are *they*?" Lois asked.

"The aliens," Luthor said. "Not him," he added, hitching his thumb toward the tall man. "The other ones, the ones pretending to be angels. They're just finishing the job, letting us destroy ourselves."

He caught the look Superman and Lane exchanged. They didn't believe him. "If you don't believe me, go find that priest that turned me in. Mike... go find Mike and use your eye tricks on him. You'll see."

Superman - Luthor couldn't help but think of him that way even though he was dressed like one of the local brainless hicks - sighed and shook his head. "You told the police and the university that you had a way to stop it. What did you have in mind?"

Luthor's mind suddenly went blank. They were asking him how to solve the problem? He mentally scrambled for an answer. "I was just putting together the data we'd need for when you got here, big guy."

"You were expecting me to show up and just fix it?"

"Well, you took care of Southern California... really pulled the fat out of the fire on that one," Luthor said. "Saved millions of lives..."

The tall man stared at him for a long moment. "You have no idea, do you? We're not talking about minimizing the effects of a nuke or an earthquake. This planet is being torn apart by a cancer you created. There is no radiation treatment, no surgery. It can't be simply cut out and it won't stop growing until it runs out of matter to convert. You made sure of that."

"But you're Superman... you can..." Luthor sputtered.

"I can do what, Luthor?" he asked. "Spin the world backwards and make it never happen? I wish to God I could. But I can't. So unless you can come up with something, like a way to neutralize the kryptonite in that monstrosity so I *can* do something, or a way to create enough starships to get everyone off the planet within the next twenty-four hours, then you'll be dead

with everyone else."

"You won't be dead," Luthor reminded him.

In response the man touched another facet on the data crystal. The globe started to change - the cracks beneath the new continent opened up and suddenly the oceans were gone - vaporized - and the planet disappeared into a haze of glowing rock and steam. The rock cooled quickly and Luthor realized the crystal continent was still there, still growing, still glowing sickly green.

There was an ineffable sadness in Superman's eyes when he finally turned back to Luthor. "Won't I?" he asked.

For once, Luthor had nothing to say.

"Do you think he'll come up with something?" Lois asked as she and Clark headed back to the Daily Planet offices.

"His life is on the line too, so maybe," Clark said. "He really is a genius. A sick, sadistic psychopath, but a genius nonetheless. It's just possible he'll come up with something that'll work. Something I haven't thought of."

"There's nothing in the crystals that would help?" Lois asked. Wayne Technologies had been the ones to find the crystals based on Luthor's less than adequate directions. To Lois's surprise, Bruce Wayne himself had handed the crystals over to Clark - apparently they were old friends and Lois suspected Bruce knew about Clark's previous job as a superhero. It was still strange to realize the quiet man beside her was the most powerful being on Earth.

Clark mulled over her question before shaking his head. "There are a few possibilities. The Kryptonians used a pocket universe they called the Phantom Zone as a high security prison. Nothing in the Phantom Zone would be affected by Earth's destruction and I have the instructions on how to build a gateway to that pocket universe."

"But there's a catch?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "Aside from the fact that it's currently inhabited by convicts whose crimes were so heinous they make Luthor look like an upstanding citizen, my father's notes indicate that the native radiation within the pocket universe is damaging, probably fatally so, to immature nervous systems. That's probably why he sent me in a ship to Earth rather than taking the whole family into the Phantom Zone when the planet began to die."

"We might be able to save some that way," Lois pointed out.

"Maybe, but if we can't save the children what's the use? Would *you* leave without Jason?" Clark asked.

Lois knew Clark knew the answer to that question. Was it only four hours since she'd dropped the bombshell of her son's paternity on him?

'When your mom finally caught up with me, she took one look at Jason and...'

'Jason?' he had asked.

'My son. Our son. Yours and mine.'

It hadn't sunk in at first. There were too many other matters to attend to first. But finally, Jason wandered into Perry White's office to meet the stranger that Mommy and Daddy had cloistered themselves with for so long. Lois watched as Clark's eyes grew moist. He knelt down in front of her son, wonder written across his face. She knew he had never expected to have a family. Coming back to find he already had one had been a surprise to say the least.

"You're Clark, aren't you?" Jason asked. "Grandma Kent's Clark?"

Clark nodded.

Jason held out his right hand as Richard had taught him. "Pleased to meet you, Mister Clark."

Clark solemnly shook Jason's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Jason."

Jason studied him carefully for a long moment. "Mommy says you're my bio...biological father but you went away. Why did you go away?"

"I was told the place I was born, a place called Krypton, was okay. I had to go see for myself but Krypton is very far away and it took a long time to get there and come back."

"Was it okay?" Jason asked. His voice was full of sympathy and Lois was so proud of him.

Clark shook his head. "There was no one there. They were all dead."

Jason reached out and hugged him. "We're here."

Lois hadn't been surprised to see tears in Clark's eyes.

"Then there's the problem of getting the people out and that can only be done from the outside. I would have to take the starship and try to find a suitable planet for emigration," Clark was saying, bringing Lois back to the here-and-now. "But the database in the crystals doesn't list a lot of suitable planets within a reasonable distance."

"Any other ideas?" Lois asked.

Clark sighed, hands stuffed into his pockets. "There is a Kryptonian story about a city that disappeared. Most people on Krypton thought it was obliterated but Jor-El believed the city was stolen by an alien of some sort. He did some research on it, had a theory on how it was done, but I don't have the technical background to finish his work. Heck, I don't even understand half of Jor-El's notes on it."

"So, Kryptonian technology has nothing for us." Lois hadn't really thought Clark could come up with a miracle but she found she was still a little disappointed. And Clark looked so despondent. He'd had such high hopes when he started scanning the crystals. They'd all had high hopes that the knowledge of long dead Krypton would be able to save them.

But the Kryptonians hadn't even been able to save themselves.

"I'm actually hoping Luthor will have some ideas we can use," Clark said. "He is nothing if not resourceful."

Clark was trying to stay hopeful, but it was hard. He honestly didn't think Luthor would come up with anything useful, but as he had told Lois, Luthor was nothing if not resourceful.

He'd been surprised to find Luthor's data crystals in the hands of Wayne technologies. Clark had been even more surprised when Bruce Wayne himself handed the crystals over to him.

"Superman should have been more careful where he left these," Bruce said.

"He was," Clark responded. "These are copies. Although how Luthor came to have copies is beyond me. As near as I can figure, he found a way to convince the Kryptonian AI that he was Superman and had the AI recreate the data crystals for him."

The billionaire shrugged. "At least it wasn't the Joker who got 'em. He wouldn't have left anyone alive."

"Thank goodness for small favors, no matter how small."

Back in Perry's office Clark scanned the crystals once again. He had spent several hours skimming the data at high speed before going to talk to Luthor. He was hoping there was something he had missed, some hint of how to reverse the damage Luthor had done.

But apparently Earth's current difficulty was a unique one. Nothing in Jor-El's review of

the twenty-eight galaxies known to Kryptonian scientists revealed any other planet that had suffered the kind of damage Earth was suffering. The closest examples were of doomsday devices released during wars of unimaginable magnitude. Entire civilizations had died when their planets were 're-formatted' on them.

But there was nothing on how to reverse the process. But then, doomsday devices weren't mean to be turned off.

He looked out the inside office window, through the drawn blinds. Jason was playing with the other children. They were so innocent, unknowing. Jason was helping one of the younger children - Helena, Bruce's young daughter. *Lois is a mommy. Bruce is a single dad.* Clark hadn't had time to ask Lois about the girl's mother. *Bruce is a daddy and so am I. Why the hell did I leave? I missed so much and now it's too late.*

Martha and Ben were watching the children. They'd shown up a short time after he met Jason.

"More than five years. I was afraid I'd never see you again," his mother said after giving him a tearful hug. "If your father were alive, he would never have let you go."

"I know," Clark admitted.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

He shook his head. "I thought... hoped... it might still be..."

"Your home?"

He shook his head. "It was a graveyard. This is my home, for as long as it lasts."

"You'll think of something," Martha assured him. "God didn't send you back to us to simply die."

"I hope you're right, Mom."

He turned back to his task. The crystals had so much information that there had to be something that would be helpful. But it would take time, even for him, to go through everything. And time was the one thing they didn't have.

"It's hopeless," Clark muttered to himself. The last time he'd felt so helpless was the day Jonathan Kent died. *'All those things I can do, all those powers... and I still couldn't save him.'* *Have I come back to Earth to watch my son die too?*

"To coin a phrase, where there's life there's hope," someone said. Clark looked up, startled. He hadn't heard anyone come into the office. Mike from the coffee shop set a cup on the desk. "Grande latte, full caff, whole milk, three sugars."

"You remembered," Clark said, wondering at how Mike had managed to escape the destruction of Metropolis. Clark recalled him as one of the staples of the city, always smiling, cheery, giving comfort and advice along with excellent coffee. Oddly, Mike didn't seem any different from how Clark remembered him - a younger, taller version of the actor that played Bosley on **Charlie's Angels**. Everyone else seemed worn and weary and Clark knew he would see the same expression on his own face if he looked in a mirror. But Mike hadn't changed at all.

Mike smiled, cheery as always. "Of course I remember. You're not exactly forgettable, even though you try hard to be."

Mike looked up at the holographic image floating in midair over the desk. "I take you haven't found anything that will help?"

Clark shook his head. "Everything requires time or resources we don't have. I don't know what to do. I've even asked Lex Luthor to help. If that's not desperation, I don't know what is." It was oddly comforting to be able to confide in Mike and it felt like something he'd done

before but he couldn't quite remember where or when. It was almost like talking to a family minister or a priest even though it had been years since he had done either.

A priest... Clark regarded Mike narrowly. "Luthor was going on about aliens masquerading as angels and a priest named Mike. Only Jimmy checked the mission Luthor had been hiding out at. There was no priest named Mike. But you're here and you shouldn't be."

"Are you asking if I'm the 'Mike' he was referring to?"

Clark nodded.

"There have always been hidden things, things beyond the vision of mortals, beyond the ken of flesh."

"You haven't answered the question."

Mike gave him another of his infuriatingly benign smiles. "You know the answer."

Suddenly Clark realized he did know the answer. Ever since he could remember Mike had been there, lurking in the background. Even in Smallville. The county clerk, the school janitor, the barista at the espresso bar.

"What are you?"

Mike spread his hands out, indicating *everything*. "This world is not God's only dominion, nor is it her first creation."

"There are more things in heaven and earth..." Clark quoted thoughtfully.

Mike nodded.

"Will Luthor come up with a solution?"

Mike shrugged. "Miracles don't come easy, but they do happen."

"We're going to need a miracle," Clark reminded him.

"Just remember that your greatest gifts, your greatest strengths, are not the ones everyone else sees. And it's going to take all your strength and more if this world is to be saved."

"Can it be saved?" Clark asked.

Mike sighed and for the first time Clark saw tension in his posture. "*She* knows all of time and space, all possibilities and probabilities. I do not. My vision in that regard is as limited as yours. But there is a *possibility*."

Luthor studied the new formulas on the board. "I can't have made that big of mistake," he kept repeating to himself. But it was clear that Superman was right. He had miscalculated the effects of the kryptonite radiation. Kryptonite was about as radioactive as basalt as far as humans and earthly materials were concerned. He knew that Superman was sensitive to it, but it had frankly not occurred to him that other Kryptonian materials would be affected in a similar same way.

And the AI hadn't said anything about it. Was it possible that the Kryptonians hadn't known all that much about kryptonite?

Superman had left the data crystals with him, along with the simple reader. Luthor was not surprised to discover the little device was only a reader. Unlike humans, Superman rarely repeated his mistakes except for the one of being overly trusting. And with the Lane woman at his side, he wasn't likely to repeat *that* mistake. And what was with those geeky glasses?

'He lived among us,' Luthor had told Kitty Kowalski at Superman's fortress. Did his human identity wear glasses? How deliciously ironic. Superman didn't wear a mask but his human identity did.

Luthor wondered briefly who it was then shrugged it aside. He had more important things to worry about at the moment - like saving his own skin from the upcoming cataclysm.

Luthor knew that if he only had time, he could no doubt devise a way to reprogram these crystals to do his bidding. But there was no time.

No time.

'Spin the world backwards and make it never happen?' Superman had asked. Luthor knew he was speaking from frustration and anger, but it was an idea. *We can't manipulate space or the matter in it fast enough to do us any good, but maybe...*

He erased the equations from the board and began to write.

"Anything?" Lois asked. Clark had been reviewing the crystals ever since they'd come back from seeing Luthor. The only break he'd taken was when Mike showed up with coffee for him.

Clark sat back in his chair. "I'm missing something." He ran his hands through his hair, mussing it even further. "With everything they knew, all the scientific knowledge they collected, *no one* ever ran across this problem? Not one of the civilizations they knew had ever had a terra-forming project that went bad on them and had to be reversed?"

"Clark, you're tired," Lois said. "Maybe if you walk away from it for a while, eat something, get some sleep..."

"There's no time."

She sighed. Lois had wondered where Jason had gotten his quiet stubbornness from. There was little doubt now that he got it from Clark.

"Clark, tired people make mistakes, miss things. Besides, your mom's going to be annoyed if you miss dinner." She jerked her head to bring his attention to the room beyond the office. It was dark, the only light coming from a single monitor - her monitor. "Everybody else left hours ago," she added.

With a sigh, Clark touched the data reader and the figures in the air vanished. He collected the crystals together and tucked them into his coat.

Lois's apartment was only a few blocks from the Daily Planet building. It was snowing and they were the only ones out on the street.

"How mad are you at me?" he finally asked. The question surprised her. Based on their conversation when he arrived, she thought he had no reason to assume she would be angry with him.

"Mad about what?" she asked. "That you didn't trust me enough to let me know your real name, or that you left without saying goodbye?"

Clark opened his mouth to say something then snapped it shut. "I'm sorry," he said after a long moment. "I thought... I never meant to hurt you. Please believe that."

She stopped and faced him. "Clark, we don't have time right now to worry about my hurt feelings. If we don't survive it won't make any difference and if we do, I'll rip you a new one then, okay?"

He chuckled in the darkness. "Okay."

It was almost like being home, Clark realized. His mom had dinner ready and even though Ben was no substitute for his father, he was a good man and it was obvious his mom had feelings for him.

Dinner was simple - roast chicken with potatoes and canned vegetables. The servings were small. Food was being rationed, as was fuel. Apparently there'd been hope that the authorities would loosen things up for the holiday, but that didn't seem to be happening.

Not that any of it will matter if I don't come up with a solution.

Lois, Martha, and Ben tried to keep to cheerful subjects over dinner. No one wanted to upset Jason but it was hard keeping up a brave front. Jason was a bright boy and he knew there was something wrong, even if he didn't know what it was.

"Grandma, are we going to end up like Krypton?" he finally asked.

"Oh, I hope not, dear," Martha told him. Jason seemed content with that and went over to the coffee table to draw while the grownups sat around the cleared off dining table. Despite the gravity of the situation, just sitting around the table with Lois, his mom, and Ben, seemed 'right'.

He took in the apartment. It was simple with not much in the way of furniture. A few toys and not nearly as many books as Clark expected - it seemed that Lois had packed in a hurry for the move to Denver. There were no Christmas decorations, even though Christmas Eve was tomorrow night.

Lois seemed to read his mind. "I honestly thought Bruce was being overly cautious and we'd be back in Metropolis before we knew it. So I only packed what we'd need for a week." She left the table and opened a trunk in the corner. When she came back she was holding a photo album. "Richard insisted we pack the photo albums. I thought he was crazy, lugging them along. Now it's all we have. Ron, Lucy's husband, was overseas and Lucy wouldn't leave without him. My dad was in D.C..."

Lois was fighting to keep from crying. Clark watched his mother rub her back, comforting her.

None of this would have happened if I hadn't left.

After a moment Lois wiped her face and opened the album. The first page revealed photos of a pregnant Lois at the Daily Planet. "Jimmy designated himself my personal photographer and chronicler," Lois said with a little laugh. The Lois in the photos wasn't smiling as brightly as the Lois he remembered. In the background Richard White seemed to hover around her. Then photos of a newborn Jason with his eyes screwed shut and a proud and tired Lois in a flowered hospital gown.

Lois's smiles were brighter in the photos as Jason grew to sturdy toddlerhood, and White was with them. Clark gave her a curious look and she smiled apologetically. "I met Richard just after I realized I was pregnant. We got along well and he was there for me when Jason was born. Eventually he asked me to marry him and I said yes."

"So why isn't he here with you?" Clark asked. He had overheard that Richard was living with Perry and Alice. Richard was the only family *they* had left after Armageddon, but Clark wasn't sure how he should feel about Lois being in a relationship with another man. A relationship that may not have happened if he hadn't been such a fool. He knew he didn't have the right to feel jealous, but he did anyway.

"The time never seemed right to actually tie the knot," Lois said quietly. "Then Luthor happened. The rest is, as they say, history. A pretty short one from the looks of it."

As Lois was speaking Martha and Ben grabbed their coats and headed for the door.

"Clark, try to get a few hours sleep, okay?" his mother ordered.

"Where are you going at this time of night?" Clark asked.

"Martha and I volunteer at the hospital. We're on the late shift this week," Ben explained as they went out the door.

So many changes and no time to assimilate them. No time.

Lois studied Clark's face. "You really do look tired," she said. "You can take my bed."

"And where will you sleep?"

She smiled. "The sofa's not so bad."

"You're sure? I mean, I don't want to be any trouble."

"Clark, you need to get some rest if you're going to pull off the miracle we need. Just don't be surprised if Jason crawls into bed with you... Now get to bed."

Clark had to admit he was more tired than he ever remembered without being exposed to kryptonite. He wasn't sure if it was mental exhaustion or physical. The kryptonite mass of Luthor's abomination was still growing. It was possible the radiation was now strong enough to get to him, even through the mass of the Earth. He didn't want to think about that.

He stripped down to his shorts in the privacy of Lois's bedroom and fell into the bed. He could smell her scent, and Jason's, in the sheets and pillows. It was strangely comforting.

I have a son. I should never have left.

He fell into an uneasy sleep.

He was flying high above the Earth. The clouds billowed white against an azure sky. Then the clouds turned dark, lightning arcing across the sky.

"It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history," a voice thundered. It was Jor-El's voice.

Another, less forbidding, voice chimed. "...there's a reason why you're here." Jonathan Kent's voice.

The two voices rang out over the thunder cracks of the storm.

"It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history."

"There's a reason why you're here."

Kal-El covered his ears with his hands to block out the voices.

"It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history."

"There's a reason why you're here."

Finally he simply screamed.

"Clark?" Lois asked. There was worry in her voice. Clark opened his eyes to see her standing in the bedroom doorway, light shining behind her.

He sat up in the bed, gratified he hadn't done any damage to the room during his nightmare.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"A bad dream."

She stepped closer. "Want to talk about it?"

"No... Yes..."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and waited.

"When I was learning to become Superman, Jor-El kept telling me that it was forbidden for me to interfere with human history," Clark said. "Not human destiny, but history. Always that specific word. I never understood what he meant. I mean why send me to Earth where I'd have all these gifts if I wasn't to use them? Why train me to use them?"

"That was your nightmare?"

He swallowed hard before going on. "Sort of. One of the last things my father, my Earth father, said to me, the last thing really, was 'There's a reason why you're here. Don't ask me what reason. Don't ask me whose reason. But whoever, and whatever, there's one thing I do know... It ain't to score touchdowns.'"

"He sounds like a wise man."

"He was."

"And the nightmare?"

He took a shaky breath. "I was flying and there was a storm. They were in the thunder, both of them. It was so loud. I felt it was tearing me apart. Like I was supposed to choose between them, only I don't know why or how. And I knew that whichever one I chose to follow, I would die."

"It was just a dream," Lois said. She had moved closer to rub his back the way Martha had done for her earlier.

"I don't think so. I think the key is there. 'It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history.' That's what Jor-El kept saying."

"But history is the past and no one can change the past," Lois said. "Can they?"

"I guess it must be possible, otherwise Jor-El wouldn't have forbidden me to do it."

"So, how would you do it, go back in time I mean?"

"I'm not sure. I'll check the crystals in the morning and see what they have on it."

He settled back on the mattress and she stood to leave. Suddenly he was worried again. The immanence of his death had felt so real.

"Lois, please stay."

She gave him an odd look, between worried and curious.

"No... I just don't want to be alone right now."

Lois relaxed and smiled at him. She slipped off her blouse and trousers and slid into bed beside him.

He fell asleep listening to her gentle breathing.

Luthor stepped back and reviewed the equations he'd worked all night on. The two grad students set to watch him were asleep at their desks and the physics students who had come in to watch were still slack-jawed as they tried to make sense of it.

It had taken Luthor hours to tease the information out of the AI's data banks. A lesser intellect wouldn't have been able to do it at all. He'd had to approach it indirectly - the AI hadn't wanted to divulge the information he needed. But finally Luthor was able to step back and take a deep breath.

The equations were elegant in their simple complexity, revealing an underlying structure to the universe that was unlike any theory Luthor had ever heard about. It was both thrilling and frightening to realize that his continued existence depended on understanding something the human mind was not prepared to comprehend.

But he, Lex Luthor, had done it.

He sat down and began to contemplate how he was going to take advantage of his new knowledge of the universe.

Lois awoke to find she was alone in her bed. She got up, put on her robe and padded out to the living room. Clark was seated at the dining table, going over the Kryptonian data again while Jason watched in rapt attention.

She took a moment to watch the two of them together. *No time. No time to get to know his son. No time for anything.* Lois noted he still looked tired. Last night she had assumed his fatigue was mostly emotional. Now she wasn't so sure. Before he left, Superman had been able to go days without food or sleep, so long as he had sunlight to sustain him.

"Have you gotten out into the sunlight recently?" she asked.

He nodded. "It helped."

"It's Luthor's abomination, isn't it? It's poisoning you."

He nodded again then gestured to the figures in the air over the table. "I know how to fix this, assuming it can be fixed. But I need to leave in a few hours, three at most, otherwise I doubt I'll be able to do it at all."

"Do what?"

"Change history."

"You can do that?"

"I think so. It must be possible otherwise it wouldn't be forbidden."

"Why don't you leave now, then?" Lois asked. "Why risk not being able to do it?"

"I need to see Luthor, for one. It won't do much good to try to stop him if I don't know exactly what he did and how he did it," Clark explained.

"Like he's going to just tell you?"

Clark actually smiled. "Well, he might not be willing to tell me, but I have great faith in your powers of persuasion."

"Let me throw on my clothes and drop Jason off at the office," she responded.

Repairing the damage Luthor did was going to be more complex and far more dangerous than Clark led Lois to believe, but he felt few qualms at misleading her. If she knew how badly the odds were stacked against him... He wasn't sure what she might do. Maybe even try to stop him.

And it wasn't simply going back in time that was complex. There was the issue of stopping Luthor in such a way as to make it impossible for him to misuse the Kryptonian technology again. Simply killing Luthor was not an option Clark was willing to go with. And from Lois's description of Luthor's prison release, putting him back in prison was not an option because he had gotten out of prison on a legal appeal, no matter how questionable that appeal had been.

He had an idea of how to do it. But he was going to need help doing it.

Clark flew Lois and Jason to the Daily Planet, landing in the alley behind the building. Jason was wide-eyed with wonder.

"Wow, can we do that again?"

Clark ruffled Jason's hair. "Maybe when all this is over," he said. *But when this is all over, he won't remember ever flying with me.*

He followed Lois and Jason into the building, ignoring the surprised looks he was getting. For what he needed to do, he needed to be Kal-El, not Clark or Superman. Kal-El's uniform was close fitting gray-black with the emblem of the House of El across the chest.

The somber tones seemed to keep people at arms length.

Perry was in his office. He was one of the few not intimidated by the dark Suit. He came out and shook Clark's hand. "Glad to see you back, son. Wish it was under better circumstances."

"I'm working to change those circumstances," Clark said.

Lois settled in at her desk and turned on her computer while Jason chattered to Perry about flying with Superman.

"Lois," Clark said quietly. "I need a favor. I need a list of eleven people you know. People, who if they were called together on a jury say, would be willing to invoke the death penalty on Luthor."

Lois simply pulled out a telephone book and handed it to him. "Take your pick."

"Eleven will be enough," he said trying to suppress a chuckle.

She hurriedly wrote out the eleven names. Clark was impressed. Lois hardly had to think about it.

Her name was at the top of the list with Richard White and Perry White. Clark was surprised to see Bruce Wayne's and Oliver Queen's names on the list. He gave her a questioning look, pointing them out to her.

"Bruce lost Selena and Alfred when Gotham was leveled during the first shockwave. Queen lost his wife and his older son. I think the only reason neither of them has gone ahead and killed the bastard is the hope he might actually have a fix for what he did," Lois explained.

Clark continued down the list. He didn't recognize the other names

"Could you note down where these last six were before they evacuated?"

Lois took back the sheet and added six company names with cities. Then she noted down where the six were currently. "A hanging jury, huh?"

He nodded.

"So, when do you..." She made the sideways motion with her hand that seemed to be the universal sign for Superman flying away.

"I have a few things to do before I see Luthor," he said. He pulled a small bag from a thigh pocket and opened it to reveal twelve small thin crystals.

He took one and placed it against Lois's forehead. "Think about what happened, the disaster, the after effects, everything. Imagine it like a movie."

She closed her eyes and the crystal glowed. After a moment, the crystal went dark again.

"What is that?" she asked.

"A memory crystal. It reads and records the surface thoughts. The Kryptonians used them for affidavits, recording research, that sort of thing."

She nodded as if she understood.

Clark repeated the procedure with Perry and Richard. Then he hurried off to find the other people on Lois's list and do the other errands he needed to do before he left. He hoped President Morton wouldn't be too upset with him for having allowed this horror to happen in the first place.

Luthor was jolted from his dreams of world domination by another quake. He hadn't realized he'd even fallen asleep. His two minders seemed inured to the shaking. Instead, they were watching the holographic display of the Earth's mantle, murmuring to one another. Luthor was hit with a sudden flash of anger. *They took **my** crystals... I found Superman's hideout. I deciphered their language, their mathematics. Those are **my** crystals, **my** discoveries. I was Prometheus giving the monkeys fire. All I ever wanted was **my** cut.*

"There's little time left, Mister Luthor," Father Mike said. Luthor tried to hide his surprise at seeing the priest in the lab. No one was allowed in the lab after he kicked the physics students out the night before. They had started to argue with him over some of the ramifications of his discoveries and he'd been too tired and annoyed to put up with their foolishness.

"I'm just waiting for the big blue Boy Scout," Luthor said. "But as you can see, he's not here. Maybe it finally occurred to him that this planet wasn't worth saving. Maybe he built himself an ark for him and his chosen few."

"And where would they go, Luthor?" Superman asked. Luthor looked over to see Superman standing with the Lane woman. This time he was dressed in a dark gray body suit. It made him look stern, even ominous.

"You know as well as I do the crystals didn't list any suitable planets within a hundred light years of Earth and precious few within a thousand," Superman continued. "So where do you propose this 'ark' take them? And how many would be alive when they got there?"

Luthor shrugged. "It was just an idea, big guy. I never said it was a great idea."

Superman grimaced at him and walked over to the white board. Luthor watched as he scanned the equations and nodded.

"I see you came to the same conclusion I did," Superman said. Luthor hid his surprise. He'd seen the Kryptonian correct equations that no human - aside from Luthor - could hope to comprehend. But he still couldn't get his mind around the idea that this... man-child, this alien *boy* who dared call himself *Superman*, could simply look at equations Luthor had spent hours working through and understand them on sight. It was enough to shake Luthor's sensibilities, until he reminded himself that the *man* wasn't a man at all.

"It was the only logical solution still open," Luthor admitted. It galled him that his thunder had been stolen.

Superman nodded. "One more small task before I... do what I have to do to fix this horror."

"And what's that?" Luthor asked.

Superman pulled a small bag from a thigh pocket and retrieved a small crystal - a crystal Luthor recognized from his survey of the Kryptonian data crystals - a memory crystal.

"Think about what happened. Imagine it like a movie, starting at the beginning," Superman instructed, placing the crystal against Luthor's forehead. "When did you steal my crystals?"

What does he think he's doing, demanding that Lex Luthor give up his secrets? Luthor fumed, glaring at the tall man. He hate the curl, hated everything about him.

Luthor felt a tickle against one ear and realized that Lane had moved close behind him. "If you don't cooperate with this, I guarantee you will be begging to die long before the world comes to an end," she whispered. "So, when did you get hold of the Kryptonian crystals?"

Lois watched Luthor's eyes widen at her threat. Then the crystal glowed for a moment and went dark. Clark took the crystal and placed it against his own forehead. His expression was stony but there was a tenseness in his neck that told her he was trying to keep from gagging at whatever foulness he was getting from Luthor's memories.

After a moment Clark dropped the crystal into the little bag and put the bag in the thigh pocket. "Thank you," he said, nodding to Luthor.

"Anything for a good cause," Luthor responded. Lois wanted to wipe the smirk off his face. Instead she followed Clark out of the lab and out to the snow covered lawn in front of the building.

"Lois..." Clark began. "If I succeed, this will never have happened."

"I understand."

"I just..."

Lois pulled him into a hug. "Be careful."

"Kal-El," Mike interrupted gently. Lois hadn't even realized he had come out with them.

"It's time," Mike added.

Kal-El moved away from Lois and Mike moved closer. "A warning," the priest said softly. "There are those who believe this world should be left to its fate. That it deserves what the purveyors of madness have done. They will try to stop you."

"Then I have to be stronger, and smarter, than they are," Kal-El said. Mike reached up and pulled Kal-El closer, kissing him on the forehead. Kal-El looked surprised at the move and Lois thought, for just a moment, she saw an imprint of lips glowing on Clark's forehead.

"Just remember," Mike said, his voice growing deep and majestic, completely at odds with his appearance. But even his appearance was morphing into something tall and bright and a little frightening. "You are *never* alone," the being called Mike said.

Clark eyes had widened in surprise but then he nodded. "I have to go. Goodbye Lois." He disappeared before Lois could react.

Good bye Lois...

Clark had been surprised to see Luthor's equations on the white board - equations giving angles and speeds, all the necessary information to achieve the impossible.

It is forbidden for you to change human history.

But Clark knew he had no choice. He had to do it or die trying.

He knew Luthor was not likely to tell him when the crystals were stolen, but he also know how 'persuasive' Lois could be. She didn't disappoint him and he had no doubt she had put a fright into the mad man. When Clark checked the memory crystal he was sickened by the twisted thought processes, the self-centered egotism and hatred that flooded Luthor's mind. Thoughts recorded for all time - or until Clark chose to destroy the crystal.

It had been all he could do to keep from gagging. But now he knew when he had to arrive.

He walked outside with Lois, intending to say his good byes to her. It was snowing again.

"Lois..." he began. "If I succeed, this will never have happened."

She looked up at him, so beautiful, snowflakes decorating her eyelashes. "I understand."

"I just..."

She pulled him into a hug. "Be careful."

"Kal-El," Mike interrupted gently. Clark hadn't noticed he had followed them. "It's time."

Clark knew he was right. The Earth was running out of time. Mike stepped closer to him. "A warning," the man said earnestly. "There are those who believe this world should be left to its fate. That it deserves what the purveyors of madness have done. They will try to stop you."

"Then I have to be stronger, and smarter, than they are," Clark told him. It was as simple as that.

Mike reached up and took Clark's face in to his hands. His hands were cool, cooler than normal for a human, even given the weather. The priest kissed him on the forehead. Clark almost jerked back in surprise - the place where Mike's lips touched him burned white hot. Painfully hot.

"Just remember," Mike said. His voice changed, deepening with added overtones and undertones a human would not be able to detect. His appearance was changing as well, changing into something still humanoid, but tall and slender and alien, utterly alien. The Mike-being had wings. Clark looked past Mike to see other winged beings watching, waiting. One stood close to Lois but she didn't seem to see him/her.

"You are *never* alone," the being known as Mike added.

Clark nodded. 'This world is not God's only dominion, nor is it her first creation.' Mike had said. It wasn't just for humanity that Clark was doing this. There was more at stake than just Earth. More than he had ever imagined.

"I have to go. Goodbye Lois." Clark didn't wait for Lois's response. He shot into the air,

into the stratosphere, high above the Earth, outside the atmosphere.

The Earth was below him, and he could see the crack in the crust as it finally split open. Within seconds, there was no planet Earth. All that was left was an irregular radioactive crystal that glowed malevolently in space.

Good bye Lois...

Luthor looked up as the grad students gasped. He had allowed them back in the lab when he realized that was the only way he was going to get his crystal back. The hologram of the Earth showed a broad bright gash across the globe.

"It's really happening," one of them said. A trembler hit, more powerful than any of the previous ones. One wall of the lab collapsed, taking part of the ceiling with it. The two students didn't even have time to scream. Maybe they hadn't even tried.

Luthor grabbed the Kryptonian crystal Superman hadn't bothered to take and looked around. "Unchain me!" Luthor shouted to the guard at the door. "I can save us!"

Then he realized the guard wasn't there. Instead there stood a creature that could have only come from a nightmare - all shadow and darkness, no form, no face. Just fear and anger and hatred.

"And why would I want to do that?" The words seemed to burn through Luthor's brain as the floor of the lab disintegrated and he plummeted into the abyss below.

Lois stumbled as the trembler hit. "Jason!"

"Come," Mike said, reaching out to her. There was a feeling of warmth, the rustling of strong pinions. Then she was in the Daily Planet newsroom. She ran to Jason, pulling him into a tight hug.

"I love you," she murmured through her tears. Richard, Martha and Ben huddled close to her and Jason, as if they could protect them and each other from what was to come. Again there was a feeling of warmth, like a summer breeze.

"You are never alone..." Mike's unearthly voice murmured soft as a lover's touch. "You are loved."

Then there was nothing.

The Earth was gone. Everyone he had ever known, everything he had ever loved - gone. But unlike Krypton, maybe it wasn't forever and always.

Kal-El began to move faster, faster than he had ever moved before. Fast enough that that he was vibrating himself and the bubble of space-time around him until they were both out of phase with the 'real' universe. He could see Luthor's equations in his mind, the 'time' and 'direction' components. He aligned himself with going 'back' and began to move along that axis.

It was tough. Nothing in the Kryptonian data or Luthor's equations had indicated there was a 'resistance' component. Images appeared around him. Was he back on Earth? He watched the magma come up, burning people alive. Most didn't have time to realize what was happening. But others died in screaming agony. 'You betrayed them,' voices whispered. 'Why didn't you help them?'

More images, more whispers. Lois and Jason, Ben and Mom, all screaming in terror and unspeakable pain. Lois cursing him with her last breath.

'Why did you leave us? Why did you let this happen?'

Then he realized the kiss on his forehead was burning. 'They will try to stop you,' Mike

had said. Kal-El closed his eyes against the images. That helped some, but the voices didn't stop and with his eyes closed, he couldn't be sure if he was veering off course.

I have to be stronger, and smarter, than they are.

He opened his eyes and began to move along the time axis once again. He concentrated on the 'path' ahead of him. The images of terror were still there but with effort he could ignore them. The sounds were harder but he concentrated on his own heartbeat. It was the only thing he knew that was real in this place outside of time-and-space.

He sped on.

Finally he slowed to get his bearings. The Earth was blue beneath him, floating serenely in space, although from where he was it appeared as though it was rotating the wrong direction.

He slowed to a stop and reentered the 'real' universe. There was no sign of Luthor's abomination in the Atlantic. *Am I back far enough?*

He was exhausted, mentally and physically. The sunlight felt good but he was too high up to breathe easily. He dropped lower into the atmosphere, avoiding the communications satellites and the spy satellites. The population of devices in orbit had multiplied by several times while he was away.

Kal-El dropped further. He pinpointed Lois's heartbeat in Metropolis. *She's okay.* Jason's heart rate was steady. Mom was at home and her heart rate was also steady. Then Lois's heart rate jumped. Kal-El could see that Metropolis had gone dark - a major power outage that threatened the entire north-central Atlantic coast. But it was more than just a power outage - cell phones and other portable devices were also affected.

EMP? But there was no sign of a bomb, either nuclear or 'conventional'. And it would take something the size of a nuke to neutralize such a large area. Lois and Rachel had both told him about a blackout along the east coast.

This must be the first one.

Kal-El scanned Metropolis and located the culprit. A growth program had been triggered in a Kryptonian crystal. The monstrosity was in a basement of a riverside mansion and Kal-El saw Luthor gloating over his achievement. There was a woman and two men standing with him.

So that's his current gang...

There were screams in the air. A 777 was being dragged into space by a space shuttle - the *Explorer*. The plane's tail was burning, and the fire was creating toxic smoke in the cabin. Some of the passengers were screaming. Others were praying. Then the fire burned through into the passenger cabin and there were no more screams. A few seconds later the shuttle tore itself apart, ripping apart what remained of the jumbo jet - one of the three clamps that had held it to the jet had finally come loose. Neither vehicle had been designed for such stress. The trajectory would take the debris over the ocean.

'You could have saved them...'

More screams, this time near the ground. Another jumbo jet, this one coming in for a landing at Berkowitz Airport. It had lost power at a critical point during landing. One wing scraped the ground.

'You can save them...'

'I'm not really here, ' he told himself. 'I can't save them...'

The plane cart-wheeled out of control.

Heartsick, Kal-El dropped to Earth not far from the Kent farmhouse. He needed to get his bearings.

"Clark?" Martha Kent stepped out from the corner of the house and stared at him in wide-eyed disbelief before breaking into a run. "Clark!"

He grabbed her in a hug. "It's good to see you, Mom," he murmured. She smelled *right* - Ivory soap and laundry detergent, loamy soil and tomato plants.

She pulled back and looked at him, forehead creasing in a frown. "You look tired."

He nodded. He was tired and achy, almost like there was kryptonite around. It was one of the theoretical side effects of what he was trying - it seemed that the universe abhorred the type of thing he was trying. Even though the version of himself that belonged in this time was light years away, he was feeling the effects of 'being in two places at the same time.' He knew the closer he was to his 'alternate' the worse his symptoms would become. He could only hope his alternate wasn't feeling as badly as he was right now.

"I can't stay long," Kal-El said. "But I need to ask you what the date is."

"September 26th. Why?"

He was only halfway to *when* he needed to be to solve the problem of Luthor.

"Mom, I have something important I have to do and I don't know if... If I don't make it back, you need to tell Lois about me," he said.

"Clark, you're scaring me," his mother said. "What is it you have to do?"

"I have to break another one of Jor-El's rules, and this one may well kill me," he told her. "Please, promise me you'll talk to Lois."

"I will," Martha promised.

With a nod, Kal-El launched himself into the air.

Luthor stood back and admired his creation. He hadn't been certain until now that he had programmed the crystal correctly. Not that he would ever admit it to anyone else, especially not his current 'partners.'

Steven Vanderworth's train set was a shambles. Where the 'lake' had been was a mass of alien crystal whose weight had cracked the concrete floor of the 'playroom'. The blackout hadn't surprised him too much. He had, after all, disabled the safety protocols on the Kryptonian programming so the crystal could grow faster and be utterly unconcerned with exactly what sort of matter, or energy, was being converted into its matrix.

"Lex, your little crystal broke everything," Kitty Kowalski observed.

"So it did," Luthor agreed. The growth had actually been faster than he'd anticipated. It wouldn't be long at all before he would be in a position to demand fealty from all the governments of the Earth. He, Lex Luthor, would rule this benighted planet with a firm but benevolent hand. It was only right that the world's greatest mind should be entrusted with the fate of the planet.

"Uh, Boss," Stanford, one of his 'associates,' stammered. The man was staring at the little screen in his hand.

"What?" Luthor demanded, irritated at the interruption.

"There was a blip on your Superman detector."

"Where?"

"West. But it's gone now," Stanford said.

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. It just sort of appeared out of nowhere right before the blackout and then it disappeared a few seconds after the power came back on."

"And you didn't think it was important enough to tell me?" Luthor grated.

Stanford just stared at him, obviously too frightened to make excuses.

Luthor shrugged mentally. He still needed Stanford's skills for now. But when the time came for them to part ways, Stanford would pay for his inattentiveness.

There was a more immediate concern. Superman had survived and was back. Luckily, Luthor knew how to handle that little problem. Superman's no doubt triumphant return was going to be greeted with a nasty surprise. A green, glowing, *Kryptonite* surprise.

With a feral grin, Luthor started planning his surprise.

Lois fumed as she sat at her desk in the Daily Planet newsroom. She glowered at the nearest overhead monitor that was showing the inaugural launch of NASA's newest orbital shuttle. The people around her had enough sense to stay out of her way, including her fiancé.

Lois was supposed to have been *on* the 777 that was launching the shuttle. Even though it was just a PR piece - NASA's safety record per passenger mile was at least as good as any commercial airline - she had been looking forward to getting away from the office, doing some real field work. But the morning had started out bad and had turned worse.

Her car wouldn't start so she took Richard's car to the office to get in a little work before heading to the airport to catch her flight to Florida. Only Jason's schoolbag was in the back of Richard's car. Then to make matters worse, her morning's coffee from the little coffee kiosk in the lobby had exploded on her, ruining her suit and new silk blouse and burning her where the liquid caught her skin.

By the time she got home and changed, and got burn ointment on her legs and hands, she had missed her flight.

The newsroom lights flickered and went out. All around her people were swearing at their computers, pressing Ctrl-S on their keyboards in the vain hope that not all was lost.

Then the lights came back on. The computers came back, along with the hum of the building's air conditioning. Overhead, the monitors came back to life. The news anchor on the screen Lois had been watching looked puzzled.

The anchor squared his shoulders. "This just in... The inaugural flight of the Shuttle Explorer appears to be experiencing extremely serious technical difficulties."

The noise level in the newsroom went down as people started to listen to the newscast. The picture went to a live shot of Cape Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Center.

A worried looking reporter was listening to his headset then he looked into the camera. "We're coming to you live from Cape Canaveral, where it seems there is a problem with the inaugural flight of the new orbital shuttle Explorer. Reports are just coming in, but it appears that the shuttle's boosters have fired before detaching from the jet, veering both craft dramatically off course and out of control..."

Moments later, the scene changed once again. A telephoto shot of the shuttle and jet. Flames and smoke could be seen trailing behind them. Then there was a bright flash and debris started to fall.

I was supposed to have been there...

"A jumbo jet just crashed on landing at Berkowitz," Perry yelled. "Wilson, McCoy, you're on it. Lane, you're on the blackout, work with them. The shuttle and the crash are too much of a coincidence for it to *be* a coincidence. "

I should be dead... If my coffee hadn't exploded on me...

Then Lois shook herself. She was alive and she had a job to do. Her reporter's instincts told her that Perry was right - the 'accidents' were connected. She just had to figure out how.

And for the first time in a very long time, Lois wished her old partner was back from where ever he'd disappeared to. Clark's input on the blackout would be helpful, even if it was just to check her spelling.

Once again, Kal-El sped up through the atmosphere, through the stratosphere to the mesosphere and beyond. He vibrated himself out of the 'real' universe into what he was now calling the time stream. He oriented himself to the proper axis and once again headed 'back'. Beneath him, the Earth seemed to rotate in the wrong direction.

The whispers began once again. 'Why didn't you save them? You could have saved them...'

'It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history, ' a familiar voice thundered - Jor-El. 'It is forbidden...'

Jonathan Kent's voice reverberated. '...there's a reason why you're here.'

More images of death and destruction. But he didn't dare close his eyes against them. He needed to keep track of how far back he was going.

'...we wait for the savior to return,' Lois's voice echoed softly. 'But the savior never does, and we realize it was better had he never come at all...'

"I never claimed to be a god," Kal-El murmured to himself. "I never claimed to be a savior. All I ever wanted to do was help... And I have to fix this."

'It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history... It is forbidden... It is forbidden...'

The kiss on his forehead burned until he felt nauseous. He wanted to claw at it but he didn't dare.

Lois's voice again. 'People have always longed for gods, messiahs, and saviors to swoop down from the sky and deliver them from their troubles... But the savior never does, and we realize it was better had he never come at all...'

'Why did you leave us?' voices screamed at him. 'We looked for you, we called for you, you never came...'

"I'm sorry..." Tears clouded his eyes. "I'm sorry."

A part of his mind noted the passage of time. He was nearing his target. Once again he slowed, praying he had hit his mark. Too far back and Luthor might spot Superman's arrival and change his plans, making it impossible to stop him. Not far enough - he might not survive a third transition into the time stream.

It had to be right. It simply had to be.

Lex Luthor fumed. The richest, the only, lode of alien technology on the planet was in his grasp, if the fools he had chosen to work with could only find it. Steven Vanderworth's yacht, the Gertrude, had been sailing north for days. But the going was excruciatingly slow.

Even in summer the Arctic Ocean wasn't a place for the faint of heart. And although he certainly would never classify himself as faint of heart, he couldn't say the same of his 'colleagues.'

Luthor wished they'd been able to leave Metropolis earlier, but Gertrude Vanderworth hadn't had the courtesy to die in the spring as he had planned. No, the romantic delusional fool had waited until mid-summer to kick off this mortal coil, leaving Lex Luthor with her late husband's billions - or what was left after Luthor had transferred every liquid asset he could get his hands on into overseas accounts.

He knew the old woman's relatives would be trying to find the money Luthor had

'liberated' from them. They would be trying, but Luthor had spent years working out his plans. No mere human would be able to thwart him. And Superman was dead.

Luthor turned up the volume on the main cabin's sound system. Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* - The Twilight of the Gods. It was one of his favorites. The hero is revealed to be an oath breaker, reviled by his beloved, and then murdered, signaling the end of godly rule in the world.

Luthor hummed to the music as he opened one of the books he'd brought with him. Crystals were such fascinating things - orderly, predictable, beautiful. And they didn't talk back.

Kitty sighed from her own seat across the room from him. The ship had a fabulous library, yet she couldn't find anything interesting to read. Of course, the library had belonged to Steven Vanderworth and his tastes had tended to non-fiction - history, geography, and biographies. Kitty preferred mindless, formulaic romances featuring broad-chested Cro-Magnons with perfect hair and teeth.

"Kitty, where's my drink?" Luthor asked.

Kitty sighed again. "My name is Katherine," she said, but she got up and went to the bar to prepare his martini. He watched as she filled the shaker, shook it up and poured it out into one of Vanderworth's monogrammed martini glasses. Then she dropped a single olive into the glass and brought it over to him.

He glowered at her.

"What?" she asked, even though he knew she knew how he liked his martinis.

"Is that the reward for the greatest criminal mind of our time? For the man who patiently waited by Gertrude Vanderworth's bedside feeding her prunes, reading her Dickens... washing her?" He knew it was a rhetorical question. He knew she had heard it all before. It had become something like a game between them.

He continued. "All so we could live in the kind of opulence a girl like you only reads about in magazines? Is this the reward, Kitty? A martini with *one* withered olive?"

It was a dance they both knew the steps to. He asked for something simple, she provided it, half-heartedly or half finished. He complained and she fixed it. She took back the glass and added more olives.

"So, now that we're out in the middle of nowhere, away from prying eyes, and have been for better than two weeks, does the oldest criminal mind of our time think I'm worthy of hearing his plan?" Kitty asked with saccharine sweetness.

"Small doses for small minds," he chided.

"So, what is it? Clubbing baby seals or selling ice to Eskimos?" she asked. "No, don't tell me. It has to do with land. You're going to subdivide the ice you're selling to the Eskimos."

Luthor chuckled. "Not bad. How long have you been working on that quip?" he asked.

Kitty poured herself a drink and glared at him over the rim of the glass.

"Do you know the story of Prometheus?" he asked, waving one hand at the mural that covered one of the main cabin's walls - Prometheus stealing the fire. Luthor continued before she had a chance to answer. "Of course you don't. Prometheus was a god who stole the power of fire from the other gods and gave control of it to mortals. In essence, he gave us technology. He gave us power."

Kitty snorted. "So we're stealing fire from gods, in the Arctic?"

"Sort of. You see, whoever controls technology controls the world. The Romans ruled the world because they built roads. The British Empire ruled the world because they built ships.

America built the atom bomb and so on and so forth. I just want the same thing Prometheus wanted."

"And what's that, Lex?" Kitty asked. "For people to be grateful to you? For them to worship you? You're not a god."

Luthor sneered. "Gods are selfish beings who fly around in little red capes and don't share their power with mankind. I don't want to be a god, Kitty. I just want to bring fire to the people."

She stared at him and he knew she wasn't buying it.

"And I want my cut," Luthor added.

"Didn't Prometheus have his liver torn out everyday for his trouble?" Kitty asked.

Luthor stopped and stared at her. For once, she had surprised him.

He didn't like surprises.

Lois Lane couldn't sleep. She'd felt restless for the past few days but hadn't been able to put a finger on why. Things were going well at work. Her last series on childcare in Metropolis had been well received and she was certain to be at least nominated for a Kerth, if not for Pulitzer, this year.

She looked over at Richard. He was still asleep and it was unlikely he would wake up if she got out of bed. He was a very deep sleeper.

She grabbed her robe and went downstairs to the kitchen. Her mother had always recommended chamomile tea for sleepless nights. Lois boiled some water in the microwave and poured it over a teabag. As she waited for the tea to steep, her thoughts went back to the man upstairs.

Richard White was a handsome man - handsome, intelligent, gentle. He was a good father to Jason. He would make a good husband. Maybe that was a source of her unease. Richard had asked her to set a date again and again she had balked. There was no logical reason for it. They'd been living together since Jason was born. Having a slip of paper that said the state had recognized their union shouldn't mean anything aside from some legal niceties.

Still she refused to set a wedding date. Was it that she wanted her son to have a father, but she didn't want to be tied to a husband? That sounded mercenary, and she was sure it wasn't true. She just couldn't see herself married to Richard. She adored him, she was willing to share her bed with him, but she didn't want to be tied to him.

Her tea was ready. She carried the cup out onto the back deck and sat down on one of the Adirondack chairs. Richard's seaplane was moored to the dock, moonlight glittering on the wings and the water.

The scene should have been peaceful and it usually soothed her nerves, but there was an uneasiness in the air tonight. It felt like a storm was brewing on the horizon, flashing lightning she could just see out of the corner of her eye but disappeared when she tried to look straight at it.

"Wind's in the east, mist comin' in. Like something is brewin', about to begin," Lois murmured to herself. Jason loved the Mary Poppins movie, especially the penguins. But Jason was too young to appreciate one of the truths of Mary Poppins - she was the east wind, blowing away the stale air and stultifying ideas. She was the destruction of old broken ways. The new broom that swept clean.

Lois shivered as the wind started to kick up and went back inside.

Again, Kal-El dropped to Earth not far from the Kent farmhouse. It was night and the lamp over the barn door cast warm shadows across the yard. The air was warm - it was summer, but was he back far enough?

He stepped forward and fell. He was exhausted, far worse than his last stop. He'd known it would be hard, but he hadn't realized how physically taxing it would be. He picked himself up and stumbled to the farmhouse porch. He had no idea of the time, but there was a light on in the kitchen.

"Mom?" Kal-El called out, hoping she was alone. The kitchen door opened and he moved into the shadows.

"Clark?" Martha Kent called from the door. He stepped forward, into the light. She stared at him, wide-eyed before throwing open the screen door and pulling him into a hug. "Clark!"

"It's good to see you, Mom," he murmured, even though from his point of view he'd seen her only minutes before.

She pulled back and looked at him, forehead creasing in a frown, just as it had before. "You look tired."

He nodded. He was still achy, and he was longing for sunrise. Longing for the golden warmth that would drive the exhaustion from his body and soul.

"It was a long hard trip," he said. She moved aside to let him into the kitchen. It was warm and cheery, the way he wanted to remember it.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

He nodded again, realizing he *was* hungry. Hunger didn't often bother him, but there were times he needed more sustenance than just sunlight.

"I'll scramble up some eggs," Martha said, turning on the stove. Kal-El sat down at the kitchen table. There was a partially finished Scrabble game on the kitchen table. He recalled that Ben liked to play Scrabble.

"More than five years," Martha was saying. "It's just been so long. If your father was alive, he never would have let you go. And then suddenly you're here. I almost gave up... I thought I'd never see you again..." Her shoulders were shaking and he realized she was crying. He went over to her and hugged her tight.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," he murmured.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Martha asked softly.

He shook his head. "I thought... hoped... it might still be..."

"Your home?" she asked.

"This is my home. That place was a graveyard. And a death trap," he said. "The report of Krypton's survival was a hoax perpetrated by a man named Luthor. He wanted me to go there to die, to leave him free to commit his crimes against humanity."

"But you're back now," Martha said, turning her attention back to the eggs she'd started beating. "You can stop him, can't you?"

He studied the calendar on the kitchen wall. "It's August 27th, isn't it?"

Martha frowned and nodded. "It's past midnight, so it's the twenty-eighth."

He sighed. "I have forty-eight hours, maybe less, to stop him. If I don't, then everyone and everything on the planet Earth will die at 3:47 P.M. Mountain Standard Time, December 24th."

"How can you know that?"

"I was there," he said simply. "I saw it happen. I saw it happen and there wasn't a damned

thing I could do about it."

"But you're here..."

"Yes," he said. "And getting here seriously bent the known laws of physics."

"More than flying?" she asked. The eggs were ready and she scooped them onto a plate for him along with two slices of toast.

"Yeah. More than flying. There are some things corporeal beings are simply not meant to do."

He sat back down at the table and dug in. He knew it was simply scrambled eggs with toast and homemade blueberry jam, but it tasted like heaven. Eggs had been one of the rationed items in the Denver of Armageddon. And on his journey to Krypton, what little he'd eaten came from food packs. They were nutritious but without flavor. He hadn't realized how much he had missed simple food until he smelled and tasted his mom's cooking.

Martha sat down opposite him. "What will you do?" she asked.

"First, get some sleep," he said. "Then, find Luthor and neutralize him."

She waited until he was finished, then took his plate and rinsed it off. "I kept your room ready for you and your other 'suits' are in the back of the closet."

"Thanks Mom, but this one is probably more appropriate," he said, indicating the dark body suit he was still wearing. "I honestly don't know if Superman will ever be coming back. But what I have to do isn't a job for Superman."

Martha peered at him. "We can talk more in the morning. You look like you're dead on your feet. You need to get to bed."

He nodded and headed for the stairs, then stopped and looked back at her. "Mom, if I don't see you before I leave, I want you to know I'm glad Ben has been here for you."

"How do you know about..."

"I... He's a good man, Mom. And I really am happy for you."

He climbed the stairs to his old room, leaving his mom staring after him. It had taken a while for him to get used to the idea of his mother with a man who wasn't his father.

'Clark, dear...' she had said back in Denver. 'No one will ever replace your father, but Ben and I found something special together. I was even planning on selling the farm before... before all hell broke loose. We were going to move to Montana. We love the lakes and the fishing.'

'Fishing?' he had managed to get out.

'You've been gone a long time,' she had said. 'And not even you can keep the world from spinning.'

Oh Mom, if you only knew...

He changed into some old sleep shorts and settled onto the old mattress. It was good to be home, good to be in his old bed. The bedroom window was open, allowing the breeze to cool the room. Once again he drifted off to sleep breathing in the familiar scents of cedar and lavender.

He awoke to the summer sun streaming through the open window. He laid there for several minutes, absorbing the sunlight, reveling in the sun's touch across his exposed skin. He wasn't as nauseous as he'd been expecting and that was good. The last thing he needed was for Luthor to suspect he wasn't at the top of his game.

Finally he rolled out of bed, stretched and pulled on the dark body suit. Then he was out the open window and into the stratosphere before his mom would even be aware that he'd woken up. He hoped he would have time to come back and explain later.

The sunlight felt even better without as much atmosphere blocking it. He basked in the glow for a few more minutes then he began searching for the yacht Gertrude, somewhere in the Arctic Ocean around Alaska.

He spotted the yacht a hundred or so miles south of the Fortress. Luthor's men were preparing a helicopter for flight. Kal-El dropped closer, staying out of sight above the clouds. A quick shot of heat vision damaged the rotator shaft on the rear of the copter. With any luck at all, it would take them a while to realize the copter had been sabotaged.

Now he had to prepare the Fortress for 'visitors.'

Repairing the helicopter took precious time - time Luthor hadn't wanted to spend watching his 'associates' fixing the bent rotor shaft. Grant and Brutus both swore the helicopter had been properly secured to the yacht and nothing had been in a position to hit it. Luthor wasn't sure he believed them. Human error was the only explanation, unless he chose to believe one or more of them was actually bright enough to betray him.

It was late morning before they landed outside the bizarre weather zone. Superman's technology was within Luthor's grasp. He knew the strange, fierce storm hid and protected Superman's 'Fortress.' Not that a mere storm would stop Luthor. Victory was so close he could almost taste it.

He wasn't worried about getting in. He doubted Superman would have put any serious thought into security. After all, how many humans even knew this place existed, much less would be willing to brave the Arctic elements to get there? Besides, he had his secret weapon - a piece of cloned Kryptonian tissue. It wasn't a large piece, but it was enough to create a small Kryptonian bio-field. It *should* be enough to fool any sensors into believing he was an injured, perhaps dying, Kryptonian.

And he still had Plan-B. Brutus was carrying high explosives with him and he knew how to use them.

The group trudged on amid the swirling, howling wind and ice. Kitty stumbled again, catching herself on an ice column.

"Lex, this ice is warm," she said, voice full of wonder.

Luthor nearly shouted for joy. *They'd found it!*

"It's not ice. It's crystal," he said. He kept his voice even. He didn't want Kitty or the others to know he'd been concerned about finding the structure. Luthor looked back to see Kitty staring, open mouthed, at the white-blue column. Its upper section was hidden in the storm.

Stanford snorted. "Why is a guy like you with a girl like her?"

"Why do beautiful women carry around ugly dogs?" Luthor asked. "Why do people volunteer to work with the mentally challenged? Work in hospitals?"

Stanford didn't volunteer an answer, but Luthor hadn't expected him to. Stanford was a capable craftsman, but he was no intellectual giant. And philosophy was something best discussed with equals. Luthor couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to discuss philosophy with an equal. He *had* no equals.

They crested a small rise. The others stopped and stared at the sight in front of them - a great crystal structure the size of an Earthly cathedral. The angles of the construction were as unearthly as the materials. There was nothing like it on Earth. And the treasures inside were his to take, to master, to profit from.

"You were right," Stanford finally said, stating the obvious. "There's some sort of

unnatural weather pattern keeping it hidden."

"I'm always right," Luthor reminded him.

The structure was further away than it looked. It took them nearly an hour to climb down the icy slope to a level area at the foot of the structure. Luthor sent the others to search for the entrance.

"Found something..." Grant said after a few minutes.

They all followed him into the structure.

"Was this his house?" Grant asked in hushed tones as he looked around the immense interior. Although the crystals glowed softly, giving them enough light to see, the ceiling was hidden in misty darkness.

Luthor considered Grant's question. "You might think that. Most would. But no. He lived among us. This is more of a monument to a long dead and extremely powerful civilization. It's where he learned who he was and where he came for guidance."

Luthor looked around the chamber. It was as he remembered it - cold, elegant, *alien*. "So many possibilities..."

"What's this, a garage?" Kitty asked from an adjoining chamber. Luthor peered into the 'room.' It looked like part of the wall was missing, as though something huge had been broken off.

He was right again...

"You're not so far off, Kitty," Luthor said. "The leading theory is that he took off in a futile attempt to find his home world."

Stanford chuckled and Luthor gave him a dark look before continuing. "If so, even he would have to rely on a craft of some kind, and I'll bet Gertrude's last dollar that's exactly what used to be parked there."

"So, did he?" Kitty asked.

"Did he what?" Luthor asked, feigning innocence.

"Take off for his home world?" Kitty asked with forced patience.

"Well, we gave him a little push," Luthor admitted with a grin. His grin faded as he looked around the main chamber again. There was something off, something odd that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Grant and Stanford had shed their gloves as they looked over the chamber for some sort of control mechanisms. Luthor knew they wouldn't find any. The Kryptonians hadn't used controls as humans knew them. They were more subtle than that.

He spotted the small opening high above and moved so that he was directly beneath it, then he counted three steps.

"You act like you've been here before," Kitty observed.

Annoyed, Luthor raised one hand to silence her. He took one last step, positioning himself at the spot where he knew the control console should appear. After a moment, he was bathed in a bright white light. Luthor waited for the console to appear - nothing. He waved his hands over the space where the console should have appeared. Still nothing.

"Lose something, Lex?" Kitty asked.

"It's not working," Luthor growled. "Why isn't it working?"

The light that was shining down on him brightened to an almost painful intensity. An odd rotating ring seemed to appear out of nowhere, encircling him. Luthor attempted to step over the ring and discovered he was trapped by some sort of force field.

He looked at the others and realized they were *all* trapped in their own beams of light

with rotating rings.

"Lex, what's happening?" Kitty's voice trembled and her eyes were wide with fear.

"Welcome to Krypton, Luthor, Miss Kowalski, gentlemen," an impossibly familiar baritone voice said in the darkness.

"Superman?"

The sense that something was getting ready to happen hadn't left Lois as she dropped her son off at school and headed in to work.

Mike was at the coffee kiosk. He smiled gently as he handed her a cup of coffee fixed just the way she liked it.

"You're a life saver," she said gratefully as she took her first sip.

"I do what I can," he said.

She started for the main door to the Daily Planet then stopped and looked back at him. "Mike, have you ever had days where it felt like something big was waiting to happen?"

"All the time," Mike said. "I've found it usually means that something has already begun. But what it portends..." He shrugged eloquently.

Lois pondered his statement as she hurried into the building.

It wasn't an especially busy news day. Lois finished her stories and turned them in - a few fires over the weekend but nothing as compared to the year before during a record breaking heat wave.

There was a note in her email calling her attention to the recent death of Gertrude Vanderworth. The woman's relatives were still fighting to overturn her last will. They claimed her new husband had bilked her out of millions before disappearing to parts unknown after her death. But will disputes weren't something Lois normally covered, until she realized who the new husband was: Lex Luthor. *So that's where he got to after he got out.*

Lois knew Luthor had managed to suborn a judge during his last appeal. She hadn't known where the psychopath had gone to ground and she didn't believe for a single moment that Luthor had reformed. Leopards simply didn't change their spots. And Lex Luthor wasn't about to go straight if he had any chance of putting one over on people who he considered his inferiors - in other words, everyone.

The question was now: Where was Luthor? And what was he planning now?

Lois spent several hours tracking down what Luthor had been up to. There wasn't much to be found, Luthor had always been very good at covering his tracks. Luthor had started corresponding with Steven Vanderworth's aged widow while still in prison. When he managed to get out, he courted her, married her, and then bilked her out of millions, if not billions.

Then he and the Vanderworth yacht disappeared, along with Kitty Kowalski, Gertrude's house maid.

Lois was getting ready to call the Coast Guard to see if there was a way to locate the yacht when a hush fell over the newsroom. She looked around for the cause.

Superman.

There was no mistaking the curl, the impossibly blue eyes or the aura of power. But he was dressed in dark gray instead of the iconic primary colors. His cape was a shimmering black and he was walking through the newsroom as though he owned it.

He seemed to be scanning the room then he focused on her. She began to rise to greet him but the strength seemed to run out of her. She sat back down.

"Miss Lane?" he said, stopping in front of her.

She gaped at him, speechless.

"I need your help," he said. "Yours, Perry White's and Richard White's."

Her mind was spinning. *Superman was back...*

"Where did you go?" she finally asked.

"I will answer everything in a few moments, in Mister White's office," he promised, taking her by the arm and helping her out of the chair. Lois looked around and saw the surprised faces of her coworkers. Richard was standing in the door to his office, eyes wide in amazement.

Superman beckoned to him and Richard obeyed, following them into the editor-in-chief's office.

"When did you get back?" Richard managed to say, beating Lois to the punch.

"Last night," Superman answered, shutting the office door behind him and locking it. Then he lowered the blinds and closed them. There was something a little startling at watching Superman do such mundane things.

Only Perry didn't seem surprised.

"I don't have much time," Superman said. "But to answer your questions, I went to Krypton and yes, it was nothing but a graveyard and yes, it was a stupid thing to do and yes, I should have said goodbye." His expression was unreadable.

Lois simply stared at him. He had changed, or maybe she had. She didn't recall him ever being anything but the perfect gentleman, although she admitted there were blanks in her memory surrounding the time Jason was conceived.

"You said you didn't have much time," Perry said quietly.

"Yes, I did," Superman said. "I have a very small window of opportunity to stop Lex Luthor from destroying this planet. And to do it, I need your help."

"And what can the *Daily Planet* do?" Perry asked.

"Not the *Planet*, Mister White," Superman corrected. "You, Richard, and Lois. You're the last three people on my list for a justice council." He reached down to a thigh pocket, retrieved a folded sheet of paper and handed it to Perry.

Perry scanned the sheet, forehead furrowing in a frown. He handed the sheet to Lois. It was a list of eleven names, half of them names Lois didn't recognize, along with two locations for the ones she didn't know. But the startling part was the handwriting - it was in her hand, only she knew she'd never written that list.

"Where did you get this?" Lois asked.

"From you."

"But I didn't write this."

"Not *yet*. And if we succeed in stopping Luthor, you will never need to write it."

"I don't understand," Lois said. Her head was spinning again. She was normally unflappable, but Superman's sudden appearance, his change in uniform, his solemn demeanor, was throwing her for a loop.

Superman sighed and it sounded like the weight of the world was on his shoulders "Rather than wasting time explaining, why don't I give you your memories of that time? But I have to warn you, it's pretty painful."

"You have our memories? Of something that hasn't happened?" Richard asked.

"Exactly," Superman said, reaching into the thigh pocket once again and pulling out a small bag. He tipped out three small slivers of crystal. "You might want to sit down," he told Perry.

Perry sat, forehead still creased in a frown. Superman placed one of the crystals against the editor's forehead. The crystal glowed momentarily. Then Perry's eyes widened in horror and he dropped his face into his hands.

"Oh dear God..." Perry murmured and Lois realized he was actually crying. Lois's heart sank. The last time, the *only* time, she had ever seen Perry White actually break down was the day of his son's funeral. What was on the memory crystal was obviously even worse than that.

Superman did the same for Richard. Like Perry, Richard seemed horrified at what he was 'remembering.'

"The intensity should fade in a day or so, like a very intense movie. But you may have nightmares for a while," Superman said.

Then it was Lois's turn. She steeled herself against the crystal's touch on her forehead. It didn't help. It was like being thrown into a maelstrom of horror - the first blackout, the destruction of the Explorer, the plane crash at Berkowitz, then Luthor's demands and Armageddon. Jason... Jason was Superman's son. And Superman was Clark Kent.

"Lois?" Superman asked. She looked up into his concerned face. She was amazed that she had never made the connection before. Now that she knew, it was obvious.

"You did it," she managed to say, wiping away her tears. She didn't have time to mourn deaths that hadn't happened, that might not happen for a long time.

"You managed to come back to 'now' to stop the bastard," she added.

He nodded.

"So, what do you need us to do?" she asked.

"So, what do you need us to do?" Lois asked.

Kal-El let out the breath he hadn't even been aware he'd been holding. He hadn't been sure what her reaction was going to be to the revelation of Jason's paternity, or his identity. Kal-El hadn't been quite as worried about Richard - the man had a reputation of being level-headed and his own observations had confirmed that. But Lois could be a spitfire.

The Fortress's AI murmured into his ear, letting him know that Luthor and his gang were approaching the Fortress. He didn't have much time for explanations.

"I'm going to set Perry up for a remote feed," Kal-El said, nodding to the older man. "You'll be able to see and hear what's happening. You'll also be able to communicate with the others, just not privately." As he was speaking he brought out a communicator headband and fitted it to Perry's head.

"And us?" Richard asked.

"I'm hoping you and Lois will agree to come to the Fortress with me."

Richard grinned. "I'm in."

Lois seemed a bit more subdued as she nodded. "Let's go."

It was awkward carrying two adults, but Kal-El had done it before. He held one on each side of him and they, in turn were holding onto each other and to him. He couldn't fly as fast as he usually did - humans couldn't handle the wind or the height.

Richard oohed and aahed as they passed over rivers, mountains, and fields. Lois was still subdued but her heart rate indicated some measure of excitement.

Finally they arrived at the Fortress. Kal-El could see Luthor and his people climbing down the slope towards the ground entrance. They were too busy to look up and the artificial storm hid Kal-El and his companions from them, in any case.

Kal-El dropped down through a gap in the ceiling, murmuring the pass phrase as he went.

He had beefed up the Fortress's security far beyond any reasonable need. But then, what has needed to thwart Luthor's plans went far beyond 'reasonable.' Luthor himself wasn't *reasonable*.

"Oh wow," Richard murmured, looking around the central chamber. "Is this what Krypton looked like?"

"Something like this," Kal-El said. "They manipulated crystal growth for much of what they needed." He stopped and listened for Luthor. They were getting closer.

"Let's get ready," he said, ushering Lois and Richard into a small chamber just off the main one.

"And what are we getting ready for?" Lois asked as Kal-El handed her and Richard dark robes of the same material as his cape.

"Luthor's trial," Kal-El answered simply. "I have President Morton's signature on a document designating this structure and the surrounding area as the Kryptonian Embassy. That means that Luthor can be tried under Kryptonian law for at least some of his crimes."

"The hanging jury you wanted," Lois stated.

Kal-El nodded. "The justice council's verdict needs to be unanimous, and we need that verdict in order to access the Phantom Zone projector. It's one of the safeguards Jor-El built into the device and I have neither the time nor the inclination to disable them."

"Was this his house?" Kal-El heard one of Luthor's men ask in hushed tones. They were in the main chamber.

"You might think that," Luthor replied. "Most would. But no. He lived among us. This is more of a monument to a long dead and extremely powerful civilization. It's where he learned who he was and where he came for guidance."

"They're here," Kal-El said quietly. He grabbed the rod of justice - a long, slender piece of crystal programmed to record the proceedings - from the table and headed out to greet the intruders.

"The leading theory is that he took off in a futile attempt to find his home world," Luthor was saying.

Kal-El led Lois and Richard into the main chamber. The lighting was low and they stayed in the shadows.

"If so, even he would have to rely on a craft of some kind," Luthor continued, "and I'll bet Gertrude's last dollar that's exactly what used to be parked there."

"So, did he?" the woman with Luthor asked.

"Did he what?" Luthor asked, feigning innocence.

"Take off for his home world?"

"Well, we gave him a little push," Luthor said with a grin. He looked around the chamber, searching for something high in the ceiling;

"You act like you've been here before," the woman, Kowalski, observed.

Luthor raised one hand to silence her. He took one last step, positioning himself at the spot where the control console should appear, if it hadn't been locked down. After a moment, Luthor was bathed in a bright white light. He waved his hands over the space where the console should have appeared.

"Lose something, Lex?" Kowalski asked.

"It's not working," Luthor growled. "Why isn't it working?"

The light that was shining down on him brightened and the containment ring appeared, encircling him. Luthor attempted to step over the ring and discovered he was trapped by a

force field. He jerked back with a growl.

Kal-El sent a mental signal to the AI and immediately all the intruders were trapped in their own beams of light with containment rings.

"Lex, what's happening?" Kowalski demanded.

"Welcome to Krypton, Luthor, Miss Kowalski, gentlemen," Kal-El stated, stepping out of the shadows.

"Superman?" Luthor's eyes had widened momentarily. His heart rate was up, but he covered his surprise quickly. He was trying to see out of the light column.

Kal-El stepped closer to him.

"Hey big guy, long time, no see," Luthor greeted him with false cheerfulness. "That's a new look for you, isn't it? A little moody, but I like it. So, how were things on the old homestead?"

"Exactly as you knew they would be," Kal-El responded. Behind him, Lois and Richard stepped forward.

Luthor peered out at them. Then he grinned. "Lois Lane, I love your writing. Didn't you win the Pulitzer for my favorite article? You know the one. 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman'?"

To her credit, Lois didn't flinch. "Shouldn't you be in prison?" she asked. "You *did* have a few years left on your two consecutive life sentences without parole."

"You know how it is, prison overcrowding, irregularities with arrest procedures, missing witnesses..."

"Enough," Kal-El ordered. He waved the rod of justice and nine faces appeared in midair around the chamber. "Alexander Joseph Luthor, you are accused of criminal trespass with the intent of stealing classified technology and scientific material belonging to the people of Krypton. You are accused of conspiracy to foment sedition and insurrection against the lawful governments of Planet Earth using classified technology stolen from the people of Krypton. You are accused of conspiracy to commit genocide against the sentient inhabitants of Planet Earth using classified technology stolen from the people of Krypton. You are accused of conspiracy to cause the extinction of all life on the Planet Earth using classified technology stolen from the people of Krypton."

The AI whispered another charge into Kal-El's ear. The AI had finished its analysis of the odd bio-signature it had discovered. Luthor had a Kryptonian cell culture on him. *So that's how he got past the security protocols...*

"You are accused of unlawful genetic manipulation of cellular matter belonging to a Kryptonian citizen," Kal-El continued. "You are accused of unlawfully attempting to clone a Kryptonian citizen. How plead you?"

"Wait just a minute here," Luthor protested. "I know my rights and you don't have..."

Kal-El had to fight to keep his temper. He wasn't feeling the effects of time travel quite as badly as he had before. He wasn't physically weak yet, but it *was* affecting his emotional state.

"I beg to differ," Kal-El stated. "This place is Krypton. This is a justice council constituted as prescribed by the laws of Krypton laid down millennia ago. As the accused, you have the right to refuse to speak. You also have the right to dispute the charges being leveled against you. So I ask again, how plead you?"

Luthor gaped at him. Then he seemed to get his resolve back. "How dare you treat the greatest criminal mind on this planet like a common thug!"

"Then perhaps you shouldn't act like one," a man's voice suggested from the shadows.

"How dare you treat the greatest criminal mind on this planet like a common thug!" Luthor protested.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't act like one," a man's voice suggested.

Luthor peered out to see another man standing in the shadows. He was wearing a dark robe similar to the one Superman was wearing. Above the robe there was the hint of a Roman collar. The man seemed familiar somehow and it took a moment to place the face - he was one of the prison chaplains. Luthor didn't know his name, had never cared to learn it.

Religion was the opiate of the masses. Lex Luthor didn't need that opiate, nor did he feel a need for those who pushed it. Religion was for the weak and weak-minded. 'Born again' simply meant 'born a hopeless fool.'

"Who are you?" Luthor demanded.

"I am called Michael." The man stepped closer to Luthor. "You have already admitted you are a criminal. A guilty plea will lead to immediate sentencing. Luckily, Krypton has no death penalty..."

"Sensible enough," Luthor commented.

"... so the sentence will be permanent imprisonment," Michael continued as though Luthor had not spoken. "A not guilty plea will lead to a review of the evidence against you."

"What evidence? How can there be evidence of things I haven't done yet?" Luthor demanded. There was something very wrong here. Superman had seemed surprised to see the man there, even though the alien covered his slip almost too quickly for anyone to catch - any one besides Luthor, at least.

Michael stepped over to Superman. The Kryptonian seemed to be listening intently to whatever argument the chaplain was mustering. After a moment, Superman handed the man something small. Michael nodded and walked back to Luthor. He stopped at the edge of the harsh light and seemed to be inspecting the force field that was holding Luthor.

Then the man's hand and arm entered the light. Luthor moved away but his back was to the unyielding force wall. Luthor felt something sharp press against his forehead. Then, his mind was flooded with images.

Vanderworth's train set was a shambles. Where the model 'lake' had been was a mass of alien crystal whose weight had cracked the concrete floor of the 'playroom'. The blackout hadn't surprised him too much. He had, after all, disabled the safety protocols on the Kryptonian programming so the crystal could grow faster and be utterly unconcerned with exactly what sort of matter, or energy, was being converted into its matrix. Speed was what was essential.

"Lex, your little crystal broke everything," Kitty observed.

"So it did," Luthor agreed. The growth had actually been faster than he'd anticipated. It wouldn't be long at all before he would be in a position to demand fealty from all the governments of the Earth. He, Lex Luthor, would rule this benighted planet with a firm but benevolent hand. It was only right that the world's greatest mind should be entrusted with the fate of the planet.

Luthor watched Stanford prepare the kryptonite they'd stolen from the Museum of Natural History. It was the only thing that would keep Superman from stopping them. Luthor's plans were perfect. If the governments of Earth wouldn't willingly cooperate with him, he would force them to. He had the capacity to make Earth a new Eden, if only the fools would do what they were told.

*The world was told of his offer to rule them. They laughed. **Nobody** laughed at Lex Luthor.*

They launched the programmed terra-forming crystal with its sleeve of kryptonite into the ocean a hundred miles east of Metropolis. Metropolis would be the first to pay the price of denying Luthor his due.

The continent grew as programmed. It was beautiful, alien - everything Luthor had expected of the advanced Kryptonian civilization. And the best part was that its presence was raising the ocean levels in the Atlantic. The entire eastern seaboard was under water within a few hours.

Then he realized that except for the continent itself, none of the other fantastic pieces of technology - the defensive and offensive systems, the transportation system, even the control console in what should have become the seat of government - worked. The place had no power, no future. It stank of death.

"Lex, we're running out of food, and we're out of fresh water," Kitty complained.

Luthor glowered at her. He knew what their circumstances were. He didn't need her reminding him.

"The guys want to leave," she added. "Right now. They're tired of waiting for you to figure this out."

Luthor heard a scraping behind one of the dark columns. They were coming. He grabbed Kitty's hand and dragged her along after him, toward the helicopter. He slammed the helicopter door on the four men chasing them. He didn't bother to look back as the helicopter took off.

Riley, Grant, Stanford, and Brutus never had a chance. But then he'd never really planned on keeping them. Their minds had been too limited to appreciate his grand plan. And like the animals they were, they turned on their master as soon as things got tough.

At least Kitty was still with him. His darling, treacherous, homicidal Kitty.

Luthor shuddered. It was too much, even for his superior mind, to take in all at once. He had failed. Everything he had worked on for so long, ashes. There was one small bright point. Assuming the memories were real, he now had a knowledge of physics that far surpassed anything Earth science would come up with for years, if not centuries. That was something he could use. Life imprisonment? Not likely. He had something a government would pay dearly to get hold of. He barely noticed Michael removing a metal cylinder from the pocket of his parka.

"Neat trick, creating memories of things that haven't happened," Luthor spat. He didn't want his 'companions' to know what a gift he'd been given. Losing the Kryptonian cell culture was a small price to pay.

Michael turned to Superman. "If I could beg the council's indulgence?"

Superman nodded, but Luthor thought he detected signs of strain. Was the big guy worried about the outcome of this farce? Or was there something else?

"There is some merit to Mister Luthor's complaint," the chaplain continued. "There are certain ethical issues to be considered with charging him with crimes that he has not, as yet, even contemplated."

Superman turned to the grim holographic images. Luthor recognized some of them - Perry White of the *Daily Planet*, Oliver Queen, and Bruce Wayne.

"Does the council agree to drop the charges of conspiracy to commit genocide and conspiracy to cause the extinction of all life on the Planet Earth?" Superman's voice rang out.

One by one, the faces either said 'agree' or 'disagree'. The final tally was three for keeping

the charges, eight against.

"The Council of Justice agrees to drop the charges of conspiracy to commit genocide and conspiracy to cause the extinction of all life on the Planet Earth," Superman announced solemnly. "All other charges still stand."

"Hey, what about us?" Stanford asked.

"What about you?" Luthor sneered.

"Well we were just following..." Stanford started.

Superman turned his gaze on them. "Derek Stanford, James Riley, Theodore Grant, Bruno Bratavlovsky, Katherine Kowalski - you are charged with criminal trespass with the intent of stealing classified technology and scientific material belonging to the people of Krypton. You are accused of conspiracy to foment sedition and insurrection against the lawful governments of Planet Earth using classified technology stolen from the people of Krypton. How plead you?"

After a few moments of consideration, they all pled not guilty.

Michael stepped over to Superman and handed over the sliver of crystal to him.

Superman waved the rod in his hand and a holographic image appeared in the air.

"So, now that we're out in the middle of nowhere, away from prying eyes, and have been for better than two weeks, does the oldest criminal mind of our time think I'm worthy of hearing his plan?" Kitty asked with saccharine sweetness.

"Small doses for small minds," Luthor's voice said.

"So, what is it? Clubbing baby seals or selling ice to Eskimos?" Kitty asked. "No, don't tell me. It has to do with land. You're going to subdivide the ice you're selling to the Eskimos."

"Not bad. How long have you been working on that quip?" he asked.

Kitty glared at someone over the rim of her martini glass.

"Do you know the story of Prometheus?" he asked. "Of course you don't. Prometheus was a god who stole the power of fire from the other gods and gave control of it to mortals. In essence, he gave us technology. He gave us power."

Kitty snorted. "So we're stealing fire from gods, in the Arctic?"

"Sort of. You see, whoever controls technology controls the world. The Romans ruled the world because they built roads. The British Empire ruled the world because they built ships. America built the atom bomb and so on and so forth. I just want the same thing Prometheus wanted."

"And what's that, Lex?" Kitty asked. "For people to be grateful to you? For them to worship you? You're not a god."

"Gods are selfish beings who fly around in little red capes and don't share their power with mankind," Luthor said. "I don't want to be a god, Kitty. I just want to bring fire to the people. And I want my cut."

The scene shifted.

Riley, Grant, Stanford, and Brutus were sitting around a table. "So, what's the caper, boss?" Riley asked.

"Only the largest technological heist in human history," Luthor's voice said. "And thanks to Stanford's creativity, we'll have a clear shot at it."

"And what did Stanford do?" Grant asked. He didn't seem impressed.

"Oh, he just convinced one meddling alien to go home, leaving everything behind for us to pick over," Luthor told them. "All that marvelous advanced technology. Energy sources,

transportation, **weapons**. And no one to stop us. We'll be able to do whatever we want, have whatever we want."

"What about the cops, the army?" Grant asked.

"What about them? I'll... **we'll** have **advanced** alien technology thousands of years beyond anything they can throw at us. Unstoppable technology. They'll be on their knees begging for a piece of high tech action. And all they'll have to do is meet our price."

There was silence around the table. Finally Riley asked the question, "And what price is that?"

"Wouldn't you like to be the new emperor of China? After we get rid of the excess population, of course."

Another long moment of silence then Grant spoke up. "I've always been partial to Europe, myself."

The images shifted once again.

An old man in a white lab coat was looking up at someone.

"What have you got for me?" Luthor's voice said.

"It was quite a challenge," the old man said. "I wasn't sure the usual techniques would work on the alien's DNA, but I believe we have success."

Luthor inspected the glass container that held an amorphous mass of pinkish material. It could have been a several month old embryo - or it might not.

"The bio-electrical field?"

"Weak, but present. And we have enough material left to try for a full term clone."

"Give me everything you have," Luthor ordered. With a nod, Grant and Stanford collected the old man's notes and equipment.

Luthor turned and walked away. Behind him, there was a pop, like a gun going off...

The images faded away.

Luthor suppressed a shudder. Nothing had linked him to the death of Adrian Willoughby. Until now.

"How did..." Grant began. The others began to chime in, asking how their private conversations came to be recorded, expressions of horror that they *had* been recorded. Luthor recognized that shortly, they would realize how Superman came by the damning recordings. And they would wonder why *their* memories weren't being used as evidence.

"Shut up!" Luthor bellowed at them. They quieted down. Good, they were still afraid of him.

Luthor turned back to his accusers. "You cannot force us to incriminate ourselves," he shouted. "We have rights!"

Superman glared at him. "This is Krypton. Your laws do not apply here. However, you do have the right to explain yourself. Do you choose to exercise that right?"

"And I am telling you, you don't have the right to try me!" Luthor spat. "And you don't have the guts to convict me."

"Is that your defense?" Michael asked quietly. The man's self assuredness annoyed him. Who was he to question Lex Luthor?

Luthor scowled as Michael addressed the others in his little group. "And you, do you wish to tie your fate to his?"

"All for one and one for all," Grant stammered out. "Isn't that what they say? Besides, I figure our odds are better here than back in the pen."

"And you, Katherine?" Michael asked. "Do you wish to tie your fate to Lex Luthor's?"

Luthor saw her wavering. "Katherine... Didn't I promise to take care of you?"

"I'll go with Lex," she announced.

If the chaplain was disappointed he didn't show it. He simply nodded and walked away.

Luthor watched as Superman turned to face the holographic faces. "You have heard the indictments brought against these individuals this day. These charges are not a fantasy. They are not the careless product of a wild imagination. We are not dealing with idle supposition... no, ladies and gentlemen - the indictments that have been brought against them, their intent to create terror by using technologies that no reasonable person would allow into the hands of criminals; these are matters of undeniable fact. The fact that of their own free will they gained entry without permission into this, the extraterritorial chancery of Krypton as described in international law, is also undeniable fact."

Superman circled Luthor, still addressing the disembodied heads.

"You all know what happened when their plans of terror came to fruition. I ask you now to pronounce your judgment on those accused... Derek Stanford, James Riley, Theodore Grant, Bruno Bratavlovsky, Katherine Kowalski. Their unbridled greed and lust for what was not, by right or merit, theirs led them to follow a murderous madman."

Finally, Superman stood close to the light that imprisoned Luthor. Luthor saw the sweat beading on the alien's forehead. It was hard to tell through the glare but Superman seemed pale. The alien was ill. Could he be so lucky?

"And finally, the architect of this conspiracy, Lex Luthor. A brilliant mind whose limitless ambition and greed is willing to sacrifice the lives of billions, indeed the very existence of Earth itself, to feed his warped sense of self-importance. The author of this vicious plot to use stolen technology to establish a new order on this planet, with himself and his cohorts as absolute rulers."

Superman paused in his speech, gazing at each member of the 'jury.' "You have seen the evidence. The decision of the Council will now be heard."

It was all Lois could do to keep her jaw from dropping as Mike the barista walked out of the shadows wearing a Kryptonian robe. But then, she also had memories of Mike giving her a cup of coffee that saved her life, memories of Mike in Denver after Armageddon offering comfort to the survivors. She found she wasn't really surprised to see he was wearing a Roman collar. She had a feeling that wasn't the only role he played.

Lois noted that Kal-El seemed surprised to see Mike as well. In the dark suit, it was hard to think of him as 'Superman' and it certainly wasn't 'Clark' standing there.

'I am called Michael, ' Mike told Luthor. And there was something in Luthor's expression that said he recognized Mike as well but how or where Lois couldn't even begin to guess.

She wasn't surprised that Luthor was contesting the charges. She was only a little surprised that the Council conceded two of the counts. There were some serious ethical issues with charging Luthor with conspiracy to commit crimes he probably hadn't even thought of yet, even though every person on the council knew what he'd done in the future.

Just describing what had happened in the future was giving her a headache. She tried to concentrate on what was happening. A U.S. court trial was a circus compared to this.

"Derek Stanford, James Riley, Theodore Grant, Bruno Bratavlovsky, Katherine Kowalski," Kal-El said, addressing Luthor's 'associates.' "You are charged with criminal trespass with the intent of stealing classified technology and scientific material belonging to the people of Krypton. You are accused of conspiracy to foment sedition and insurrection against

the lawful governments of Planet Earth using classified technology stolen from the people of Krypton. How plead you?"

After a few moments of consideration, they all pled not guilty, including Luthor. Of course.

Mike stepped over to Kal-El and returned Luthor's memory crystal to him. The small crystal slipped into a slot in the rod in Kal-El's hand.

Images appeared in the air. Kitty Kowalski and someone - probably Luthor - who described himself as Prometheus intent on providing the world with new fire. But Prometheus and humanity had both been punished for their arrogance.

More images. The men were describing their plans to break into Kal-El's fortress to steal the technology hidden away there. Luthor was gloating over how he had conned Superman into leaving Earth.

Another scene. A laboratory somewhere. An old man handing over research, referring to the 'alien'. Lois thought she recognized the old man - Doctor Adrian Willoughby. He had been a noted researcher into stem cell uses and cloning until his murder six weeks before. The police had blamed an unknown anti-abortion group for his death. It now appeared the police were wrong.

The images faded away. Lois wondered who had chosen those particular scenes, Kal-El or Mike. Whichever one it was, she felt sorry for them - going over Luthor's memory record had to have had all the charm of visiting a charnel house.

"How did..." One of Luthor's thugs began. The others began to chime in, protesting what they saw.

"Shut up!" Luthor bellowed at them. His associates quieted down.

Lois thought she saw fear in their eyes.

Luthor turned back to his accusers. "You cannot force us to incriminate ourselves," he shouted. "We have rights!"

Kal-El's expression turned stony. "This is Krypton. Your laws do not apply here." He turned away from them, facing Lois. She could see the strain in his face. There was actually a bead of sweat on his temple. Lois wanted to reach out to him, but it wouldn't be appropriate. Her own memories were - confused wasn't the right word - conflicted? And she hadn't had time to sort through everything.

Lois *remembered* a future where Luthor destroyed nearly all of humanity. She *remembered* Jason saving Richard's life and realizing who Jason's father really was. She remembered so many things. And so much of it would never happen now, luckily.

She glanced at Richard, standing beside her. He was watching the proceedings with rapt attention. Was he having the same problem she was, reconciling his memories of the future with what was happening in front of him?

Kal-El was glaring at Luthor. "This is Krypton. Your laws do not apply here. However, you do have the right to explain yourself. Do you choose to exercise that right?"

"And I am telling you, you don't have the right to try me!" Luthor spat. "And you don't have the guts to convict me."

"Is that your defense?" Mike asked Luthor. Luthor glared at him and he shrugged.

Kal-El looked up at the holographic projections and began his final arguments. "You have heard the indictments brought against these individuals this day. These charges are not a fantasy. They are not the careless product of a wild imagination..."

The Kal-El Lois remembered from six years before hadn't been an orator. As Clark, he

was frequently so tongue-tied it was sometimes a wonder he could actually string words together at all except on paper. And Superman wasn't known for speech-making. But he was making a good show now. Lois could tell he had the jury in the palm of his hand.

He circled Luthor, gesturing to Luthor's cohorts. "You all know what happened when their plans of terror came to fruition..."

If everyone else carried similar memories to hers - and Lois had no doubt they did; she had memories of choosing this jury for that very fact - then every person on the council had good reason to want Luthor dead and his accomplices along with him. Kal-El had wanted a hanging jury and she had found him one.

Finally, Kal-El stood close to the beam that imprisoned Luthor. Lois could see the strain in Kal-El's face. He was sick, she was certain of that. Had that been what he meant when he told them there wasn't much time? He had succeeded in traveling back in time, but at what cost to himself?

"And finally, the architect of this conspiracy, Lex Luthor..." Kal-El continued.

Richard reached over and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. She tried to smile back at him. She had lived with him, shared his bed for five years. She had loved him, but now memories of a future that might well never happen intruded. Their relationship hadn't survived Armageddon. But at least they had parted friends.

Kal-El gazed at each member of the council. "You have seen the evidence. The decision of the Council will now be heard."

Luthor was ranting inside his cage of light. And from the worried expressions on their faces, it appeared as though his accomplices were finally catching on to what was happening.

The council was polled in alphabetical order. As each verdict came in, their image vanished.

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

Lois's turn. "Guilty." The light that had been shining diffusely above her went out, leaving her in shadow.

"Guilty."

Oliver Queen. "Guilty."

"Guilty."

Bruce Wayne. "Guilty."

Perry White. "Guilty."

Richard White. "Guilty." The light above him went out. The only remaining illumination was the harsh light of the force fields and a single light on Kal-El.

He turned back to Luthor. "Do you have anything to say before the decision of this Council is pronounced?"

"You don't have the right... I am an American citizen and I have rights! You can't do this!" Luthor shouted. His face was red in anger.

"As required by law, the verdict is unanimous. Guilty," Kal-El stated and he too disappeared into the shadows.

Kal-El felt the sweat beading on his forehead. He was thankful he wasn't nauseous. He couldn't afford giving Luthor the impression that he was weak or failing. Like a predator,

Luthor could sense weakness in his prey. Kal-El couldn't afford weakness. Not now.

"You have heard the indictments brought against these individuals this day," Kal-El told the council. He wasn't an orator. His last public speaking class had been years before in college and he'd only been an average student, but this venue demanded a certain amount of pomp and solemnity.

"These charges are not a fantasy. They are not the careless product of a wild imagination. We are not dealing with idle supposition... no, ladies and gentlemen - the indictments that have been brought against them, their intent to create terror by using technologies that no reasonable person would allow into the hands of criminals; these are matters of undeniable fact. The fact that of their own free will they gained entry into this, the extraterritorial chancery of Krypton as described in international law, is also undeniable fact."

Kal-El walked slowly through the chamber. "You all know what happened when their plans of terror came to fruition. I ask you now to pronounce your judgment on those accused... Derek Stanford, James Riley, Theodore Grant, Bruno Bratavlovsky, Katherine Kowalski. Their unbridled greed and lust for what was not, by right or merit, theirs led them to follow a murderous madman."

Finally, he moved to stand before Luthor. Kal-El had once called Luthor a 'sick twisted dreamer.' The appellation still stuck. Luthor was practically foaming at the mouth with rage.

"And finally, the architect of this conspiracy, Lex Luthor. A brilliant mind whose limitless ambition and greed is willing to sacrifice the lives of billions, indeed the very existence of Earth itself, to feed his warped sense of self-importance. The author of this vicious plot to use stolen technology to establish a new order on this planet, with himself and his cohorts as absolute rulers."

Kal-El looked up at each member of the council. From their expressions it was unlikely that anyone was even considering the possibility of a not guilty verdict. Had choosing a jury where everyone had a reason to see Luthor dead been unethical? Possibly, but on Krypton, such a trial was called only in capital cases and it was assumed every member of the council had their own agenda for or against the accused. On Krypton, an 'impartial jury' was an oxymoron. The last such trial on Krypton had been against General Zod and his accomplices. Jor-El had been the prosecutor.

"You have seen the evidence. The decision of the Council will now be heard," Kal-El announced.

Luthor was still ranting like a mad man but it was unlikely to make a difference. If anything, his foul threats would make it easier for the council to see him as a madman he was.

"Guilty," the first councilor intoned. His image disappeared.

"Guilty." Another image vanished.

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

"Guilty." Lois vanished into the shadows.

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

Finally Richard White. "Guilty." He too vanished into the shadows. Kal-El hoped they were both doing okay. Having the horrific memories implanted then having to stand through

this circus had to be hard on the both of them.

Kal-El turned back to Luthor. "Do you have anything to say before the decision of this Council is pronounced?"

Luthor was nearly incoherent with rage.

"As required by law, the verdict is unanimous. Guilty," Kal-El stated.

That part was done. The requirements Jor-El had set as safeguards for using the Phantom Zone projector had been satisfied - there was a legal sentence of guilty under Kryptonian law.

The interior of the fortress was dark except for the light of the force fields.

Kal-El keyed a switch on the rod of Justice and the force fields merged, forcing the occupants together. It was odd, but not a single one of them had asked to be tried separately from Luthor. Did they think the madman would be able to save them or were they still too afraid of him to speak their own minds?

The force field constricted, forcing the little group even closer together.

It was time for the sentence to be executed.

The interior of the fortress was dark except for the light of the force field. They were alone in the chamber. Maybe there was time to do something. Luthor knew he had the knowledge in his head. All he needed was time...

There was a faint whirring and it was getting louder. A silvery sliver appeared in the chamber, resolving itself into a large flat mirror-like diamond that had only height and width but no depth. It slowly spun toward Luthor and the others, passing through the containment field.

Kitty disappeared first and Luthor realized she had disappeared *into* the mirror.

Within seconds the mirror had scooped up everyone except Luthor.

'The sentence will be permanent imprisonment, ' the chaplain had said. Nothing had been said about *where* they would be imprisoned.

The mirror scooped him up. "You can't do this to me!" he screamed as the arctic fortress disappeared below him.

"I'm afraid they can," a voice said. Luthor couldn't be sure if the voice was inside his head or not. The voice seemed to belong to a wiry man with cold eyes and a silver streaked beard.

"And they did," the voice added smugly.

"Telepathy?" Luthor wondered. "And who are you?" he demanded.

"General Zod. And this is where you will spend the rest of eternity."

"This can't be true... I'm an important man... The greatest mind on the planet... There's been a horrible mistake."

"I doubt that. I doubt that very much. Now, tell me what you know of Krypton's fate and the son of Jor-El."

Lois watched as the mirrored sliver swung through the containment field and the six condemned prisoners vanished.

"They're not..." Richard began.

Kal-El shook his head. "Krypton did not have a death penalty."

"That was the Phantom Zone entrance," Lois realized. She remembered Clark telling her about Krypton's high security prison. A 'pocket universe' he'd called it.

Kal-El stumbled and Lois was by his side, helping him to one of the crystal 'benches'.

"Are you okay?" Richard asked. Lois placed the back of her hand against Kal-El's

forehead like she did to check Jason's temperature. He was burning up. She shot Richard a worried look.

"What can we do?" Lois asked.

Kal-El shook his head. "Nothing." He began shivering.

"There must be something... Did Luthor poison you, is that what's wrong?" Lois asked.

"No..."

"Then what's wrong?"

"The flesh is not meant to do what he did," Mike said from the shadows. "There are laws in the universe and there are consequences to breaking those laws."

Lois turned back to Kal-El. "You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

Kal-El didn't answer her. She sat back on her haunches. "You knew it would kill you, and you went ahead anyway."

"My life in trade for you and Jason and everyone else I care about? One life in trade for the world? A small price."

He was shivering more violently and Mike helped ease him down, supporting his head. Mike had one of the memory crystals and placed it against Kal-El's forehead. It glowed and went dark.

"Clark, please hold on... for me and Jason?" Lois begged. She ignored the tears running down her cheeks. She took his hand. It was cold. He was normally so warm.

"Lois, it's okay," Clark said. His voice was so weak. "I love you. I always have..."

He shuddered one last time, his jaw clenched against the pain. Then his eyes closed and he went limp. He stopped breathing.

"Clark?" Her voice caught in her throat.

"Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest..." Mike murmured.

"No... no," Lois protested. It wasn't fair. He finally came back to her and now he was dead. Clark was dead... "It's not fair..."

She felt strong arms pulling her into a hug. Richard, ever faithful Richard comforting her just as he always had.

"He's not really dead..." Richard began.

She pulled away from him, suddenly furious. "Don't give me that crap of 'He's not really dead so long as we remember him.' Today's headline and tomorrow nobody cares, nobody remembers." She turned on Mike. "Bring him back!"

"I cannot," Mike said simply.

"Why?" she demanded. She was acting childish and she knew it and she didn't care.

"The power of life and death does not belong to me," Mike told her. "He was aware of the price and he chose freely to pay it. Do not demean his sacrifice by demanding things out of their proper time."

"Clark..." This time she didn't bother to try to stop the sobs or the tears streaming down her face.

"Lois, I..." Richard's voice trailed off. "I'm so sorry," he said finally.

Lois heard the rustle of robes and realized there were others in the chamber with them. There was a sound, an unearthly dirge of ineffable sweetness. It filled the chamber, echoing along the crystal pillars. It spoke of longing and hope, of death and life, endings and beginnings.

"It's time for you to leave," Mike said quietly. He pressed the memory crystal into Lois's

hand. "You'll know what to do when the time comes and remember that all things are possible. The *impossible* just takes more effort."

Lois saw Mike nodding to two strangers in white robes - only they weren't really strangers. Like Mike, the woman seemed uncannily familiar.

"Gabriel and Anachel will take you back to Metropolis," Mike said. He picked up Clark's body as though it weighed nothing, cradling it in his arms as a father might cradle a sleeping child. "I will do what needs to be done here," he promised.

"Come," the woman, Gabriel, said reaching out to Lois. There was a feeling of warmth, the rustling of strong pinions. Then Lois and Richard were standing on the roof of the Daily Planet in Metropolis.

"You really are angels, aren't you?" Richard asked.

"This world is not God's only dominion, nor is it his first creation," Gabriel said quietly.

"There is a story that a human who sees an angel's true form is doomed," Richard said.

"All things of flesh are doomed," Gabriel said. "Rao died. Sol will die in its proper time, the Earth will die. All is ephemeral. But be not afraid. It is not *your* time yet. And remember, you are never alone."

Gabriel and Anachel vanished, leaving Lois alone with Richard on the roof.

"What do we do now?" Lois asked, wiping her face with the sleeve of her robe.

"We do what he would have wanted us to do," Richard answered. "We keep going."

Lois felt the crystal biting into her palm. She opened her hand and gazed at it. "What do you think Mike meant when he said I'd know what to do when the time comes?"

"I have no idea," Richard said. "But maybe you should keep it in a safe place."

She took a shuddery breath, her mind clicking over to what needed to be done. "We should let Perry know what happened. He's probably worried about us... Then I should call Martha and let her know..." Lois's eyes filled with tears again.

"I'll talk to Uncle Perry," Richard offered. "You call Jason's grandma, okay?"

"I loved him, you know," Lois admitted. "I still do. God help me, but I still love him..."

"I know," Richard said softly. "I think I've always known."

Kal-El had spent most of his return journey from Krypton dreaming. He dreamt of his home in Kansas, of his adoptive parents. He dreamt of Metropolis, the joy of reporting for the *Daily Planet*. He dreamt of flying, using his immense powers to help. But mostly he dreamed of Lois. She danced through his dreams. She sang in his dreams. She loved him - in his dreams.

But there had been nightmares as well - nightmares of returning to an Earth that had been murdered by Lex Luthor. The nightmares would have left him screaming except that the paralysis of the forced sleep wouldn't let him actually scream. In his nightmares, Lois was dead, his mom was dead. Everyone was dead.

He should never have left Earth. He should have known the reports of Krypton's survival had been a lie, a trap. Rao was a white dwarf and Krypton was nothing but a shattered mass of deadly kryptonite.

The kryptonite had made him sick before he even realized what was happening.

His last conscious words to the AI that controlled the ship had been, 'Take me home.'

But in the nightmares, Earth had been turned to kryptonite too.

Lois Lane chortled as she put a 'Y' at the end of her word on the Scrabble board. She looked around the table at her opponents. "There."

"Lois, 'chumpy' is not a word," Richard stated.

"Of course it is," Lois protested. "It's an adjective describing a chump. A chump is 'chumpy'."

"Try again," Richard told her.

"He's right, you know," Martha added with a little laugh.

"You're absolutely sure?" Lois asked.

"Don't ask me," Ben said. "I'd let you have it, just so I could use it sometime."

"I'm absolutely sure," Martha said.

Lois took her 'Y' back. She wasn't really as upset with the game result as she was letting on.

It was strange, but even four months ago she wouldn't have imagined she, Jason, and Richard would be spending Christmas with Martha Kent and her fiancé, Ben Hubbard. But then, four months ago Superman hadn't died of the stress of traveling back through time to save the planet from Lex Luthor's madness. Four months ago she and Richard hadn't been given memories of that other future, the one Superman died to prevent.

As predicted, the horrific memories of Armageddon had faded into something that resembled having seen a very disturbing movie. She and Richard had mostly stopped having nightmares about that version of history. At least Lois assumed Richard had stopped having nightmares. Less than a month after Superman's death, Richard chose to move out of their river front house.

"They say there's only one way to console a widow," he had said. "I didn't know I was consoling one when I asked you to marry me."

"Richard, I..."

He shook his head. "You said it yourself, you still love him. I'm not fool enough to think I can compete with him."

"Richard, you don't have to do this..."

"Yes, I do," he said. "I've never been willing to settle for second best, and neither have you. I just hope, at least for Jason's sake, we can stay friends."

They agreed to split custody - Lois had Jason during the school week and Richard had him for weekends - and they settled into amicable non-domesticity as Richard moved into a small apartment in the city. The house was hers and she let him keep his seaplane docked there.

The newsroom rumor mill had buzzed for several weeks about what had happened between them, but none of them knew the truth. Perry hadn't told anyone what Superman had wanted the day of his mysterious reappearance wearing black instead of the iconic primary colors. Lois and Richard had only said that Luthor had been dealt with under Kryptonian law. They hadn't told anyone the details of Luthor's trial, or of Superman's death.

Martha Kent was the only person that Lois told of what had really happened that day in Superman's fortress. She had been the one to tell Martha that her beloved son was dead and, although it wasn't much of a consolation, she was also a grandmother.

Martha and her fiancé, Ben Hubbard, came to Metropolis for Thanksgiving and to meet Jason and Lois's family.

"Lois, what's wrong?" her mother had asked when she told her parents she had invited her ex-partner's mother to Thanksgiving dinner.

"What do you mean?" Lois asked.

"You're going out of your way to be nice to your father," Elinor Lane said. "You've

invited your ex-fiancé and his current girl friend and you've invited your ex-partner's mother and her boyfriend to Thanksgiving dinner. Not that I object to having a houseful, but I know how much you hate these family get-togethers. So either you're dying or something else is wrong."

Lois's first instinct had been to deny it. Instead she said, "A couple months ago something happened that made me realize exactly how important family was for me. Made me realize how close to the edge we all are. One misstep..."

*"Lois, **are** you ill? Is that what's going on?"*

"No, Mama. I'm okay, really I am. But I... A very good friend of mine died because something needed to be done and he was the only one who could do it and even though he succeeded, it killed him. It finally hit me how fragile everything is. We think we have forever. But it could all end tomorrow."

"But your ex-partner's mother?" Elinor asked. Lois's father was sitting in his chair, listening.

"She's Jason's other grandma, Mama. Clark Kent is Jason's biological father. And even if Jason never gets to meet his father, he should at the very least, know his father's family."

"Lois, is he the friend that died?" her father asked with uncharacteristic gentleness.

"No," Lois lied.

Martha and Ben were both as sweet as Lois remembered from the other future. Even Lois's father, the General, was charmed by them. It seemed that Ben Hubbard had served in the Far East at about the same time Sam Lane had.

Now Lois, Jason, and Richard were spending Christmas in Smallville, Kansas. Richard hadn't needed to come along, but it felt *right*.

"I haven't decorated for the holidays in years," Martha told them when they finally got to the farmhouse. "But I found all my old decorations. I thought Jason would like to help trim the tree. Clark used to love... I sound like a silly old woman, don't I? But part of me doesn't believe he's dead."

"I know," Lois admitted. "I have the same problem. I know what I saw, but part of me keeps hoping... I know miracles happen. I just keep hoping we'll have another one." As she spoke her hand went to the small velvet bag she wore on a thin cord. Inside was the memory crystal Mike had given her. 'You'll know what to do when the time comes,' he had said. She still didn't know what he meant.

The Scrabble game was over. Richard and Martha were tied. Lois was several hundred points behind them and Ben was close behind her, but Lois suspected he hadn't been trying very hard. Lois was a prize winning writer, but Scrabble wasn't her game.

Jason was in the living room, tapping out Christmas tunes on Martha's aged upright piano. The newly decorated Christmas tree glittered in the corner of the room.

Jason heard it first - a distant rumble, almost like an earthquake. He stopped playing the piano and looked over at his mother.

"Mommy?"

Then Lois heard it too. It sounded like an overweight freight train approaching fast. The house rattled and the lights blinked several times.

"Earthquake?" Ben murmured.

Martha had gone to the kitchen window and was staring out at the sky and snow covered fields.

The night sky turned red, brightening until it almost looked like it was on fire. Something

large and round and shiny streaked overhead and the sky brightened to almost noon-time intensity. Then a thunderous sonic boom shook the house and the sky went dark again.

"What the devil?" Ben murmured.

A few seconds later the old farmhouse was shaken again, this time by a deafening explosion.

"Ben, would you stay with Jason, please?" Martha said, grabbing her coat.

"We're coming with you," Richard announced, handing Lois her coat and shrugging into his own.

"Shouldn't we call the sheriff?" Ben asked.

"There's not much Rachel can do about a meteorite hitting the back field," Martha commented as she headed for the door. Then she stopped and looked back at Lois and Richard. "Let's bring some blankets, just in case."

"In case of what, Martha?" Ben asked.

Martha's expression was worried yet hopeful. "In case that wasn't a meteorite."

Lois gave Jason a quick kiss on the cheek then followed Richard and Martha out to Martha's old truck. Richard threw the blankets into the bed of the truck and climbed into the driver's seat. In the distance, Lois could see a red glow lighting up the sky in one of the further fields.

"It's exactly where he landed before," Martha said. She was seated between Richard and Lois, pointing out the road to Richard.

"Where who... oh," Richard said as he turned the truck off the gravel road onto a stubbly field.

"Ben doesn't know about Clark, does he?" Lois asked.

"He suspects," Martha said. "After all, everybody knew you were Superman's main squeeze. It's a little doubtful the famous Lois Lane would have suddenly fallen for a farmer's son."

Lois spotted the charred trench and the crater. Deep in the crater was something that looked like a huge crystal Christmas ornament that had been through a fire. It still was glowing red in places. Richard stopped the truck and got out, followed by Lois and Martha. The heat could be felt dozens of feet away.

"It's exactly like before," Martha said. "This field belonged to old man Schuster then."

Lois tested how hot the ground was with her booted foot and kept going. *Clark's space ship... was it possible?* The ground was cooling quickly - it was, after all only four days before Christmas in Kansas. She stepped closer to the crystal ship even though the heat was still coming off it, making the air shimmer around it.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned, expecting to see Richard or Martha.

"No, it's still too hot," an impossibly familiar voice said.

"Clark?"

He stood there, swaying. "Lois?"

Then his eyes rolled up in his head and his knees buckled.

"Martha! Richard!" she yelled as she tried to keep him from hitting the ground.

Clark's first conscious thought on awakening was that the house smelled like Christmas - ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, pine tree, and coffee. The second was that he was in his old room, in his old bed. The construction paper stars he'd put up when he was in kindergarten were still on the ceiling. *I'm home. The nightmares weren't real.*

He rolled out of bed. The sun was already up, golden rays glistening on the snow outside.

He looked around the room. The old bookcases were still there, loaded down with his books, albeit arranged a little more neatly than he had left them. There were photographs from his childhood on wall. But there were other photos too, of a boy with brown hair he didn't recognize with a woman he did - Lois. There was also a teddy bear on the bed and some toys on the floor. What was going on? Mom had company?

Clark checked the closet. His old clothes were hanging there, still in their dry cleaning bags. He put on a white t-shirt and jeans, grabbed his glasses and headed downstairs. The living room was decorated for Christmas. As far as Clark knew, his mom had stopped decorating the house for the holidays after he left high school.

"Mom?" he called. He heard voices from the kitchen. His powers weren't back quite yet - he hadn't been exposed to the yellow sun for long enough yet to rebuild his reserves. But even without his powers he knew his mother wasn't alone.

"Mom?" he called again, walking into the old farm kitchen. Mom was there with the small boy from the pictures upstairs. Lois was there, along with a man Clark didn't know. He'd thought he'd heard Lois the night before, after the landing. But he'd thought it was a dream. But she was here, at the farm with his mother.

Martha wiped her hands on her apron and pulled Clark into a tearful hug. "Oh my God, I was afraid I'd never see you again. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. "A little confused, though."

Martha laughed. "You know Lois, of course. That's Richard White from the Daily Planet and this little guy..." As she spoke she pulled the boy to her. "... is Jason Lane."

Clark's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Surprise, Lois Lane is a mommy," Lois said with a chuckle.

"You're Clark, aren't you?" the boy asked. "Grandma Kent's Clark?"

Clark nodded. Grandma Kent?

Jason held out his right hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mister Clark."

Clark solemnly shook Jason's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Jason."

"You look like you could use some coffee," Lois said with another chuckle.

Clark nodded, sitting down at the table before his knees gave out from the shock.

The man, Richard, handed him a mug of coffee. "Don't worry. Lois didn't make it."

"What's going on?" Clark asked. It was just too weird, Lois and her son with his mom at the farm. The Lois he knew... But this wasn't the Lois he'd left behind. This Lois had a son, and by the looks of it, a boyfriend.

"It's a long, complicated story," Lois said. She picked up her coffee, leaned against the counter and watched him over the rim of her mug. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No," Clark admitted.

Richard took Jason's hand and announced they were going outside for a bit to see what Ben was up to. Lois seemed comfortable with that.

"Who is he?" Clark asked. He nodded toward the door Richard and Jason had disappeared through.

"A friend. Like I said, it's a long complicated story," Lois said. "But, I have some things that belong to you. One is a Kryptonian memory crystal."

"A Kryptonian..."

"It carries the memories of someone who died saving the Earth," she explained, placing a little velvet bag on the table in front of him.. "*Your* memories of events that will never happen

because you did the impossible."

Lois wasn't making much sense. How did she come to have a Kryptonian memory crystal? And why would she think it belonged to him? Unless... Lois had been there last night. That hadn't been a dream.

"How long have you known?" he asked. She knew he was Superman. She knew and she wasn't furious with him. *Yet.*

She smiled and that worried him even more.

"A couple months," she said. "Believe me I've had time to get over being furious with you for leaving. Of course, you dying saving the world helped."

"But I'm not dead," he pointed out. He went over to the counter to pour himself another cup of coffee.

"Which only proves there really are miracles," she said. "And speaking of miracles, you haven't asked why my son and I are spending Christmas with your mother."

"Okay, I'll bite," he said. His mother had made herself scarce.

"Lois Lane is a mother," Lois said. "But Clark Kent is a father. Jason is your son."

Grandma Kent. "But how?"

"The usual way," she said, stepping closer. "You know, man plus woman plus unsupervised time..."

Clark pulled her into his arms.

"I've missed you so much," she murmured. "Don't ever leave us like that again."

Clark realized she was crying against his chest. "I promise."

There was a rustle of what sounded like feathers and a faint chuckle.

"What was that?" he wondered.

"What was what?" she asked, lifting her head. He wiped the tears away with his thumb and bent to kiss her. There was another rustle and the chuckle was louder.

"Oh, that," Lois said with a tremulous smile. "That is probably one very self-satisfied guardian angel called Mike. Remind me to introduce him to you sometime." She stood on tip-toe and kissed him gently. "Merry Christmas, Clark and welcome home."

And yes, this really is a Christmas Story.