

Destined: Journey

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Summary: Until recently, young 16-year-old Kal-El's entire life has been about training and preparing to be Supreme Ruler of Krypton. But when he learns his planet is doomed, he faces a new journey — not just to be Krypton's sole survivor on a distant planet called Earth, but also to find a way to create a life and a legacy his parents would be proud of. Part one of a three-part epic.

Story Size: 17,967 words (101Kb as text)

Author's note: This AU has consumed me since I started seriously working on it, and it grew in the oddest of ways — starting with a little hint of an idea based on an old fic I read and then a few lines of dialogue that popped into my head. I wanted to tell a sort of love story that I've never seen before in an L&C fic but that I've really wanted to read. And as I started thinking about it and beginning to outline a story, I realized I really, *really*, *really* needed to tell the whole backstory if I was going to do it justice... So, 280,000 words later, and here we are...

I need to send HUGE thanks to KSaraSara and lovetvfan, my wonderful cheerleaders — without the two of you, I don't know whether this story would have ever gotten finished, and it certainly wouldn't be what it is. And of course, thank you to KSaraSara for BRing, helping with Summary writing, and for...other stuff that I'll leave for my author's note for the other two parts. :)

This first part, *Destined: Journey*, is part one of a three-part story. The other two parts (*Destined: Friends* and *Destined: Legacy*) are available on the message boards, AO3, and the nfc archive.

Chapter 1

The boy walked with purpose down the long corridor, his shoulders squared and his head held high. Father would be waiting for him at the laboratory, and he was already running late. But it couldn't be helped. He'd had to finish the task his father had given him first — the gathering of books from the library.

And now, he carried the stack, weighing heavily in his arms, as he hurried along, his footsteps echoing in the otherwise quiet hallway. He passed an older man dressed in all white, and the man bowed his head and knelt as the

boy passed, but he was used to the gesture, and he did not slow or acknowledge the man. It would be seen as improper if he did anyways.

The boy's own flowing robes, which he was required to wear over his skintight leisurewear when passing through the hallways of the palace, were also white but were adorned with intricately embroidered geometric patterns in a shimmery dark blue and with his family crest on the chest. He wore his crest proudly. After all, he was Kal of the House of El. And, in just four years, on his twentieth birthday, his title would be exalted to Lord Kal of the House of El, and he would take his place as Supreme Ruler of Krypton.

But for today, for right now, his task was to assist his father in...some way. Kal's forehead creased slightly in thought as he remembered his father's words from earlier in the day.

"After midday exercise with Jin-Dal, go to the library and bring me three books. The titles are these: *Planets of the Fifth Realm*, *Hyperspace Travel*, and *Lost Languages: English of Earth*. Meet me here no later than sunset, Kal. It is important that we speak. And tell not a soul of this. Not even Drek-Dal."

The concern in his father's voice had tugged at something in him, and an unfamiliar feeling — nervousness, maybe? — had settled over him. But he had gone on with his day, trying to push away the odd feeling that something was terribly wrong. He had eaten midday meal with Drek, as they always did after morning teachings, and then they had headed to the exercise wing to practice fighting techniques with Jin-Dal, Drek's father. And then, he had bid farewell to his friend, donned his robes, and hurried off to the library, where he had silently waded through shelves of books to find the three his father had requested. They were dusty and old and looked as though no one had pulled them from the shelves, well, ever maybe. Yet, they intrigued him. And whatever his father had planned also intrigued him.

Kal made the final turn down another long corridor and saw his father's laboratory at the end, the closed door embossed with the pentagon-shaped symbol of the House of El. He quickened his pace more and closed the distance in a matter of seconds. As he approached, the door automatically shimmered out of existence for him and then rematerialized with a faint pop behind him, and he hesitated; the pop sound meant the door was locked — no one could follow him in. They were effectively sealed off from the outside world.

He swallowed back the same emotion as earlier — nervousness, he decided again — and stepped forward into the laboratory. Jor-El, Chief Scientist and Advisor to the Supreme Ruler of Krypton, stood next to a holographic

panel, flicking his fingers rapidly along control keys that Kal could not make out. An outline of a small spacecraft rose up into the air, and Kal's eyes widened briefly before he blinked away the surprise and once again took on a more neutral expression.

"Good evening, Father," he greeted. "I have brought the three books you requested. I apologize for being late. The *Lost Languages* book was difficult to find."

"Kal, please bring the books here. I have news to share with you." His father's voice was deep and oddly resonant in the small laboratory.

Kal complied and placed the books on the table as he stepped up to his father. He stood as tall as his father now and shared his father's broad shoulders and jet-black hair. However, he had gotten his deep blue eyes from his mother, La-Ra, who was currently on a journey to the eastern city of Valandar and was not expected back for three more days.

Jor-El turned to face his son, his expression impassive as always, and Kal straightened up taller as his father seemed to appraise him.

"Divest of those robes; they are no good in a laboratory, my son. And then, we shall speak of...this," he instructed, gesturing to the holographic projections in front of him depicting the small spacecraft and, Kal now saw, a flight path with a trajectory to the Fifth Realm.

"Yes, Father," he responded, and he moved back toward the front of the room as he removed and folded his robes. He placed them on a shelf at the front of the room and then returned to his father's side, now clad in his simple black leisurewear, also embroidered with his family crest in shimmering dark blue on the chest.

Jor-El stared at the hologram, but was silent for several minutes. Kal stood next to him, studying the image in front of him. The spaceship was a single-person craft with a simple, sleek design. The list of specifications designated that the ship held enough fuel for two hyperspace jumps, which Kal quickly calculated could transport the ship to the Fifth Realm, but only on a one-way journey. He blinked at the hologram again. Only a one-way journey.

"Father —"

Jor-El turned abruptly toward Kal, interjecting with unfailingly blunt words. "Kal, my son, Krypton is dying. The planet's core has been exploited by our people for too long, and the life of the planet is nearing its end."

Kal stared at his father, unable to respond as he processed the meaning of his father's words. Jor-El continued, twisting back toward the hologram. He reached out and touched one image — a planet — and the image enlarged and began to rotate.

"In mere months, maybe weeks, my son, Krypton is going to explode as the core becomes unstable. You see,

Kal, we have been mining iron from the core without consideration for maintaining the balance of other metals, primarily nickel. This imbalance has led to the generation of excess heat, and that heat will result in a detonation large enough to break the entire planet apart."

Jor-El again touched the hologram, and the planet began to rotate faster and faster. Kal flinched involuntarily as the planet then exploded in a burst of light, virtual debris flying everywhere and then disappearing as the holographic space rocks blinked out of existence, leaving only the small spaceship and its spec list.

"Father... Surely, the Council...?" Kal could not find the words to finish his sentence. He turned away from the hologram and toward his father, but the older man offered no comforting look or embrace. Kal straightened up taller and again pushed away his nervousness.

"I have approached the Council as well as the Advisory Committee on Sciences several times. Unfortunately, they have decided that my calculations are incorrect and that we have nothing to be concerned with. In short, my son, they have abandoned us in this, and they will do nothing to support any measures I have suggested. My son, there is nothing left to do. Krypton is doomed."

Jor-El turned his back to Kal then and seemed to hunch over a bit, but only very briefly. When his father faced him again, his eyes gleamed with determination, and he motioned for Kal to follow him. Together, they walked through a doorway connecting the main laboratory to an even smaller room. Jor-El pressed a button on the wall next to them, and a control panel materialized in front of him. After another moment, robotic arms emerged from the ceiling and began reaching into a void, methodically pulling out small pieces of a shiny, silvery metal and arranging them on a platform. Kal recognized the fabricator machine at once.

"You are building the spacecraft. The one from the hologram," Kal stated.

Next to him, his father nodded, and they watched in silence for several moments. The machine's progress was very slow; each piece was assembled with the utmost care, and the arms paused every few seconds as though running more calculations. Kal turned to his father.

"Why, Father? What will you do with this spacecraft? It is only for one person. It cannot save everyone."

"No, son, it cannot. We cannot. I tried and failed. I am but one man, and the Council will not listen to me in this instance. I believe they feel the problem is too big, and they do not want the people of Krypton to panic if they heard the news. Or, I suppose it is possible that they indeed do not believe me. In any case, Kal, this ship, this spacecraft — it is for you, my son."

"Me, Father?" Kal could not keep the surprise out of

his voice this time. He shook his head slowly as he stepped closer to the platform. “No, Father, I cannot leave Mother...I cannot leave Mother and you and all of Krypton. That is not right, Father.”

Jor-El was again silent, and Kal spun back around, his heart pounding in his chest. He suddenly felt as he often did when Jin-Dal made him and Drek run laps in the exercise wing for hours.

Finally, Jor-El spoke, his voice quiet but firm.

“You must listen to me, Kal,” he said. He placed his hands on Kal’s shoulders and almost shook him as he spoke. “This spacecraft will take you to a planet in the Fifth Realm. A planet the inhabitants call simply ‘Earth.’ They are a more primitive people than us, but they are like us too in many ways. You will fit in there, Kal, and you can grow and reach adulthood and build a new life there. Your mother and I have decided this, Kal. You shall not argue with us.”

Kal’s chest seemed to heave with the effort it took to breathe, but he maintained his posture, standing upright next to his father.

“Yessir,” he said, and he bowed his head.

“I have asked you to bring the three books because those are the books you will study by,” Jor-El explained. “You can learn the language that is most commonly spoken on Earth and some of the history of the planet and its solar system. And the book on hyperspace travel will prepare you for your journey.”

“I understand, Father.” Kal did not trust himself to say anything else or argue with his father anymore. It seemed he had no choice. The decision had already been made for him by his mother and father. He would abandon them, all of them — his entire race of Kryptonians. He would abandon them. He uttered one final word to his father. “When?”

“The spacecraft will be ready in twenty-one days, my son. I can only hope that will be enough time. Consider yourself relieved of all other household duties so that you may study. However, I do wish for you to continue with your daily teachings and exercises with Jin-Dal and Drek-Dal. Otherwise, they may become suspicious and wonder why you are absent. We cannot have anyone else knowing of this. It would be much too dangerous, my son.”

“I understand, Father,” Kal answered in a monotone. “I will begin my studies right away.”

Jor-El simply nodded to his son and then turned and watched as the fabricator machine continued to add pieces bit by bit to the spacecraft. With a final bow to his father, Kal turned and left the small room, dressed himself again in his robes, and lifted the three books into his arms.

He would do as his father told him.

After all, he really had no choice.

Chapter 2

Kal closed the book and set it down on his desk as he took a small bite of his pastry from morning meal. The English language, he decided, had to be the worst language he’d ever tried to learn. And that included ancient Kandorian, which his father had insisted he become familiar with despite the fact that it had not been used in thousands of years. But English made even less sense. Although they seemed to have a rule for everything, every rule had at least one, if not several, exceptions, none of which followed any notable pattern. And they had multiple words for a single object. For example, a floor covering could be called “*carpet*” or “*rug*” or “*mat*” or “*runner*.” But “*runner*” could also be used to describe someone who ran, for fun or to get away from a dangerous or disturbing situation. To make matters even worse, some words could have opposing meanings. He had just finished reading that the verb “*to buckle*” could mean either to fasten something together or to warp or break under a weight.

A week had already passed since his father had given him his instructions, and Kal felt like he was no closer to being able to speak or understand English than when he had started learning.

And he was tired. His father had insisted he stay up late every night, reading or studying or working with him in the laboratory. And since her return from her travels several days prior, his mother had also given Kal extra tasks. They had sat together and made a list of the items Kal should pack for his journey, and she had listened to him speak to her in English, gently encouraging him as he stumbled over the words. She had also spent several hours with him just the night before, reading to him in the library — stories from books on little-known aspects of Kryptonian culture and history, as though she needed him to remember.

Yet despite all of this extra work, Kal was still required to meet with Drek and Jin-Dal for morning teachings and exercise every day. Today, in fact, he had assessments in all subjects — mathematics, science, writing, and history — followed by physical tests of running, strength, stamina, and fighting technique. He would be busy all day, which was why he had gotten up earlier than usual to study English.

“*My name is Kal-El from Krypton,*” he tested out loud. “*I am...sixteen...years old, and I would like to pet your cat.*”

He did not know what a “*cat*” was — some type of small domesticated animal, according to the *Lost Languages* book — and the words felt so foreign to his ears. It was difficult not to cringe as he spoke. The book provided pronunciation guides for the sounds and letters,

translating into Kryptonian equivalents, but Kal felt completely lost. He could speak thirteen languages — Kandorian, Urrikan, and Surrusian, which were the three languages most commonly used by the Kryptonian people, as well as ancient Kandorian and nine other languages he had learned through his extensive education in preparation to lead his people. However, this was the first language he had been made to learn completely on his own, without anyone to help him practice.

He stood up and looked around his quarters.

“I am standing in my...bedroom,” he stumbled, pursing his lips to try to find the right word. He turned to his left, where the soft red light of the morning sun filtered through the large window taking up most of one wall. *“It is morning...or evening...?”* He frowned, moved back to his desk, and flipped through a few pages of the book, his fingers landing on the page describing time of day on Earth. *“Morning,”* he declared confidently. *“It is morning. The sun is rising...”*

He stared out at the landscape in the distance. Their sun, a red dwarf star, was only about half the size of Earth’s sun, he had learned. Yet, as it rose into the sky over the distant horizon dotted with ice-covered mountains, it looked to him as huge and majestic as ever, bathing the land in a familiar reddish glow. His eyes closed as he imagined what a sunrise on Earth might look like, how the sunlight would heat his skin, and whether the climate would be warmer or colder than that of Krypton.

“I have many tasks to complete today,” he continued out loud, trying to hear the sounds as he spoke. *“Soon it will be...it will be...”* He sighed with frustration. What was midday meal called? He could not seem to remember. Again, he flipped through the book on his desk and nodded as he landed on the correct page. *“Breakfast,” “lunch,”* and *“dinner”* were the three main meals. He repeated the words in his head and then tested his voice again. *“Soon it will be lunchtime, and we will eat.”*

A loud knock at his door startled him, and he quickly closed the book, shoved it under another book on his desk, and cleared his throat as he hurried to open the door.

“Drek! You are early, my friend. We do not start assessments for some time still,” Kal stated, pulling his robes on over his leisurewear and following his friend into the hallway. He and Drek had been friends for as long as he could remember, and although they were similar in age, Kal stood nearly a head taller than Drek, and Drek’s light brown hair and bright green eyes further set him apart from Kal. Drek wore his own robes, also white in color, but with the light green embroidery of the House of Dal crest, a circular symbol with three lines intersecting in the center. Because his family’s status was not as high as Kal’s, the embroidery on Drek’s robes was much less

intricate. Despite this, Drek stood tall and confident next to his friend, and the two started off down the corridor together.

“Father wanted us to get started early,” Drek explained. “He said this year’s assessments are more difficult, particularly in mathematics, and that he has a special challenge for us to complete during our physical tests. I trust that is acceptable to you, Kal?”

“Of course, my friend,” Kal responded easily, and the two turned left down another corridor that opened into the Great Hall.

Small groups of councilmen, scientists, and advisors sat at round tables, talking in muted tones amongst themselves while they ate morning meal and drank tea. Kal and Drek had both already eaten morning meal earlier, although they still had to pass through the Great Hall to reach the teaching quarters. As they walked straight by the rows of tables, men stood, bowed their heads, and knelt to acknowledge their future Supreme Ruler. Kal continued walking briskly, maintaining his neutral expression to mask his discomfort. He absently wondered if he would ever get used to people bowing before him. And then, with great unease, he realized he would not have to get used to this, because in only approximately two more weeks, he would be on a small spaceship, jumping through hyperspace at many times the speed of light, on his way toward Earth. He stumbled, and Drek reached out to grasp his arm.

“Kal, my friend, are you feeling well this morning?” Drek’s voice held a touch of concern, but Kal quickly brushed it off.

“Yes, my friend, I apologize. I must have tripped.”

And they continued out of the Great Hall, turned right, and entered into the teaching quarters to take their assessments, Kal’s mind still whirring with the realization that he had only a short time left here.

Despite Drek’s warning that the assessments were to be more difficult this year, Kal sped through his in record time, completing all four subjects before midday meal. He then hurried off to the Great Hall to eat while waiting for Drek to finish.

Sitting by himself at a small table in the corner of the room and picking uninterestedly at his simple meal of oatmeal and vegetables, Kal took the time to watch men come and go around him. Most of the men wore their nicest white robes while here in the Great Hall. Those in gray or light brown were of lower status, most often aides accompanying their superiors, while those in green were slaves. Kal lowered his eyes to his food. He’d never been comfortable with the thought of men owning other men or women. His family did not own slaves or concubines,

although his father had considered buying a slave one time. His mother, thankfully, had convinced him to reconsider. But many of the noble families did own slaves, and the ruling family in particular, currently the House of Zod, set to switch to the House of El on Kal's twentieth birthday, had always found it necessary to own many slaves. Indeed, the slaves owned by the ruling house were responsible for the important work of food production and clothing manufacturing, among other tasks.

Kal frowned as he took a small bite of the brownish vegetable in his bowl, its slippery texture familiar and yet unappetizing at the same time. He had already been working with his preparatory advisors and a few current Council members on a plan to shift to paid labor in all sectors, including agriculture and textiles. Certainly, he believed, the ruling family was wealthy enough to not need slave labor. And, working with his advisors, he had come up with a solid plan to phase out slave labor all together over a ten-year period.

But now, none of that mattered anymore. Krypton would be gone. Everyone would be dead. Everyone except him.

Startling him out of his dark thoughts, Drek sat heavily in the chair opposite his with a weak sigh. His tray contained food items similar to Kal's — a bowl of oatmeal topped with vegetables, a small pastry, and a mug of hot tea. Drek dug hungrily into the oatmeal.

"You finished your assessments too quickly, my friend," Drek said after he swallowed a mouthful and washed it down with a sip of tea. "Father is concerned that your marks will be low."

Kal pushed away his own tray, his food only half eaten, and casually surveyed the room again. No women. There were no women or children. The women and children, he knew, ate in a separate room. But on Earth, he had learned, men and women and children could eat together, attend teachings and exercise together, and spend leisure time together. Women were also important members of society, including scientists and leaders. He blinked, trying to imagine the room half filled with women or girls his own age, and he unconsciously tilted his head a bit as he wondered how that might change things.

"Kal, did you hear me? My father said —"

"Your father is wrong, Drek," Kal interjected, his tone unusually taut. "The assessments were no more difficult than last year, when I received top marks. And I completed them quickly because I have more important things to do today. When can we begin physical tests? I would like to start as soon as possible."

Kal stood, leaving his tray at his table for someone to clean, as was customary. He then started toward the exercise wing, suddenly needing to be anywhere but near

his friend. He would start early, finish his physical assessments, and then head back to his room to study more.

"*I am running out of time,*" he said in a low voice, the foreign words sticking in his throat. "*Soon, I will be gone. Soon, Krypton will be gone.*" English seemed the wrong language to be speaking those words, and maybe he should not be saying them at all. But at least he knew no one else, if there had even been anyone else around, could possibly have understood him. No one else knew how to speak English, after all.

He opened the door to the exercise track where he would complete most of his physical tests that afternoon, and he straightened up taller as he scanned the empty room, feeling dreadfully alone. He wondered just how alone he would feel on his journey to the Fifth Realm, to Earth, with nothing but black space stretching out around him for billions of miles. Alone in the darkness for about two days — which was how long his father had said the trip would take. He tightened his jaw, walked to a small shelving unit along the eastern wall, and removed his robes. His black leisurewear shimmered faintly in the dim light, and its regal blue symbol, which Kal now knew oddly resembled a stylized letter 'S' in the English language, seemed to reflect off the white walls of the room.

Ahead of him, the track stretched out, circling around in a large oval shape. One of his tests today would be to run the equivalent of twenty-five kilometers on this track, which meant seemingly endless loops for over approximately one and a half hours. But the faster he ran, the faster he could finish. He would complete the test in record time. "*And then I will study English more,*" he said quietly.

A short figure appeared from the other end of the room, his white robes flowing behind him as he hurried around the outside of the track toward Kal. His sharp voice raised, the stocky blonde-haired man declared, "You are early, Young Lord Kal. I was not expecting you for some time still. Where is Drek?"

The man halted abruptly in front of Kal and knelt briefly, as was customary. Kal stood still as a statue. When the man rose again, Kal cleared his throat.

"Drek is in the Great Hall, finishing his midday meal, Jin-Dal. I wish to start my testing early. I have work to complete for my father this evening," Kal explained tersely. He clasped his hands behind his back and squared his shoulders.

"Very well then, my young lord. We shall start with strength testing," Jin-Dal said. He tapped a button on a band on his wrist, and a holographic projection showing Kal's testing itinerary and scores from the previous year

flickered on in front of them. A moment later, Jin-Dal cleared his throat and motioned for Kal to follow him. “This test is just like last year’s, my young lord. You will stand underneath the weight press, and we will measure the weight you can support. The weight will increase in increments of five kilograms until you can no longer support the weight.”

They approached the rear wall of the room, and Jin-Dal again tapped the button on his wristband. The wall opened up, and a platform emerged. Kal stepped onto the platform and positioned himself in a slight lunge position, with his right leg a bit forward and his left leg a bit behind him. He then raised his arms up over his head and nodded to Jin-Dal.

“Last year, you supported one hundred seventy-five kilograms, so we will start at one hundred eighty kilograms today,” Jin-Dal explained. He input a few numbers into the holographic keyboard in front of him, and a large, round press lowered down from the ceiling, stopping as it reached Kal’s hands.

Kal settled into his lunge, pressed his palms flat against the hard surface above him, and readied himself for the weight. A second later, the press above him became heavy, and he pushed against it, easily holding up the one hundred eighty kilograms. He took a deep breath as Jin-Dal said, “Increasing by five kilograms,” and the weight bearing down on him became heavier. And the process repeated. One hundred ninety kilograms. One hundred ninety-five kilograms. Two hundred kilograms. Two hundred five kilograms. And up and up. Kal knew he’d gotten stronger over the past year, but the actual numbers seemed inordinate.

Several minutes later, he topped out at two hundred twenty-five kilograms. As he lowered his arms and stepped off the platform, Jin-Dal nodded with a touch of pride and finished inputting the results into his virtual platform.

“A respectable improvement over last year, Young Lord Kal. You have been working hard, I see,” he said.

Kal just nodded an acknowledgement as he stretched out his shoulders. He tilted his head toward the track.

“Sprinting is next and then the endurance run?” he asked.

“Yes, Kal. And then, in addition to the test of fighting technique, I have one more challenge for you and Drek today. It is a rope climbing endurance test. I have been trying to implement this as part of your assessments for years; however, the Council would not approve. I have finally convinced them to allow it.”

Jin-Dal again motioned for Kal to follow him to the other side of the room, back toward the door where Kal had entered. The two stopped at the first section of track, and a control panel materialized next to Jin-Dal.

“One lap is your sprint test,” the older man commented. A moment later, he added, “Last year, you completed one lap, equivalent to one-fifth of a kilometer, in twenty-six point three four rs. Please step onto the track.”

Kal briefly stretched his legs and then moved to stand on the short track, made of a solid material with just a tiny bit of give beneath his feet. He readied himself at a faint line on the ground, designating the approximate start line, and took a long, deep breath.

“The machine is calibrated to you. You may begin when ready.”

Kal closed his eyes a moment, settled himself into a lunge, and then launched forward, almost immediately reaching his fastest pace. He breathed hard and rapidly, his lungs burning with the need for more oxygen, but he pushed on. His long stride ate up distance around the track, and in no time, he passed across the same line where he’d started and allowed himself to slow to a jog and then a walk, his chest heaving with the effort. He felt he had surely been faster than last year. He glanced over toward Jin-Dal, who nodded absently while tapping away at the holographic keys of the control panel.

“Impressive again, Kal. You improved your time by nearly three seconds,” Jin-Dal confirmed.

Kal nodded and suddenly felt slightly dizzy. He stopped and sat on the hard ground, lowering his head into his knees while taking deep breaths.

“You are pushing yourself hard today, Young Lord Kal. Rest and have some drink before your next test.”

Kal complied, taking several minutes to rest and drink. During his short break, Drek showed up and completed his sprint test, coming in several seconds over Kal’s record time. Kal then insisted on starting his endurance test while Drek readied to complete his strength test. Once the machine was again calibrated, Kal began. One hundred twenty-five laps around the short track to complete twenty-five kilometers. Last year, he had barely finished, breaking into a walk for the last five laps to finish at one hour, forty-four minutes, thirty-seven seconds. Drek had easily beat him, finishing at one hour, thirty-nine minutes, sixteen seconds. However, Kal fully intended to finish much stronger this time.

As he ran, he cleared his mind of all negative thoughts. His lungs *did not* ache, and his feet *did not* burn. He was strong and capable and fast, and he could keep going. He would keep going. Then, he began to have to distract himself from the monotony of the constant circling around the plain room. So, he recited English words and phrases, his eyes flickering around the “*room*” to the “*window*” and looking “*outside*.” He thought, “*My friend will not run faster than I,*” as he increased his pace even more. After

fifty laps or so, Drek joined him, and Kal found himself pushing himself even harder to keep up. Eventually, his pace surpassed Drek's, despite the fact that Kal had been running for much longer, and he heard his friend huff in protest as Kal pulled away. *"I am Kal-El from Krypton. This is my spaceship. I have traveled from far away. I would like to pet your cat."* He wondered if he would encounter a "cat" when he arrived on Earth. He wondered what a "cat" would look like. Maybe it would have scales or spikes, like the wild dolomers he had seen with his mother when they traveled last year. *"I am Kal-El from Krypton. This is my spaceship. I have traveled from far away. I would like to pet your cat."*

"Young Lord Kal, you can stop now. Your test was completed three laps ago."

Jin-Dal's voice broke through into Kal's thoughts, and he sucked in a long breath as he slowed, moved to the outer edge of the track, and stopped. His heart pounded in his chest, and he collapsed onto his back on the hard ground, breathing deeply and fast. His eyes closed as he groaned.

"You are pushing hard, my young lord," Jin-Dal repeated.

"Did I beat my time from last year?"

That was all he wanted to know. He had to know. Because he had to beat everything from last year. For some reason, he had decided there was nothing more important.

"Young Lord Kal, you beat our best time on record. One hour, twenty-four minutes, thirty-one seconds. You are pushing hard."

"Good."

And he lay panting on the ground for many minutes until his heart slowed to a normal rate and his breathing was no longer labored. Then, he sat up, stood, and turned to Jin-Dal, who watched Drek continue to run laps around the track.

"I am ready for the rope climbing test and fighting technique, Jin-Dal," Kal said, his voice strong and steady. In his mind, he tried out his English, but he quickly realized he did not know the words for "rope climbing test" or "fighting technique." He shook his head slightly, but then assumed a more formal position with his shoulders square and his hands clasped behind his back.

Jin-Dal turned to Kal and stood staring at him for several seconds as though appraising whether Kal was actually ready for his next test. Kal knew that typically he would be required to take a longer break after the endurance test. However, he felt impatient and ready to go.

Finally, Jin-Dal glanced at Drek, who still had nearly thirty laps left to complete, and motioned for Kal to follow him back to the platform where he had performed the strength test hours ago. This time, when Jin-Dal input his

codes into the control panel, a square platform emerged, along with a transparent holographic grid running around the entire platform. Kal stepped up onto the platform and positioned himself at the ready for the fighting technique sequence.

"This test is just as you have performed it in the past, Young Lord Kal. You will present your skills in hand-to-hand fighting technique, and the system will assess your speed, the correctness of your skill, and the strength of your punches and kicks. As usual, please perform all of your skills in the traditional sequence, starting with blocks and punches and ending with kicks. Remember that the system assesses the flow and refinement of your movement as well." Jin-Dal paused and looked again at his data on the hologram. "There is much room for improvement over last year's results. You scored a seven point nine out of ten possible. Begin when ready, Young Lord Kal."

Kal nodded, took a deep breath to focus himself, and started his routine, as he'd practiced hundreds of times now. Outward block, upper block, lower block, inward block, closed hand block, rising block. Pause. Spinning backfist punch, cross punch, lunge punch, reverse lunge punch, straight punch, low jab, high jab, rising punch. Pause. Front kick, side kick, reverse side kick, pivot kick, back kick, inner crescent kick, outer crescent kick, double leg jump kick, flying side kick. Pause. Bow.

Kal's chest again heaved with his exertion, but he felt sure he had done well. He turned to Jin-Dal, who watched the system process Kal's performance. A moment later, Jin-Dal nodded at Kal.

"Nine point four. Excellent form, my young lord. You have improved much since last year."

"It is because of your superior teaching, Master Jin-Dal," Kal addressed formally. Again, he attempted to translate his words into English as he followed Jin-Dal to the opposite wall in the exercise room. And again, he realized he did not know the English words for "superior" or "teaching." He added them to the growing list of words he needed to look up when he arrived back at his quarters later.

They stopped at a long, thick white rope that hung from the ceiling. Kal had climbed the rope many times as part of exercise. However, he had never been tested on his rope climbing ability. He stood straight and square, his hands clasped behind his back, and listened carefully as Jin-Dal explained the rope climbing endurance test.

"The rope climbing test has two measures: the number of climbs up and down and the average speed for the first three climbs up and down. For a climb to count, you cannot use your legs to assist you. The legs must be held out in a piked or seated position and must not fall to more

than forty-five degrees below horizontal, or the test is considered complete. You must start seated on the ground here and climb the six meters to the black line and then back down to this red line.” Jin-Dal indicated to the two colored marks — the black one near the top of the rope and the red one near the bottom. “When you can no longer continue, the test is complete. Do you understand the rules for this test, my young lord?”

“Yessir,” Kal answered. He moved to sit below the rope and grasped the rope strongly with both hands, one up slightly higher than the other. He was vaguely aware of Drek staggering toward them after finishing his endurance run; however, he focused on his current task. He had no reference for what might be good marks on this test, but he told himself he would not stop until he had climbed up and down the rope at least five times. His eyes flew open. “Rope!” he exclaimed as the word came to him.

“I apologize, my young lord. I do not understand,” Jin-Dal said, his eyes narrowed slightly in confusion.

Kal mentally scolded himself and returned his face to a concentrated but neutral expression.

“It is nothing, Master Jin-Dal. Please, let us continue,” Kal replied calmly, and he again readied himself for the test. *At least five times up and down*, he thought, finding the English words.

“The system is calibrated and ready for you to start, Young Lord Kal.”

I am starting, Kal told himself in English. And then, he heaved himself up off the ground, holding his legs up at horizontal, and commenced his climb.

Chapter 3

Kal stood quietly behind his father and watched the machine continue to place piece after piece onto the growing spacecraft. Seven more days. His father said the spacecraft would be ready in seven more days. They would run a few simulations over the next several days as the vessel was nearing completion, and then, Kal would leave. He stared blankly as a robotic arm placed a small sliver of clear crystal about the size of a finger into a slot next to the simple control panel in the inner chamber of the spacecraft. The crystal had been programmed with the exact location to which the spaceship would navigate and the take-off and landing protocols; Kal would have to do nothing.

Soft footsteps approached from behind him, and Kal turned and bowed slightly to his mother. Her face was a mask, betraying no grief or pain or unease. Kal tried his best to maintain a calm expression, like hers, but he felt an unfamiliar knot growing in his stomach. He would miss her. He would miss his mother dearly.

“Tell me one more time, my son. What is it that you

will say once you reach Earth? Tell me in English, Kal,” La-Ra implored, her voice kind and gentle. Her blue eyes gazed upon him with hope, and he swallowed tightly as he formed the words in the still-awkward language he had worked obsessively to learn in the last two weeks.

“Hello. My name is Kal-El. I am from a faraway planet called Krypton. I come here in peace and wish to learn about your world. Please direct me to where I might find shelter and food. I appreciate your assistance. And I would also like to pet your cat.”

Kal knew neither of his parents understood a word he spoke, and so for his own amusement, he tended to always tack on a random statement at the end when they asked him to speak to them in English. Asking about petting a “cat” was still his favorite. He had tried over the last two weeks to guess what a “cat” might look like. Sometimes, he pictured the animal as a one-meter tall monster with a long tail covered in iridescent scales, large glassy eyes with slitted pupils, hooked claws for feet, and red and green feathers covering its thick body. Other times, he imagined something a little less grand — for example, a creature small enough to hold in one hand, covered in a thick, soft layer of fur. He hoped for the former; it sounded more interesting.

His mother nodded and held his gaze for a few extra seconds before moving away from him, closer to the spacecraft. Her eyes seemed to scan every bit of the small vessel carefully, looking for flaws. Jor-El also stood by, running calculations and simulations, testing and testing and testing some more.

Both of his parents had been working as tirelessly as he, and although he was reassured by their effort and trusted that his spacecraft would carry him the nearly one million light-years to Earth, he found it more and more difficult to accept that they were willing to send him off, knowing they would not survive.

“Mother, I think you should go to Earth instead of me,” Kal had told her two days prior as they shared evening meal together in their family’s quarters. He had started into a long and somewhat incoherent explanation as to why he felt that way. He had tried to appeal to every logical argument he could, even though this strange, irrational part of him just wanted to stand up and shout, “I cannot live while you die, Mother!” However, halfway through his long-winded rant, his father had stopped him and told him that he was not to bring up the subject again. Kal had hung his head, mumbled a quiet, “Yessir,” and continued to pick at his food, his appetite gone.

Now, as he stood watching his parents converse about whether the hyperjump system would function properly given the added weight of the pack Kal planned to bring with him and whether the trajectory of the landing would

account for the drag created by the varying thicknesses of the different layers of Earth's atmosphere, he knew his eventual departure from his home planet was indeed quite inevitable.

And would occur in only seven days.

He had also grown more distant from Drek and from his other friends, Tag-Do and Kin-Ra. It pained him too much to contemplate that he would be abandoning them to their deaths. And his father had finally given him permission to skip morning teachings, although Jor-El still insisted he attend exercise every day. Keeping in peak physical condition would be important for surviving the trip to Earth, Jor-El said.

Kal backed up a step and turned away from the spacecraft.

"I would like to take a walk to the far gardens, Mother. It should be quiet there. Will you accompany me?"

Kal had made the same request every evening for the last five days, and every time, his mother had some reason for not being able to accompany him. Today was no exception.

"I apologize, my son, but I must stay here and help your father recalibrate the navigation crystal for take-off. It seems the speed of Krypton's rotation is increasing, as your father postulated it would. We are nearing the end of Krypton," La-Ra said, her tone straightforward and impassive.

Kal's breath caught in his throat, but he did not allow himself to react outwardly. He straightened up and set his jaw.

"I see, Mother. Will you require my assistance with your recalibration, or may I take my walk?"

"You may go, Kal. Your father and I will expect you at evening meal," La-Ra replied. She sounded distant, far away from him, even though they stood less than a meter apart.

"Yes, Mother."

He moved, unable to be still any longer, and he soon found himself at the exit to the laboratory, tugging on his heavy, cumbersome robes. He stepped outside of the laboratory and into the long corridor, which was empty and quiet. He turned to his right and headed briskly toward the west wing of the palace. Expertly navigating corridor after corridor, he allowed his mind to wander, and he spoke softly to himself, jumping from Kandorian to English and back again as he remembered words and phrases from his studies.

"I am Kal-El of Krypton. My mother and father were Jor-El and La-Ra. Our planet exploded and now I have no home. I was Kal-El of Krypton. Now, I am Kal-El of... nowhere."

He halted just outside the palace and gazed out across

the dimly lit walkways crisscrossing around the courtyard. The sun had just set, and the light continued to fade around him. Kal-El *of nowhere*. Did English have a term for "nowhere"? "Kal-El *of no place*," he could say, but he thought maybe that was not quite right.

He began walking again, following a path north along the wall bordering the edge of the courtyard until he eventually came to a gate.

"I am Kal-El of no place. And I would like to open this gate, which will lead me to the gardens. Will I find your cat there? And may I pet it?"

He knew one thing for sure — he was absolutely going to have to make petting a "cat" his first priority upon reaching Earth.

He continued talking quietly to himself as he exited through the gate and continued north.

"I am Kal-El of no place. The gardens will be dark tonight. I would like a light...a lantern. I did not bring a lantern with me. Do you have a lantern?"

At a fork in the path, he turned sharply to the right and then continued on.

"I am Kal-El of the planet Krypton. My mother and father? No, they did not survive the explosion. I am sixteen Earth-years old. And I am an orphan."

He blinked as he tried to remember the English word for a child whose parents had died, but he found he did not really want to know, and he continued on his path as he distracted himself by recalling other information he had read about Earth.

Surprisingly, he had learned that Earth's rotation on its axis and its orbit around its sun were nearly identical to Krypton's; therefore, Kal would also be considered sixteen years old in Earth-years. His studies of Earth in his book on planets of the Fifth Realm had also revealed that Earth's gravity was only two-thirds that of Krypton. But what interested him the most was what they called "seasons." He had learned that because of Earth's tilt on its axis, the climate cycled through four major seasons, which were called, "spring," "summer," "autumn," and "winter" in English. According to his father, he would be arriving in the northern hemisphere of the planet during "summer," when the temperature was warmest. Still, the warmest of temperatures on Earth were nothing near the normal temperature on Krypton, and his mother had begun working on a simulation for him to acclimate himself to the much cooler temperatures of Earth.

However, he was running out of time to acclimate to anything.

He stopped walking and sat at a bench just off the main path. Spread out in front of him, blue and white flowers with large broad leaves and delicate round petals bloomed in patches dotting the brown earth.

The far gardens, called such because of their location at the very edge of the palace property, had always attracted him, drawing him near whenever he felt uneasy or unsure of himself. The last week, he had come here every evening to just sit and think. He thought about his friends and how he had been unable to tell them anything about his upcoming journey — how they had no idea that the planet they called home was about to explode. He thought about his early childhood and when he had begun his studies with Jin-Dal. He thought about a journey he once took with his mother, traveling for a day and a half over the mountains to the west. And although he could not remember the purpose of their trip, he recalled hours of her telling him stories, reading to him, and wandering quiet mountain trails together in search of rare flowers, like many of the flowers here in the gardens. He thought about Za-Ra, the young woman whom he was supposed to marry when he reached his twentieth birthday and became Supreme Ruler. They had been betrothed at birth, but he had only met her one time, when he had turned thirteen years old. And he thought about his upcoming journey and how nervous he was to travel alone to a strange planet with strange people who spoke a strange language.

He wrung his hands together and held them still in his lap.

“I like these flowers. They are white and blue. My mother and father? No, they did not survive the explosion. I am an orphan.”

He closed his eyes.

“I like these flowers. They are beautiful. They are white and blue. I am Kal-El of no place... I am Kal-El of... Earth.”

When all of the light had finally disappeared from the sky, Kal stood and quietly turned and walked back toward the palace, where his parents would be waiting for him.

Kal-El of Earth.

Only seven days.

The next morning, Kal awoke to tremendous shaking. His sleeping platform rattled, and books, writing implements, and papers fell from his desk. He grasped the blanket covering him and pulled it up over his head as he squeezed his eyes shut.

His father had explained to him that this would happen. As Krypton’s core began to become more unstable, the ground would start to quake. Weakly at first, and then growing stronger and more frequent as the planet’s destruction grew closer. Yet, even though Kal knew the cause of the shaking, a strange unease washed over him.

This is fear, he thought, automatically using English rather than Kandorian. The Kandorian language had no word for “*fear*”; the closest equivalent was probably

“apprehension,” but that did not quite fit the emotion Kal felt.

After a moment, the shaking stopped, and Kal jumped up and rushed to dress, pulling on his leisurewear and robes over his undergarments. A loud banging at his door startled him, and he hurried over as his mother pushed the door open.

“Kal, please come with me to the laboratory at once. Your father is already there. It is starting, my son. Hurry,” La-Ra instructed, her tone tight. She motioned stiffly to the hallway, and Kal nodded as he rushed past her and down the long corridor of their family’s housing unit.

At the end of the corridor, Kal turned sharply to the right, his mother at his heels. Around them, other families milled about in the hallway, talking amongst themselves in hushed voices. Kal overheard a few words and phrases, punctuated by stunned silence as they knelt formally at Kal when he and his mother hurried past. He did not recall ever having seen so many people in the hallways, even following the presentation of the Supreme Ruler, which happened once a year in the courtyard outside the Great Hall. However, he kept his eyes straight ahead and his face impassive and continued walking purposefully.

“Young Lord Kal-El!”

Kal heard the voice of Jin-Dal from behind him, but his mother placed her hand on his back and applied just enough pressure to keep him moving forward.

“My son, please continue on to the laboratory. I will explain to Master Jin-Dal that you are not to be disturbed,” La-Ra told him in a low voice. Then, her touch dropped away, and he heard her greet his teacher kindly. “Master Jin-Dal. Best morning to you. I am afraid my son will not be able to speak with you as he is needed right away in Jor-El’s laboratory...”

Her voice faded as he rounded the final corner to his father’s laboratory, and he approached the door in a slow jog, not bothering to stop or pause as the door disappeared to allow his entrance.

“Father!” he called as soon as he felt the door rematerialize behind him.

Jor-El emerged from the small room where the spaceship was being assembled. His face remained expressionless, but he hurried over and placed his hands on Kal’s shoulders. Kal at once felt some of his unease fade at his father’s touch.

“My son, you must focus and be strong right now. The planet’s core is heating faster than I had expected, and our time is running short. We must again recalibrate the navigation crystal. Do you remember how to run the calculations?”

Kal nodded, his eyes wide. “Yessir, I remember. But Father — ”

“Kal, we have no time right now. The Council has summoned me, and I must leave immediately. You and your mother must work together to recalibrate the navigation crystal. I have diverted all of our extra resources to increase the assembly speed for the spacecraft.” Jor-El squeezed his son’s shoulders and then moved away toward the door. “Our time grows short, my son. I believe your journey must happen sooner than we expected.”

Jor-El turned back toward Kal, regarding his son for a moment. Kal held his breath as his father’s dark eyes flashed with concern for just the briefest of moments before becoming impassive once again. Jor-El then nodded and knelt down to pick up his robes, which sat in an untidy heap on the floor.

“Please, my son, get to work recalibrating the navigation crystal. I will return as soon as I can.”

And Jor-El disappeared through the doorway, leaving Kal alone.

He did not allow himself even a moment’s hesitation. Recalling the many hours he had spent learning the recalibration process from his father over a week prior, Kal stepped into the small room with the nearly completed spaceship, pulled up the holographic control panel, and began inputting a series of numbers and symbols, representing his personal security code. Then, Kal clicked several keys to eject the navigation crystal from the vessel and gently extracted the crystal from its slot.

He held the crystal up to inspect it. The small, clear crystal captured and refracted the dim light entering the room through a small window along the upper edge of the wall, sending a ribbon of rainbow colors cascading along the white floor near Kal’s feet. He turned the crystal around in his hand and then placed it into a void space, which opened up near the holographic control panel.

Then, he began scanning through lines and lines of data his father had collected and compiled to explain and predict the heating and destruction of Krypton’s core. Acceleration of the planet’s rotation resulting from the unexpectedly fast rise in the core temperature was the key variable that had changed. His eyes landed on numerical readouts for the last week, and he quickly assessed the numbers. The sharp increase in the planet’s rotation corresponded to a rapid jump in core temperature by nearly five hundred degrees. Kal swallowed hard and began copying the new numbers into the appropriate mathematical formulas.

Footsteps behind him announced the arrival of his mother, but she remained silent as she moved up to his side and studied the calculations with him.

As the calculation was completed, Kal stared at the new numbers, an odd and uneasy sort of emptiness filling

him. The new calculation revealed that their timeline had been shortened by two full days.

He shook his head as his breath began to come in short, fast bursts.

“This cannot be right, Mother,” he said. And his fingers once again clicked through the calculation. But he once again obtained the same numbers. Three more times, he repeated the calculation, each time feeling himself grow more agitated. “This cannot be right, Mother,” Kal repeated. “I cannot lose those two days. You cannot... You and Father and Drek and Jin and Kin and Tag... You cannot lose those two days. This cannot be — ”

His mother’s hand covered his, and she moved closer to him and wrapped him in her arms. She had not embraced him like this in many years, and he stiffened as he closed his eyes.

“The calculations are correct, my son,” she murmured into his ear. “Please continue with the remaining steps of the recalibration process. You leave Krypton in four days. We must get the spaceship completed before then.”

Then, La-Ra pulled away, turned around, and left the small room. Kal stood, unable to move, staring blankly as the robotic arms continued their silent work. He did not want to recognize that his calculations were correct and that his mother was right. He did not want to leave his parents and friends. He did not want this.

“I am Kal-El of Krypton. I leave for Earth in four days. And please may I...pet your cat.”

He murmured the now familiar words while he clicked on various buttons to initiate recalibration. The hologram in front of him flickered as the ground shook briefly, and Kal tightened his jaw.

“What is your name? I am Kal-El of Krypton. Is that your cat? What is your cat’s name? I have traveled from... from very far away. My planet...it was...destroyed. I am the last survivor.”

He did not know the word. He never knew enough words.

Resigned, he reached into the void and pulled out the recalibrated crystal. It again refracted a deep rainbow of light as he moved it into its slot in the spacecraft. The machine paused momentarily and beeped when he inserted the crystal, then resumed the assembly process.

“I have traveled from very far away. My planet was destroyed,” he repeated again, raising his voice just slightly. *“I am Kal-El, the last son of Krypton. Please help me.”*

He backed away from the vessel until his back hit the wall, and then he slid down and buried his head in his knees.

Only four days.

The ground continued to quake all throughout the day. Most tremors were much weaker than the one that had woken Kal up. However, with each one, the population grew more anxious.

La-Ra forced Kal to take a break from his work for midday meal, and he settled at a small table in the back corner of the Great Hall, feeling nauseous as he stared at his food and listened to the quiet whispers around him. He only caught bits and pieces of conversations, but in these bits and pieces, he heard an underlying mistrust of the official statement released by the Council assuring the populace that they had nothing to worry about.

“The shaking is merely the tectonic plates realigning and should not cause any alarm,” the statement had said.

Jor-El had written the statement and signed his name to it, and that should have been enough to placate everyone; after all, Jor-El was one of the most well-respected scientists on Krypton. But the curious glances in Kal’s direction as he ate his midday meal with disinterest and the murmurs circulating around the room hinted that the suspicious behaviors of the El family as of late — Kal’s lack of attendance at morning teachings and disruption of his regular routine, Jor-El’s prolonged stints of working in his laboratory without rest, and La-Ra’s canceling of two planned trips in the last two weeks — had attracted more attention than they had hoped.

And now, Kal sat alone, forcing himself to eat some of the oatmeal in his bowl, while running their most recent calculations in his head again. His four days were passing, and he had not even seen his friends. He looked up and scanned the room but did not see Drek or Tag or Kin. Even Nor-Zod, son of retiring Supreme Ruler Dru-Zod, was notably absent. Not that he cared to see Nor-Zod; Nor-Zod had never liked Kal and had made sure that Kal knew it.

The ground shook again, and a hush fell over the room. Kal’s hands flattened onto the table, and he closed his eyes as he waited for the tremor to pass. Finally, after several much-too-long seconds, the rattling abruptly stopped, and Kal let out the breath he had been holding.

He shoved another bite of the bland food into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed, then washed down the taste with a long sip of tea. As usual, the oatmeal had little flavor, but the tea was his favorite — a bit spicy almost, made from a rare plant found only in the mountains to the west. He had requested it specifically. And he savored the sip, knowing that he may never taste this type of tea again.

English had a word for the drink — “*tea*,” he recalled. He gazed blankly at his plate as he imagined what “*tea*” on Earth might taste like. Would they have plain “*teas*,” like the brown leaf tea he usually drank? And spicy “*teas*,” like this, his favorite, made from special herbs or plants?

“Kal-El, my friend, you are here.”

Drek’s voice startled Kal, and he looked up at his friend, who approached with a tray of food and sat.

“Yes, my friend. I have been busy as of late and not so hungry either. It is good to see you, Drek,” Kal replied. He sipped his tea again and watched his friend push his utensil into the bowl of warm oatmeal on the tray.

“I am not so hungry today either, but Father insists I must eat,” Drek agreed.

“You, not hungry? That is something I never expected to hear, my friend!” Kal said with a bit more enthusiasm than he had intended. Drek nodded, abandoned his oatmeal altogether, and instead picked up the small pastry sitting in the corner of his plate.

“True, I never miss a meal. But today, Kal...”

Drek’s agitation was clear to his friend, and Kal felt himself tense uneasily. He picked up his own pastry and took a small bite. A faintly sweet flavor from the dark filling inside tempted his tongue, and he took a second bite.

“I understand how you feel, my friend. My father has been working all morning to understand what is happening with these tremors,” Kal lied. A feeling of disgust welled up inside of him, far stronger than he had ever felt before, but he pushed away the unfamiliar emotion as he remembered his parents’ insistence that no one know the true nature of the quaking. “Would it please you for me to explain?”

Drek held his friend’s gaze for a second and then nodded, his interest evident in the minor tension in the creases in his forehead. Drek ate his pastry with one single, large bite and chewed while he listened to Kal.

“Krypton’s crust is composed of five large tectonic plates...”

By the time Kal finished his long, detailed, and not entirely accurate explanation, all of the men sitting at tables around them had also grown silent. Kal was all too aware of the attention he had attracted, and he shifted his eyes from Drek’s to scan the room. Although many of the men who had been listening in lowered their eyes and turned their heads away, pretending they had not been eavesdropping, several met Kal’s gaze unabashedly, which was slightly disconcerting to Kal. One man at the table directly next to theirs stood, knelt down for a moment, and then cleared his throat as he rose back to his feet.

“Young Lord Kal of the House of El, future Supreme Ruler of Krypton and son of Jor-El, Chief Scientist and Advisor to the Supreme Ruler, please accept my apologies for overhearing your conversation. My name is Thak-Tal, and I am an assistant to the Council. I am glad to hear your detailed explanation for the shaking of the ground. We have surely never felt anything like this before, Young Lord Kal-El, and we are all a bit unsure. Your explanation

has reassured me, and I will now go back to my family and give them the news that all will be well. Please accept my words of appreciation, Young Lord Kal-El.”

The man bowed again to Kal and then turned and left. Many others around him followed, murmuring their gratitude to Kal before leaving the Great Hall to return to their families. Drek sat quietly until the commotion had died down and then stared at his friend.

“They do not all know you like I do, Kal,” Drek said informally, his voice low. “They do not know that at least part of your explanation was fabricated.”

Kal blinked back his surprise at Drek’s tone and forced a neutral expression on his face.

“I do not understand, Drek, my friend. I have not been deceitful,” Kal stated. He took another small bite of his pastry and held his head high, maintaining an air of indifference.

“Kal, you have been distracted for weeks now, not just from the quaking of the ground that started today. There is something else happening that is beyond what your father has told us and beyond your current explanation,” Drek said. He took a long sip of his tea.

“It is true, Drek, that I have been preoccupied as of late,” Kal admitted quietly. He kept his expression carefully controlled and thought quickly for an explanation that would appease his friend. He settled on something that was at least somewhat close to the truth. “The shifting of Krypton’s geological integrity has been under my father’s watch for some time now, and Jor-El required my assistance with his work as he sought to understand and predict the movement of the tectonic plates. My father expected this would happen, but he did not want to alarm anyone because there is no cause to worry, my friend.”

Kal studied Drek’s expression, but found it blank, as usual, and to his relief, Drek nodded.

“I expected such an explanation, my friend, and I am pleased to hear there truly is no cause to worry,” Drek stated, his tone becoming more formal again. “Will you be attending midday exercise with me today, Kal?”

“I cannot. My father still requires my assistance.”

“I am saddened to hear this, but I understand. I hope to see you tomorrow then, my friend.”

Drek nodded to Kal, pushed himself up, and took his tray with him as he left Kal, once again, to himself. The exchange had left Kal even more uneasy. It was not right for him to survive and everyone else to perish.

They do not even know they will not survive, Kal thought, again switching to Kandorian when he did not know the English word for “survive.” His jaw tightened as he corrected the sentence using a word he did know. *They do not even know they will all die.*

“*It is not right,*” he mumbled out loud, keeping his

voice low to disguise his use of the foreign language. “*No one will know. Is that better, or not?*”

“Kal, my son.” Jor-El’s greeting startled Kal out of his reflections, and he looked up to his father, who stood not more than a foot away, his eyes neutral and impassive. “Kal, please join me back in the laboratory at once. We have more work to do.”

“Yes, Father,” Kal responded.

He stood, leaving his tray on the table, and followed as his father led the way back through the winding corridors to the laboratory. He pictured Drek again, his closest friend, and saw the tiniest flicker of betrayal that had flashed through Drek’s eyes as Drek had accused him of not telling the truth.

He did not like it. He did not like the deceit and betrayal. But more importantly, he did not like to consider that in four days, he would be leaving Krypton and his family and his friends — leaving all of them behind to perish.

He stepped into the laboratory with his father and heard the pop behind them as the doors locked. Jor-El turned around to face Kal, his eyes dark.

“Kal, my son, I have been informed of your oration in the Great Hall,” Jor-El expressed. His voice was without emotion, but he reached up and set both hands on Kal’s shoulders. “You have a gift with words, my son. Your discourse has eased the worries of the people, and they will surely pass on these assurances to others. I am thankful for your quick thinking and articulation, my son.”

Kal simply nodded at the praise. Then, he and his father removed their robes, and he followed his father into the smaller room. He stopped abruptly as his eyes fell on the small spaceship sitting on the platform in front of him.

The robotic arms had retracted and no longer whirred and clicked and hummed.

The top of the ship was open, and Kal’s pack, which he had prepared two days prior, was secured next to the seat for the sole passenger — him.

La-Ra stood silently, her hand placed over the family crest that had been etched onto the front of the spaceship.

A single white flower, like those from the patch of blue and white blooms growing in the far gardens, had been placed on the control panel next to the only button that Kal would have to push — the launch button.

Kal felt his stomach sink, and he shook his head.

“I have four days. Mother?”

He stepped forward toward her, but his legs wobbled precariously, and just as he steadied himself, the ground shook again, this time rumbling with such ferocity that a crack formed along the far wall of the room. His mother reached out and grasped his hands, and they stood silently, Jor-El joining them, while the quake passed. As the ground

stilled, Kal again shook his head.

“I have four days. The calculations said I have four days. Father, did you see? Mother?”

Panic like he had never known before welled up within his chest, and he stepped backwards away from them.

“*I am not ready. I have four days still!*” The words were spoken in English, although he had not meant them to be, and he backed up another step and repeated the words in Kandorian. “I am not ready. I have four days still! Mother?”

“Kal-El, my son, while you were gone, the core temperature jumped another three hundred degrees,” Jor-El said firmly, his voice clear and strong. “I predicted that near the end, the fluctuations in temperature would become erratic. This is what we are now observing. The core temperature is increasing in random increments, and we have reached the point where we can no longer predict with certainty when Krypton’s destruction will occur.”

Kal shook his head again, and his mother squeezed his hands.

“Kal-El, my beloved son,” his mother murmured softly. Her hand reached up to touch his forehead. “You must be brave, my son, for great things lie ahead, and your journey is just starting. Be brave and strong and unafraid as you approach your new life and new destiny on Earth. Find new friends and experience new things and build yourself into the great man I know you can become. The great man I know you are. And most of all, my dear son, remember that you are Lord Kal of the House of El of the planet Krypton. Do not forget our family crest, which is a symbol of hope, and do not forget yourself.”

Jor-El stepped up, but did not touch Kal. His voice deepened as he set one hand on La-Ra’s arm.

“Take with you your strength, honor, honesty, and intelligence, Kal-El, my son. Take with you your courage and bravery. And should you find yourself feeling lost or alone, remember that your mother and I will always be with you, Kal. You are our greatest accomplishment, my son. You are our legacy. You are the legacy of Krypton. Be your best, my son. Be yourself.”

Kal stood as still as stone as his mother and father both stepped away from him. He could not breathe. His chest would not rise to fill his lungs with air. He balled his hands into fists but did not move.

He did not have his four days. He only had minutes.

He did not want this.

He opened his mouth to speak, but the ground shook again, a tremendous force from below them breaking up the layers of earth and rock. The floor fractured between his feet, and Kal stumbled sideways toward the spaceship. He grasped its edge, smooth and cool, and looked up at his parents in alarm. A crevasse had opened up between them,

separating him from his parents.

“Mother! Father!”

No, he did not want this. He could not leave them. He shook his head.

“My son, my dearest Kal, you must go now,” La-Ra spoke in a strong, clear voice. She leaned into Jor-El’s arms, and the two embraced as the ground shook again.

Outside, an enormous crash echoed through the courtyard. Kal twisted around toward the sound, and his eyes widened in alarm as he saw the growing chaos through the room’s single window. The building that used to stand tall just across the courtyard, which had housed the library, weapon storage units, and food storage units, was now not more than a pile of rubble, dust billowing out from underneath the settling rock and stone.

He turned back to his parents. The crevasse had grown to about two meters across. His eyes flitted back and forth several times as he judged the distance. He could jump and make it and then stay with them. He could do it. He would do it. But as he readied himself for the leap, the ground shuddered again, and the crevasse grew larger.

“I was supposed to have four days!” he yelled. He grabbed a hold of the spaceship to keep himself from falling as his legs gave out; his hand gripping the spacecraft also felt weak, and he struggled to hold himself upright.

“We love you, my dear son Kal.”

He raised his eyes across the room and saw his parents again, holding each other. His mother’s eyes, a beautiful shade of vivid blue, held no *“fear.”* Only love and hope. And in his father, who held his chin high despite the walls beginning to crumble around him, Kal saw a great fortitude — a strength and resolve unlike he had seen before. Kal clenched his jaw, dipped his head in acknowledgement, and turned to climb into the small spacecraft.

It was a tight fit; the vessel was barely large enough to hold him and his pack. As he settled into the seat, which was maybe a bit too hard and a bit too cold, the canopy began to close, and he watched through the transparent material as his parents held each other tighter and shifted backwards another few meters from the still-growing crevasse. Shoulder and hip belts automatically fastened to secure him into his seat, and a monotone voice announced, “Life signature detected. Welcome, Young Lord Kal-El. Please press the ignition to initiate the launch start sequence.”

With a final exhale, he reached out a trembling hand and pressed down on the ignition button, his eyes locked on his mother.

The ship whirred to life, rose a meter or so off the ground, and hovered briefly as an opening formed in the

ceiling.

And with a final, oddly silent vibration of the spaceship's control panel, the ship rotated and launched heavenward as its passenger screwed his eyes shut, clasped his hands together, and screamed with grief.

When his screams subsided, Kal sat staring out at the vast blackness ahead of him, blank and numb. The numbness stuck with him, throbbing like a headache and blocking any other feelings he might have had. Even when he turned around and looked back at Krypton, growing smaller and smaller as his ship moved away; even when he closed his eyes and tried to remember how it felt to have his mother embrace him one last time; and even when he twisted around again to see the planet that was once his home explode in a blinding flash behind him, he still felt only numbness. A great emptiness — a void that nothing could fill.

Gone. Krypton was gone. His parents. His friends. His home. The gardens, the palace, the courtyard, the trails, the mountains, the oceans. All gone.

And yet, here he sat, in his little single-person spaceship, hurtling through emptiness, safe and sound, somehow having escaped with only minutes to spare.

He felt numb.

The control panel lit up, and its monotone voice announced, "First hyperspace jump set to the Ginga Cluster in ten seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

He suddenly seemed to become so very heavy, and a great weight pressed down on his chest, forcing all the breath out of him, as the blackness around him swirled into a blinding array of bright colors. Then, only seconds later, the feeling disappeared, and he was once again surrounded by blackness out in every direction.

Kal closed his eyes and leaned his head back onto the headrest of his seat as the ship's navigation system spoke again.

"First hyperspace jump successful. Next hyperspace jump to the Fifth Realm in forty-four hours, sixteen minutes, fifteen seconds."

And silence filled the space. A silence that would surround him for the next forty-four hours, sixteen minutes, fifteen seconds until the countdown to his second hyperspace jump. He should use the time to study English more. But he could not convince himself to do anything. Not think, not speak, not read. He did not want to be here.

No, he should be dead, with the rest of them.

His eyes opened halfway, and he saw the white flower his mother had left him on the control panel. He straightened up, reached forward, and cupped it carefully in his hands. It was perfect; a full bloom with three broad

leaves underneath the multiple thick layers of round white petals. Kal brought the flower up and touched it to his forehead, imagining it was his mother's lips kissing him goodbye. Then, he leaned forward and set the flower back down on the control panel.

"Mother, I miss you already," he said out loud, using his native language. With a sudden rush of an unfamiliar emotion that made him want to punch the roof of his vessel with all of his strength, he realized he did not want to practice his English. He did not care whether he could communicate when he got to Earth. He did not even care if he eventually reached Earth or not.

After all, he should be dead with the rest of them.

"Mother, I miss you. Father, I miss you."

He closed his eyes, dropped his chin to his chest, and let the silence and darkness envelop him.

Chapter 4

Hours upon hours upon more hours of the same soundless black void finally ended as the spaceship completed its second hyperspace jump, and when the ship exited hyperspace, Kal sat up a little taller and just stared.

In front of him, a huge blue and green planet with large masses of swirling white clouds filled his view. In the distance, the solar system's bright yellow star shone, and Kal felt an oddly refreshing burst of energy as its light hit him. He breathed deeply and gazed again at the rapidly approaching planet.

"Warning. Landing trajectory failure. Recalibration required."

Kal's eyes widened at the notification, and he shifted nervously in his seat as he tried to recall his training. He cleared his throat.

"Recalibrate landing trajectory using current coordinates. Identify suitable landing trajectory."

The control panel lit up, and a holographic image appeared in front of him, reflecting Earth and the large landmass that seemed to be getting much too close much too quickly. Kal reached forward, enlarged the view, and touched his finger lightly to the point near where they had decided he should land.

"Error. Recalibration failure. Suitable landing trajectory not found."

Kal swallowed and stared at the control panel. He remembered his father warning him about this possibility, that is, that the system may have difficulty with the landing protocol because of differences in the expected versus actual atmospheric conditions, temperature, and other factors. However, a single recalibration is all that should have been required. He tried the prompt again.

"Recalibrate landing trajectory using current coordinates. Identify suitable landing trajectory."

But again, after the same process, the monotone voice declared, "Error. Recalibration failure. Suitable landing trajectory not found." Then, to Kal's dismay, the voice added, "Impact in seven minutes, fifty-six seconds."

The spaceship was traveling much too fast now and began shuddering as it passed through the outer layers of the Earth's atmosphere. His clear view of the area ahead began to fill with bright orange and yellow as flames formed at the front of the ship. Kal felt his heart start to pound in his chest.

"Manual control activation," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. He had not trained for this possibility. His father had promised the ship would navigate itself.

"Manual control activation not recommended," the system told him.

"I am aware of that. Activate manual controls and fire reverse thrusters," Kal instructed.

His hands shook as he reached out and touched several keys on the hologram that popped up in front of him. He looked out ahead of the ship again. He could see huge stretches of green below him, dotted and crisscrossed with structures and roads. He frowned. He had no idea where he was or where to land. And he had never controlled a spacecraft before. He only remembered reading a short section on this in a book; he had not paid too much attention.

"Current speed," he inquired as he continued scanning the land below.

The system immediately answered. "Current speed one thousand seventy-one kilometers per hour and holding."

"Decelerate to two hundred kilometers per hour at a rate of..." Kal paused and did a quick calculation in his head. Then, he repeated the command. "Decelerate to two hundred kilometers per hour at a rate of two hundred kilometers per minute."

"Deceleration activated."

Immediately, Kal felt the shoulder belts pull against him as the ship began deceleration, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he sensed his approach slowing. The ground was much closer now, and he could make out green rolling hills and flat green and yellow fields. The roads were more prominent as well, running north-south or east-west at random intervals. Kal blinked and shook his head. It looked nothing like what he'd expected. And it definitely looked nothing like Krypton.

The spaceship jerked sideways roughly, and a sudden wave of nausea hit him. Blackness swirled in his vision briefly, and he felt a surge of panic. He could not black out right now, not as he needed to manually land the ship.

His thoughts stopped abruptly as an alarm sounded in the small ship and the control panel turned red.

"Error. Deceleration failure. Current speed six hundred

thirty-eight kilometers per hour and holding. Altitude twenty-seven kilometers. Impact in two minutes, thirty-four seconds. Error. Landing speed dangerously fast. Recalibration recommended."

Kal wanted to scream. However, logically, he knew that would not help him. The spaceship shuddered again.

"Decelerate to two hundred kilometers per hour within one minute," he commanded. But the system continued beeping in error, and the ground continued to approach much too rapidly. "Recalibrate landing trajectory," he tried again.

"Recalibration in process. Thirty-five seconds to completion," the system whined back at him.

He held his breath as he waited. Glancing outside, he observed structures that looked like homes spread far apart in the vast landscape below. He could see a river and trees and so much lush green covering the earth. Patches of slightly different shades of green, yellow, and brown in rough squares suggested agricultural fields, maybe. "Farms," he remembered. In English, they were called "farms."

The blinking red lights faded to a calm blue illumination, and the system's monotone voice announced, "Recalibration complete. Landing trajectory identified. Prepare for landing. Landing in fifty-three seconds."

The spaceship steadied itself and slowed noticeably, and Kal let out a sigh of relief. He closed his eyes as he leaned his head back against the seat. Then, another wave of nausea hit him, and everything went black.

"Hello? Are you okay in there? It won't open."

A muffled male voice pulled Kal out of unconsciousness, and he blinked his eyes open slowly, his vision still blurry. Bright light filtered in, and he groaned as a pain ripped through his head, forcing him to screw his eyes shut again.

The voice called again, *"Hello? Should I go get help?"*

Kal felt the spaceship rock slightly, and he steadied himself and blinked his eyes open again, prepared for the sudden onslaught of pain this time. Squinting, he raised his hands up and blocked the intense light shining down through the transparent panels of the spaceship's roof. A young man about his age with black hair, some sort of odd black-framed goggles covering his brown eyes, and a dark blue shirt stretched tight over his broad shoulders leaned over the spaceship, peering warily inside at Kal.

Kal took a shaky breath and attempted to reach out to the control panel. However, his hand shook violently, and he gave up almost immediately, letting his arm drop back down as he closed his eyes. He had not counted on being so unsteady and nauseous. And because the system's safety protocols prevented voice commands for opening

the canopy, he would need to try something different.

With a weak cough, he cleared his throat.

“Enable outer controls.”

“Whoa, what is...”

Kal blinked his eyes back open and watched as the man outside jumped backwards a step in surprise at the holographic control panel that materialized in front of him. The man looked at the panel and then back into the spaceship at Kal.

Kal did not want this. But he was here and had no choice.

His eyes closed softly as he pictured his parents, standing together across the growing crevasse, looking on as he had climbed into the spaceship and taken off. He remembered his mother’s words. He would not forget hope; he would not forget himself. And he remembered his father’s words. He would be honest and honorable; he would always remain true to himself.

“Mother, Father, I have made it to Earth. I am Krypton’s legacy. And I will make you proud,” he said quietly.

“I don’t know what to do here. Is this supposed to help you get out? What should I push?”

Kal opened his eyes and stared up at the stranger outside of his ship. The man looked worried, and his eyes flickered back and forth from Kal to the control panel. Somehow, Kal could immediately tell the young man was kind and decent and trustworthy. He blinked again and straightened up. In the best English he could manage, he said, “Please press the button with the diamond symbol. It will open the...” He trailed off as he realized he did not know the right word.

“The canopy?” the man suggested.

Kal pointed to the transparent roof of the spaceship, his hand still shaking badly, and when the man nodded, Kal repeated his sentence, inserting the word the man had provided.

“Please press the button with the diamond symbol. It will open the canopy.”

The corners of the man’s mouth twitched up slightly in an expression Kal was not familiar with. However, the expression made him feel more at ease, and he nodded as the man reached out tentatively and touched the holographic diamond symbol. Instantaneously, the top of the spacecraft began to retract, and a burst of fresh, cool air flooded the small cabin.

Kal inhaled sharply, his eyes widening as the chilly air burned his lungs. He took several deep breaths, gripping his knees tightly as his body trembled.

“Hey, man, are you okay? Let me help you out of there. Which of these buttons undoes your seatbelts?”

Kal tried to make sense of the man’s rapid talking, but

he at once felt dizzy, and he worried he might lose consciousness again. His heart raced, and dark spots flickered in and out of his vision.

“You know, maybe I should go get my dad. He’s better with this stuff than me. I bet he can help you out.”

Kal’s eyes flew open as another wave of nausea hit him. He did not know what “maybe” or “dad” or “stuff” meant, but he did not want the man to leave him here. He had no idea where he was or where he should go, and he was hungry and tired and so dizzy.

“Deactivate shoulder and hip belts,” Kal stated in clear Kandorian, and the restraints keeping him in his seat dematerialized. Kal listed sideways, but before he could fall out of his seat completely, two strong hands grasped underneath his shoulders and tugged carefully. The next thing Kal knew, he was lying on his back on the soft, cool earth, several feet away from his spaceship, gazing up at a clear blue sky dotted with small patches of fluffy white clouds and continuing to breathe in the fresh, heavy, cold air. The man knelt next to him, his face contorted with worry and one hand still resting on Kal’s shoulder.

“I still think I should go get my father. He can drive his truck up here, and then we’ll get you some help. But I —”

Kal lifted a shaky hand to grip the man’s arm.

“I am Kal-El. I am from the planet Krypton.”

He closed his eyes very briefly, but then opened them again. The young man still knelt next to Kal, his eyes narrowed and his head slightly tilted as he listened. Kal started over, allowing himself to remember the countless hours of practicing, both in his head and out loud.

“I am Kal-El of Krypton. I have traveled from far away. I come here in peace and wish to learn about your world. I would like to ask for your help.”

The words “And may I pet your cat” popped into his mind, but he suppressed the urge to speak them out loud. As it was, he doubted his English was recognizable enough, since the man simply stared at him blankly. Kal tried one more time, mimicking some of the sounds the man had used earlier for familiar words.

“My name is Kal-El, and I am from a faraway planet called Krypton. I have traveled a long way to get here. I come in peace and mean no harm. My planet was... My planet was destroyed, and now I have no home. I would like to ask for your help.”

“Kal-El?” the man asked, pointing to Kal.

Kal nodded, but then realized he was not entirely sure whether a nod meant the same thing on Earth as it did on Krypton. And so, he clarified, “Yes. My name is Kal of the House of El. Formerly...formerly of Krypton. Now, I am Kal of...no place.”

The sad words reminded him of his deep losses, and he had a sudden urge to curl up and just sleep forever. After

all, he should be dead, like everyone who had ever meant anything to him. Dejectedly, he reached up and rubbed his eyes with trembling fingers.

“Well, Kal, I have never heard of Krypton, but I’m sure it was an incredible place, and I wish I could have seen it,” the man said, speaking a bit slower than he had before and with a softness to his voice, as though he sensed Kal’s grief. *“We are in Smallville, Kansas, on the planet Earth,”* he added. *“And my parents and I live just down the hill. Your ship landed in our field. We grow corn here. My name is Clark. Clark Kent.”*

And the man stood and reached out his hand, his lips again twitching up into a curve and parting slightly to show his bright white teeth.

“Come on. My mom is just about finished cooking dinner, I bet. She and my dad will know how to help you.”

Kal looked apprehensively at the man’s hand outstretched toward him as he tried to interpret the man’s speech again.

“Clark Kent?” Kal repeated.

And the man nodded.

“That’s me.”

Kal grasped Clark’s hand, and the man helped hoist Kal to his feet. He was strong, Kal noted.

“Can you grab your bag, or do you need help?” Clark asked, motioning to Kal’s pack in the spaceship.

“The spaceship should follow me, I think. That is what Father said,” Kal responded, turning toward the vessel for a moment. He shook his head as he realized he had slipped back into Kandorian. He corrected himself in English. *“My ship will follow me.”* After Clark nodded, Kal stepped closer to the ship and said, *“Activate ground cargo transportation mode.”*

The holographic control panel flickered off, the canopy closed, and the ship whirred back on, rising up off the ground by about half a meter and turning to point its nose toward Kal.

Kal stood taller as he faced Clark again, forcing himself to maintain a neutral expression despite the stiffness in his back and the weakness in his legs. Clark’s deep brown, intelligent eyes were wide as he regarded the spacecraft and then shifted his gaze back to Kal. He lifted a hand slightly and pointed at the spacecraft, then shook his head and adjusted his eye coverings.

“Our farmhouse is just down the hill here,” Clark said, again speaking slowly and clearly. He motioned for Kal to follow him.

Kal silently complied, trailing a meter or so behind as Clark led the way down the hill toward a small yellow and white structure, which Kal reasoned must be the *“farmhouse.”* A *“house”* that is on a *“farm,”* he concluded, since this was obviously a *“farm.”* Halfway toward the

farmhouse, Kal wrapped his arms around himself and shivered; despite the bright sunlight of the late afternoon and the long sleeves of his leisurewear, he was cold. His eyes darted briefly to the man walking ahead of him, noting the shorter sleeves and thin material of Clark’s shirt, although Clark did wear long pants and thick-soled shoes. A thin sheen of sweat was also visible on Clark’s neck and bare arms. Kal felt confused.

“Are you not cold?” Kal asked, breaking the silence. He hoped he had chosen the correct word. He thought he remembered that *“cold”* meant low temperature, whereas *“hot”* meant high temperature. Clark halted abruptly and turned around to face Kal, his mouth upturned again in that odd expression where his teeth showed.

“Cold? No, definitely not cold,” Clark said. He blinked several times as his expression changed in the other direction, the corners of his lips turning slightly downward in a small frown. *“In fact, the heat this summer has been torture. We already lost a young calf and half of our lower cornfield to the heat. You’re cold? Uh, Krypton must have been a really hot planet then, I suppose.”*

Kal stared at Clark, again struggling to interpret the rapid speech. Talking in English to himself had been one thing; hearing it spoken, so quickly and easily, was completely different.

“This is hot for you?” he managed after a moment. He clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. When Clark nodded, Kal continued, *“What is a calf? I do not know that word, but I am saddened to hear that you lost it, along with your corn.”*

He thought he had done a good job of putting those sentences together, but Clark bit his lip, and his eyebrows furrowed, which Kal interpreted as a look of confusion. At least, that was his best guess. This man seemed to have a lot of expressions, most of which Kal had never seen before.

“You really aren’t from around here, are you?” Clark said. He continued without giving Kal a chance to reply. *“I’m sorry, this is very difficult to believe if you really are from...another planet. Um, a calf is a young cow, an animal we use for milk and meat. One of our cows, Gloria, she had a late calf. She gave birth just last week. But the heat was too much, and the calf didn’t survive.”*

“Ah. I am saddened to hear this,” Kal repeated. He understood that a baby animal had died, although much of the detail was lost as he could not follow every word.

Clark started walking again, and Kal followed solemnly, keeping his arms wrapped around himself for warmth. Clark then slowed slightly and motioned for Kal to walk next to him rather than behind him, and the two neared the farmhouse together. Kal distracted himself by studying the home. It was small, certainly, but was

obviously a single-family dwelling, not like the massive palace where Kal had grown up. The outside was painted a bright yellow, the edges offset in white, and boxes of flowers sat on the steps near the doorway. Blue, red, purple, and white flowers.

Kal stiffened and stopped. His flower from his mother. It had not been in the ship when he had closed the canopy. He turned around abruptly and addressed the ship, vaguely cognizant that Clark had also stopped next to him.

“Deactivate ground cargo transportation mode. Open canopy.”

The spaceship lowered and settled on the ground, and the canopy opened, retracting with a quiet hum. His breathing came in shorter gasps as he closed the distance between him and the ship and leaned into the cabin, scanning the control panel, floor, and seat. His pack sat, unopened and secured still, but otherwise, the cabin was empty.

The flower was gone.

“Where is it?” Kal said loudly, unaware that he had once again switched to Kandorian. His heart pounded unsteadily in his chest, and he frantically glanced around again, reaching into the ship and pushing his pack over slightly. No flower. “Where is it? Mother, where are you?”

He turned and began racing back up the hill as fast as his legs would carry him. Behind him, Clark called out, “*Kal! Wait!*” But Kal did not stop running until he reached the spot where his ship had landed. A deep rut nearly fifty meters long ran alongside a row of tall, bright green stalks. At the end of the rut, where his ship had come to a stop, Kal saw it — the beautiful white bloom, still perfect, still full and undamaged. He sprinted over and fell to his knees in front of the flower. Then, he cupped the flower carefully with both hands, as he had at the beginning of his journey, and brought it to his forehead again.

“Mother... Mother, I...”

He closed his eyes and held the flower as the sunlight began to grow dim. He felt Clark’s presence behind him, but the other young man said nothing as Kal continued to kneel on the cold ground, clutching the flower as though his life depended on it.

Finally, he stood, holding the flower carefully in his cupped hands. And as he turned back around toward Clark, he faltered. His heart had stopped racing, but he still felt weak and dizzy with grief. Briefly, a deep sadness seemed to overwhelm him as he once more remembered watching his planet explode behind him, knowing that he would never see his mother, father, and friends again. However, as his eyes met Clark’s, a tiny bit of that grief faded. This man, Clark Kent, he seemed kind and helpful, and being near him made Kal feel just a little more at ease. He lowered his eyes back to the flower.

“*I’m sorry,*” Clark said quietly as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants. “*The flower must have fallen out when I pulled you out of the ship. I’m glad you found it though. It’s special to you?*”

Kal tilted his head as he tried to recall what “*special*” meant. Unique or important, he thought, and so he nodded.

“*Yes, it is special to me. It is very special to me. My mother gave it to me when I left Krypton.*”

“*It’s beautiful, Kal,*” Clark said gently, and he again motioned for Kal to follow him back down the hill.

A few minutes later, Clark held open the door to the farmhouse and ushered Kal inside. Brightness, warmth, and tantalizing smells assaulted his senses, and Kal almost stumbled as he gazed in awe around the small, colorful space.

“*Mom, Dad?*”

Kal felt a soft pressure brush up against his legs, accompanied by a quiet, unfamiliar sound. He gasped as he looked down and saw a small creature rubbing against him. The animal, covered in orange fur except for its paws and the tip of its tail, which were white, made a deep rumbling sound and stared up at him with large, amber-colored eyes. Kal backed away several steps and watched the creature anxiously.

“*What is that?*”

“*What? Oh, little Finn? He’s our cat.*” Clark bent down and picked up the animal, who began to make even louder rumbling noises. Then, Clark’s expression brightened, and he stepped up closer to Kal, holding the animal out a bit. “*Would you like to pet him?*”

“*Would I like to...?*” Kal’s voice trailed off as he blinked and stared at the small animal. The creature’s huge, intelligent eyes stared back. Was this really...what a cat looked like? With some hesitation, his eyes not leaving the strange animal, he spoke the words he had been practicing for weeks. “*Yes, I...I would like to pet your cat.*”

Kal shifted his flower to a single hand and then reached out and touched the soft fur on the animal’s back. The animal leaned into him as he stroked it. Kal felt an overwhelming emotion that he could not identify, accompanied by a strange sense of gratitude and belonging.

“*It is...soft.*”

“*Yeah. He’s a sweet cat. He seems to like you,*” Clark commented, and he set the cat down and glanced up a stairway ahead of them. “*Mom and Dad are probably getting washed up for dinner. Have a seat at the table, and I’ll go get them. Mom made pot roast and an apple pie. You’re gonna love it.*”

Clark then disappeared up the steps, calling out to his parents again as he took the stairs two at a time.

Kal lowered himself into one of the chairs at the table

and set his flower down in front of him. He leaned forward until his forehead touched the flower. And then, in quiet Kandorian, he whispered, “Mother, I made it here to Earth, and I have found a kind, generous friend who will help me. I will not forget you, Mother. I will carry you with me, always. Thank you, Mother.”

And as the daytime darkened into night and the small family congregated around him, sharing food, drink, and lively conversation, Kal again thought of his mother and her final words to him.

“You must be brave, my son, for great things lie ahead, and your journey is just starting. Be brave and strong and unafraid as you approach your new life and new destiny on Earth. Find new friends and experience new things and build yourself into the great man I know you can become. The great man I know you are.”

He was here, ready to start this journey. He still felt a deep grief, an emptiness that he had never felt before and that he knew could never be filled. However, his mother and father had sacrificed everything for him to be here, and he knew he had to approach his new life as they had wanted, with courage and confidence.

And with at least one new friend, he thought as his eyes settled on Clark Kent.

He felt the corners of his mouth turn upward. A “*smile*” they had called it — the expression that happens when someone is happy and content. Clark and his parents smiled a lot, and it made Kal feel warm inside and welcome.

He smiled again, took another bite of the delicious dessert Clark had called “*apple pie*,” and touched his hand to the flower still sitting next to him on the table. He would never forget them — his parents. But he would allow himself this, here — the smiles, the warmth, the kindness — as they would have wanted.

And he would be brave and strong and unafraid as he embraced his new destiny.

THE END

of Part One.