

When Clouds Gather

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Rated: PG-13

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Suggestive situations, violence, rumors of death.

Summary: On a mission to save the entire solar system from a destructive space cloud, our heroes are also targeted by a terrorist group controlled by an alien determined to kill them, no matter what the cost.

Part 3 of the “When ...” Series

“When Clouds Gather” is the third of a series. “When Butterflies Gather” is the first and “When Changes Gather” is the second, but aren’t necessary to understand this one. Any discrepancies between the stories and the TV series are just because.

The Encyclopedia Galactica was invented by the late Isaac Asimov. I make no profit from this and I’m just writing it for fun. I lay no claim to any of the situations or characters, except those I invented to annoy Lois and Clark. DC Comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions and all the companies associated with them own the rest.

*When clouds gather,
Eagles soar.
When light returns,
Heroes roar.*

— Anonymous, found on a fragment of stone from the planet Eridanus 10, carved circa 12,000 BC

Of the many world crises and earth changing events that Lois Lane and Kal-el/Clark Kent encountered during the late 20th century, the events of the Kleinium Cloud period were some of the most dangerous and puzzling. The substance is not a naturally occurring element, and some suspect it may have been seeded into the cloud to lure Kal-El/Superman to his doom.

...

Of particular interest is the rise of the Cult of the Cloud organization which later served as the nucleus of the anti-alien movement of the mid 21st century.

—Encyclopedia Galactica
Special 40 Volume Supplement: Earth and Galaxy, 20th and 21st Centuries

Clark Kent knew he had a couple of major dilemmas to resolve, not the least of which had the initials LL, beautiful brown eyes, and a steely streak of stubbornness capable of resisting his power like no mere bar of titanium alloy. He spared a fraction of a second to wonder where she was. Even with the wind howling in his ears, he would have heard her heartbeat if she had joined the crowd watching him work. Since she wasn’t here, it meant that she was on her way. She couldn’t let this particular story go by without the Lane touch. Not after all that happened with Mindy Church.

Even if she was four months pregnant.

If anyone could have seen his face at that moment, they would have wondered what the hell could have brought that smile — reminiscent of the cat that ate the canary — to Superman’s lips. She was pregnant. He was going to be a daddy.

Clark’s eyes narrowed. Better concentrate on the job at hand.

A few months before, a Church Industries construction company broke ground on a modest high-rise in an area of

Metropolis that other builders had avoided, primarily because of the soft, sandy soil that made it difficult to pour a stable foundation. Their engineers had assured the city inspectors that they could compensate for the lack of stability with enough concrete and structural reinforcement. They had been given the permits to continue the project.

Though Mindy Church was no longer around to push the construction, too much had been invested to stop it. At least, that what the still living officers of the corporation said. He and Lois were convinced that at first, they were waiting on the collapse so they could collect the payoff on the over-insured building, just as Mindy had planned to do before her unfortunate demise. To avoid possible sabotage, Superman had made it known that he was watching the construction of the building. “For safety reasons,” he had said. The statement had made the remaining officers of the Church Corporation nervous enough that the building still stood. Or at least it had, until just a few minutes before.

Lois and Clark had written the initial story for the Daily Planet, and started a follow-up investigation into the company and its methods. It turned out that at least one of the city inspectors had made an uncharacteristically large deposit into an account with a Gotham City bank just before the approval. By the time they had found enough hard evidence to break the story, the skeletal frame of the building stood against the Metropolis skyline like the dark rusty branches of a metallic tree. Then there were the circumstances of Mindy Church’s death, which further delayed the investigation. Justice, especially impeded by enough money, moved slowly, and any injunction to stop the construction would likely come too late to avoid disaster. When the building began its collapse, there were almost a hundred workers laboring overtime to complete the building before the courts could render a decision. After all, there would be no insurance payoff for a half completed building stopped by a court injunction. After it was built, who could say what might have caused it to collapse? Accidents happen.

A few minutes earlier, Clark had been with Lois in the doughnut shop near the Planet, his fingers entwined with hers absently. Their hands seemed to find each other without conscious effort whenever the two were within touching distance.

Clark looked distressed, and Lois looked determined. Stubborn, he thought. Not determined, stubborn.

“Well, when are you going to take maternity leave?” he asked reluctantly. “I can see it now. You’ll be sitting at your desk, typing, and your water will break. Then you will yell at me, or Jimmy if I’m gone, to bring you a towel so you can finish the last few paragraphs of the story. And of course, Jimmy will be mortified and embarrassed and Perry will chuckle and I will panic and it will all look like an episode of the Dick Van Dyke show.”

Lois smiled. She knew that he liked those old sitcoms.

“I feel great, Clark, and I’m barely showing. Before too long, I’ll look like I swallowed a beach ball and then I’ll consider taking the leave.” She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers. She didn’t know whether it was because he was Kryptonian or because he seemed slightly flushed whenever she was around, but his skin always felt warm against hers, and there was some hint of mint when she kissed him. No matter where she kissed him. “Besides, do you want me fussing around the house? Sweeping under your feet? Dusting the TV while you are watching? Cooking your supper so it’s ready when you get home?”

His smile froze for a second as he considered coming home to Lois’ cooking each day. A sudden, bright flash of light drew both their attention to the window.

“What was that?” Lois asked, looking at the sky.

Clark shook his head and started to answer when he heard the faint screech of tortured metal. He had been waiting for that, or something similar, for weeks, keeping a super-ear out for the

sound he dreaded. Somewhere deep in the interior of the half-completed building, a support beam of inferior metal began to bend. An extra weld or simple metal reinforcement might have prevented the failure, but the men were too rushed, too tired, and too uncaring to do the job correctly.

So, in a matter of seconds, it became a job for Superman.

Lois recognized the look of alarm and whispered, “Go,” even as Clark sprinted for the bathroom. They knew from experience that the high window inside opened out into an alley and provided a perfect take off point. A sonic boom echoed faintly in the distance. Somehow, she knew it was the Church Highrise and was plotting her route even as she paid the cashier. Being four months pregnant was not going to slow her down. A smile not unlike that Superman was going to wear later brightened her face. An objective observer would have had to say she was suddenly even more beautiful than before, as unlikely as that seemed.

Lois found the remote and the late model Cherokee’s horn chirped as she approached it. They had talked about the construction project a lot. She knew it wasn’t going to be a simple grab and get rescue. It had the potential to be a major disaster where the lives of hundreds of innocent bystanders could be in danger, all because the late Mindy Church didn’t care how she added to her fortune.

She had to get there as quickly as possible.

Clark pushed himself as much as he dared above the city, the red and blue blur morphing into a faint red and blue flash of lightning across the sky. The building had started to collapse, so he had to hurry. To his accelerated senses, it looked as though it was all occurring in very slow motion, but he knew he had little time if he was going to save those men and women working inside, and all the people who lived in buildings nearby that were threatened by the falling debris. Unfortunately, there was no way to invoke the hyper-speed state, but he was going to have to push his super speed to the limit.

Even as he approached, he examined every falling speck with his x-ray vision, locating each person and memorizing their position. They wouldn’t have time to move more than a few inches if he was to save them at all. Then he noted the trajectory and speed of thousands of falling bits of metal and concrete, deciding which fragments were and were not a threat to the surrounding buildings and the people walking near the building.

There were high voltage electrical cables being severed by falling metal, and he spared a blast of heat vision to cut the wires at the source to reduce the danger. A natural gas pipe ran underground near the north side of the building, and he would have to remember to clamp that off when he got a chance. There were a few hydrants in the area, too. If they were damaged by the falling debris, they could flood the entire block and make any lingering electrical lines even more dangerous.

Clark took a deep breath and accelerated as he arced around the building. No, this was not a simple grab and get rescue. He was going to be very busy Superman for the next 7.5 seconds. And after that, he figured he had another thirty minutes of clean up and making the area safe. Lois would probably arrive in about ten minutes. No, that wasn’t right. He had been with her when she was in a hurry to get to a story. Five minutes, tops.

Eventually, he had to convince her to take maternity leave, or at least slow down a little. But how was he going to do that? Easier to juggle a few million pieces of collapsing high rise. He turned his attention back to the rescue.

Another few tenths of second had elapsed.

At the speed he was moving, everyone was virtually motionless, like warm, living statues, features frozen with expressions of terror. Clark would have to be careful. He could seriously injure someone trying to get them to safety too quickly. At the same time, the building was collapsing so rapidly that he could not afford to waste time. Even as seemingly random blasts of heat vision disintegrated debris threatening victims he could

not reach immediately, he was triaging the rescue, deciding which people were in the most imminent danger and which could wait another few seconds.

A water pipe inside the half-completed building snapped, spraying a fountain towards a sparking transformer. A breath of super-compressed cold air from Clark’s lungs froze the water instantly into a sparkling, crystal tower.

Four workers huddled near the center of the building, directly in the path of a multi-ton support girder. A flash of red and blue swept past them, gathering them like logs of firewood in his arms. He knew they were hurt, and his treatment added even more bruises and muscle strains, but considering the alternative, he thought they might forgive his rough handling. He dropped them into a pile of sawdust and streaked back inside the structure.

If anyone could have tracked his path in the next few seconds, they would have seen him diving in and out of the building dozens of times, curving from one side to the other, blasting through unfinished walls and floors, darting here and there, and always returning with another group of stunned victims.

The crowd grew near the pile of sawdust. One last sweep with his x-ray vision and a search for the sounds of a hearts beating in terror convinced him that there was no one left inside.

Now, he could focus on containing the building.

When demolition experts destroy a structure, they place carefully measured explosives in precise locations to cut the supports so that it falls in upon itself. When a building decides to collapse of its own accord, the results were unpredictable and potentially catastrophic. Bits of metal and concrete fell and bounced and ricocheted in random directions. The metal framework of the high rise threatened to tilt sideways, across a busy street and onto a nearby apartment complex. Clark had to contain the building.

First, he cut through the foundation supports, duplicating to some extent the effects of carefully placed explosives. This reduced the tendency of the building to lean. He flew tight circles around the falling debris, smashing back rogue chunks of debris trying to escape the hurricane force wind he was producing. When he was sure he had contained all the rubble within the whirling dervish, he gradually slowed and let it drop to the ground, forming a pile of metallic and concrete scrap, dust and smoke rising, then settling around the remnants of the building.

Clark heard a familiar heartbeat beneath him and glanced down. Four and a half minutes. How fast had that woman been driving, anyway? He shook his head.

Dozens of people on and near the building should have been killed or seriously injured. Besides the cuts, scrapes, bruises, and pulled muscles, the only major trauma was a broken arm suffered when somebody tripped over a discarded lunchbox trying to get away from the building.

Clark reviewed his priority list in his mind. He glanced toward where Lois was standing, helping some of the victims to waiting ambulances, and revised his list. He blurred into action at the faint hiss of gas.

Lois glanced at her husband occasionally, trying to keep track of what he was doing, so stumbled back and sat down in a patch of — fortunately soft — mud when a Superman sized hole appeared beside her. The squeal of tortured metal being compressed by steel hard fingers reached her just before Clark floated out of the hole.

“Gas line,” he explained. “It was ready to explode.” He walked over to her, and she could tell he was scanning her, looking for injuries. “Are you okay?”

“Do I look okay?” she asked. “I’m sitting here up to my tush in mud, wondering how this dress will ever be clean again, and you ask a question like that.”

“Are you okay?” he repeated, reaching out to help her up.

“Fine,” she said, standing and trying to brush off the worst of

the mud. “Great. Now my hands look like I’ve been playing with the pigs.”

Clark smiled at her. He disappeared for a second, then returned and dropped a bundle of shop towels at her feet. “These were inside the building. Pass them around.”

She nodded. “Go,” she said. “Finish what you need to finish. I’ll be fine.” She wiped off as much mud as she could and began to distribute the towels. “Mud,” she muttered. “I hate mud.”

Clark grinned and disappeared again.

“Be careful,” she whispered, knowing only he could hear her.

Clark was still working to securing the area when her cell phone rang a few minutes later. Lois checked the display and wondered what *he* wanted.

“Dr. Klein,” she said. There was not even a hint of irritation in her voice. “What can I do for you?”

“Ms. Lane, are you at the site of the building collapse?” he asked.

“How did you guess?” she asked.

“Well,” he answered. “It was only a logical deduction based on your reputation as a reporter and the fact that Superman is—”

“Bernie,” she interrupted. “It was a rhetorical question.”

“Oh, I see,” he said, as though he did not see at all. “In that case, could you get a message to Superman for me?”

“I think I can attract his attention.” Lois knew he was being careful not say anything that might compromise Clark’s secret or even the close relationship between the three of them.

“It is imperative that I speak with him,” Dr. Klein said.

“Is that so?” Lois asked. Everything was “imperative” or “important” or “earth-shaking” to Dr. Klein. “What global disaster is threatening us all, now?”

“If it were only that simple, Lois,” he told her. “Of course the earth, too, would experience a destructive wave—”

“Dr. Klein,” Lois interrupted again. “Does this have a point? Is the planet in danger?”

“Not just the Earth, Lois,” he answered. “Unless we can avert this disaster, the entire solar system will be destroyed.”

For the first time in a very long time, Lois was completely speechless.

“Lois, are you sure you heard him correctly?” Clark asked her, glancing sideways as he drove to Star Labs.

Lois stared at him in a way that made Clark glad she did not have heat vision.

“Clark,” she began, then crossed her arms and looked out the window. Just as Clark was about to apologize — he wasn’t sure for what, but knew that an apology would be the smart thing to do — Lois looked at him and continued. “In all the time you’ve known me and all the times we’ve worked together, have I ever gotten a quote wrong?”

“Well, no.”

“Then why would I get this wrong?”

“You’re absolutely right. I apologize,” Clark told her. “But what you said just seems so unbelievable.”

“That I agree with,” Lois said. “I think the stress of knowing about Superman has pushed Klein off the deep end.”

Clark reached over and patted her tummy.

“He’s been wrong before,” he said. “Thank goodness.”

Lois smiled. “Well, that wasn’t entirely his fault, you know.”

“Maybe not,” Clark said. “But there’s something about the genetic profile he did of you that scares him. Despite all his scientific explanations, there was something there that made him nervous.”

“Things just keep getting more convoluted and complex with him.” Lois looked out the window again and sighed. “Maybe the implications of a Kryptonian-human baby scare him.”

“Maybe. The way his brain works, it’s hard to say.”

“Well, it will be ‘disastrous’ or ‘catastrophic’ no doubt,” Lois said. “Like the call today. Whatever the emergency is, he’ll

sputter a bit, clear his throat nervously and say ‘This is a dire ...’”

“... situation,” Dr. Klein finished ten minutes later. Clark pulled a five from his wallet and handed it to Lois as she grinned knowingly. That was going into the baby’s educational fund. She shook her head at him. You’d think he would learn.

“Sorry for the delay getting here. Superman was unavoidably detained by the cleanup of the building,” Lois told him. He squinted, staring at Clark as though looking for smudges of dirt, then sighed deeply.

“I understand. He must prioritize his time with so many demands on his services.” Dr. Klein looked off into the distance. “In any case, the observational data seems to confirm my conclusion that the threat to the solar system is not an immediate one.”

“That’s good to hear,” Clark said. “Are you sure the entire solar system is in danger? It’s a big place, you know.”

“I am well aware of the size of the solar system,” Dr. Klein said indignantly. Lois wondered if he was still a little sensitive about the whole pregnancy situation. But how could he have known?

“One of my early areas of study involved analysis of the motions of certain Kuiper Belt bodies past the outer planets. As a matter of fact, this is why I’ve been consulted on this.” He stopped and looked at them directly. “It is important that you understand the situation, and refrain from reporting until we can devise a plan to fix this problem. I have a couple of ideas that may help.”

“Bernie, with all we’ve been through the last few months,” Lois said. “You know you can trust us with the story and that Superman will do whatever he can to help.”

“I realize that, Lois,” Dr. Klein said. He seemed to gather his thoughts for a few seconds.

“You know, of course, that the galaxy is filled with clouds of interstellar dust and debris and various types of atoms.” Clark and Lois looked at each other. Well, they did now. “But for the past few million years, the solar system has traveled through a relatively empty area of galaxy.”

“Well, that’s good isn’t it?” asked Lois.

“An astute observation, Lois,” he replied, smiling. He punched a few keys on his computer keyboard and an image expanded to fill the screen. “That is about to change.” A brilliant, breathtakingly beautiful picture of multicolored stars and dust clouds drew their attention.

“Are we going to enter an interstellar cloud?” Clark asked.

“Technically, we’ve been in an interstellar cloud for the past 100,000 years or so. A denser portion of that relatively empty space I mentioned. But it is so rarefied that it has not been a problem. We should be out of it in another 15,000 years or so,” Klein replied absently. “Almost no time in astronomical terms.”

“I’m sure that’s something we should be concerned about,” Lois said. “But Dr. Klein, that’s a long time down the road.”

“You misunderstand. Entering or leaving the main body of the cloud is not the problem,” Dr. Klein said. “Under normal circumstances, even the densest part of the cloud is not much more than a hard vacuum.”

Lois took a deep breath. Maybe, just maybe, he will now get to the point.

“However, in less than a year we will encounter a small but particularly concentrated offshoot of the cloud containing a mixture of carbon atoms and a substance we have named Kleinium. A rather clever name, even if I do say so. I named it myself, you know.”

“I’m not sure I’d want an element menacing the solar system to be named after me,” Lois told him.

They watched him quietly for a moment, and he finally cleared his throat and continued. “Yes, well, perhaps we should rethink that particular name. In any case, the previously unknown

matter - whatever we decide to call it — seems to be an extremely effective catalyst for fusion reactions.”

“And this is important why?” Lois asked.

“Because, Lois,” Dr. Klein answered, “six months after that encounter, after billions of tons of carbon and this catalyst have fallen into the sun, it will nova, reducing the earth and all the inner planets to drifting streams of dust and ash.”

Lois dropped her pencil and her hand went automatically to her abdomen. She felt dizzy, and Clark held her until she could sit in the chair Dr. Klein hurriedly found.

“We have to talk to Perry,” Lois said on the drive back to the Planet. They hadn’t said much to each other since leaving Star Labs. Dr. Klein and his associates had a plan, but so much of it depended on her husband. She looked over at him. It was as if a weight had suddenly burdened his shoulders. Like Atlas supporting the world. Clark’s brow furrowed in concentration.

“What about?” he asked.

“Us,” she answered, surprising herself. From somewhere inside, in that spot of Lois’ mind and soul where those infallible hunches were born, where certainties more powerful than intuition were formed, and from which the core of the bond between Lois Lane, Terran, and Kal-El, Kryptonian, sprang, the conviction and knowledge of what she had to do exploded into being. “We’re going. Both of us.”

Clark met her determined stare with a steely one of his own. And this time, unlike so many others, he did not flinch. Lois thought the car would crash before he finally turned his attention back to the road.

“No way in hell,” he said.

Uh-oh, Lois realized. This was going to be tougher than she thought.

On the other hand, she knew that if they — and the planet — had a future, she had to win this fight. She had to go or none of them had a chance.

Clark refused to discuss the matter again until they knocked on Perry’s office door.

“May we come in?” Lois asked, leaning through the doorway.

“Sure, darlin’,” Perry said. “There’s always time for my two favorite reporters. And besides, I’m really tired of working on this budget. If I have to do another report for those guys upstairs, I’ll never find time to put out this newspaper.” He stopped. Those two looked like their best friend had just died. “Okay. What’s up? You two fighting?”

“Not really, Perry,” Clark said quickly. “There’s nothing to fight about. But we do have a situation.”

“We just came from Star Labs,” Lois said.

“Where we talked to Dr. Klein about a potential disaster.”

“An interstellar cloud.”

Well, that’s normal, Perry thought. They were finishing each other’s sentences.

After a few minutes, Perry looked at them and pulled at his chin thoughtfully.

“This sounds like an old sci fi book by Isaac Asimov, *The Currents of Space*,” he said. “A scientist in the book determined that an interstellar stream of carbon atoms was causing suns to nova.”

“You read science fiction?” Lois asked.

“I read a lot of stuff, honey,” Perry said smiling. “Asimov was mistaken about the carbon currents causing suns to nova. Research showed it just wouldn’t happen that way. This Kleinium stuff sounds like it’s the real deal, though.”

“But Star Labs and Dr. Klein may have a solution,” Clark said.

“It better be a whale of a solution to deal with that cloud,”

Perry said.

“A super solution,” Lois said. “They’ve built a non-powered

prototype of an armor plated, shielded, and completely safe space pod, like a space going rv. They call it the Ork.” She watched Clark as she spoke. His jaw muscles looked tight, and she could feel the tension radiating from him like heat from a blast furnace. “Superman will fly this overgrown camper to the cloud under his own power. They don’t have time to test and install a rocket engine powerful enough to do the job.”

“He will have to carry his own oxygen and food for the two week journey,” Clark said. “The experimental space craft will have a solar radiation generator so that Superman will keep his super powers so far away from the sun.”

“They have a device called a fusion impeller,” Lois continued. “It will create some kind of gravitational thingy that will cause the cloud to condense into a black hole. It turns out the Kleinium is particularly susceptible to this.”

“Great shades of Elvis,” Perry said. “How is a black hole any better than that cloud? Aren’t those things dangerous?”

“Yes,” Clark answered. “But they figured out a way to divert it from the solar system. The fusion impeller actually pushes the black hole away as it is formed. But you’re right,” he said, looking at Lois. “It is very dangerous.”

“Dr. Klein insists that it’s no more dangerous than crossing the street,” Lois said.

“I’d like to know what kind of streets he has been crossing,” Clark said, raising his voice. “Maybe a NASCAR track during a race?”

“Can we keep it down, folks?” Perry said. “I think we’re disturbing some of your co-workers’ naps.”

They looked out and noticed a number of head turned in their direction. Jimmy looked particularly concerned.

Perry closed the blinds and turned back to them.

“If I get the drift of what’s going on here,” he said, “I take it that you two want to go with him.”

“No,” Clark said. “Not her.”

“The Ork was designed for four or five people,” Lois said.

“No,” Clark said.

“That impeller machine is so sensitive that it has to be protected from any kind of cosmic radiation. That’s why there is so much shielding. It will be perfectly safe.”

“No.”

“You’re not going alone! I won’t let you!” Lois almost screamed, moving closer to Clark and hugging him tightly enough to break normal ribs. After a few seconds, she seemed to realize what she said and turned to look at Perry. A slight smile touched his lips.

“Clark said he was going to cover the story,” Lois said. “He wants to go with Superman.”

Perry nodded. “Good idea, son,” he said. “If you’re up to it.”

“Not Lois,” Clark said.

Perry walked to the door and opened it.

“I think I will have to leave that decision to you,” he said.

“Drop whatever you’re doing and take the rest of the day off. Go home, and talk about it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“But the building collapse,” Lois said.

“If you get a few seconds, write it up and send it over the company network,” Perry said, looking at Clark. “Now, git.”

Even Clark sometimes tired. A night or two of twilight missions, a major flood in the midwest, then the collapse of the Church Highrise had taken a lot out of him. Now the thing with the cloud and Lois. How could he let her go on such a dangerous mission? It was his job to protect her, keep her out of harm’s way. How could he do that a billion miles away from home? A thousand things could go wrong. She could get hurt or die. The baby could die.

He could die.

Lois had a point, though. She always has a point. Would she be safer with him in an over-engineered space rv a billion miles

away, or here alone in a city where the crime rate alone was newsworthy, despite the presence of Superman? Lois has gotten herself into dozens of dangerous situations, both before and after he came along. And she continued to be the daredevil Lois he knew and loved even after discovering she was pregnant.

Having made all the logical and illogical arguments to him, Lois had left Clark alone with his thoughts. Forcing him to consider everything she had said, especially the last part.

"I won't be left behind. Tell me that you will be safe on this 'routine' mission and I will believe you, but then explain why I can not go. Do you want to leave me alone to raise your child?" Lois looked into his eyes, and he could see the love and the pain that she felt. Maybe something else, too. Something she knew but was not telling him. "I can help you. We both know we're better, stronger together than by ourselves. Superman or not."

Damn, she was good, he thought. Guess that's why I love her.

He settled on the couch, his head back, staring at the ceiling. Finally, he found the remote and flipped through the channels until he found an episode of the Bob Newhart show. The first one. He always thought Suzanne Pleshette resembled Lois a lot.

Lois watched him sprawl on the couch and recognized the symptoms. She knew what to do. He wasn't the only one who could wear a costume. She disappeared into the bedroom. When she was returned, she held a feather duster and wore a stereotypical French maid apron.

Out of the corner of his eye, Clark vaguely noted that Lois was dusting the shelves that contained their various Kerth awards for both individual and team accomplishments over the years. It was only when she moved in front of him to dust around the fringes of the television that he began to take notice.

She was wearing a French maid apron.

Lois smiled as only she could, a light flashing in her eyes as though she had acquired an extraordinary vision power herself. She twirled as she passed between Clark and the television.

She was wearing a French maid apron.

Clark sat up. He felt as though the temperature in the room had gone up 40 or 50 degrees, though in truth, a thousand degree change wouldn't have bothered him. But a fine sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead and his breathing quickened.

She was wearing *only* a French maid apron.

Lois giggled as he lifted her as though she were a delicate flower in his hands, and moved his lips close to hers.

"You know you're insane, don't you?" he asked quietly, his breathing still uneven. "A completely mad nut."

She touched his cheek and kissed him, barely brushing his lips with hers so it felt as though a feather caressed his skin.

"Well, you know what they say." Her voice was barely audible.

"What's that?" Clark asked.

"Sometimes you feel like a nut, sometimes you don't."

If he hadn't been Superman, he would have dropped her.

"Well?" Lois asked.

"Definitely," Clark answered. "I feel like a nut."

An indeterminate time later, she lay in his arms, her eyes closed, a dark-eyed, dark-haired angel who had the power to destroy the most powerful being on earth with just a glance. He kissed that oh-so-perfect nose, immersing himself in the feel of her body against his. Her smooth skin triggering tiny explosions of pleasure where they touched. Her eyes opened slowly and looked into his.

"You *are* going to let me go, right?" she asked. As if he could actually stop her. But he had to make at least one more token protest.

"Lois—"

"Clark."

He sighed a final, resigned sigh. "Yes, dear," he said. "Was there ever any doubt?"

She smiled and closed her eyes again.

"Good," she said. "My things are already packed."

"I know, sweetheart," Clark said, pulling her a little closer. "I know."

As they prepared for the journey and devised a way for both Clark and Superman to appear together at the departure, they learned more about what to do once they arrived at their destination. As it turned out, the cloud had already insinuated itself into their lives.

Dr. Klein seemed to think that a small part of the Kleinium cloud had broken away a few thousand years ago, perhaps disturbed by a distant nova. This tiny, independent fragment of the cloud had drifted into the sun a little over eight minutes before Lois and Clark had seen the flash at the doughnut shop. That same bright flare from the sun momentarily blinded a forklift driver at the Church Highrise, causing him to drop a load of steel about ten stories onto the first support beam that failed. Even that would not have caused a properly constructed building to collapse, though. They made note of the fact in a follow up to the original article.

Before long, they found themselves in an all too familiar situation: being the news instead of reporting it. At the mission briefing, one of the first things asked was about Ork, the name of the spaceship. Lois looked back at the picture of the egg-shaped pod projected on the screen behind them and said, "They don't have reruns where you come from?" Those around the questioner laughed and explained the name to him.

Lois thought it was annoyingly ironic that she and Clark had to wait until *after* the press conference where Dr. Klein announced the existence of the cloud and the mission to divert it away from the sun before the Planet could print their own article. And they were at the microphones answering questions along with Dr. Klein. At least Perry had the presses ready to roll as soon as the press conference ended. They had finished their own report hours ago.

The questions were tough, too. Every one of those reporters wanted to be on the pod with them. Inevitably, someone asked why Superman was not at the press briefing.

"He is busy preparing for the mission," Dr. Klein answered. They had all discussed the answer to this question. "The entire success of this undertaking will depend on Superman, so he is being extremely diligent in his efforts to ensure that no mistakes will occur. Especially considering that his good friends Lois Lane and Clark Kent will be accompanying him. He may talk to the press later if he has time."

"What makes them so special?" yelled Mark Davidson from the Star. A rumble of resentment moved through the crowd. A lot of them were wondering the same thing. "Who decided they could go?"

Dr. Klein blinked in puzzlement as though the question startled him.

"Why, Superman did, of course," he said.

At the back of the room, behind the reporters and cameras, a man dressed all in black listened with intense interest to the briefing. It was all as the Cloud Seeker had predicted. The mission, Superman and the woman, though he had not foreseen the addition of her husband, but that seemed inevitable in hindsight. Even the Seeker admitted his visions were not always perfect, so the observer was not surprised. Sometimes he missed the details, but the grand vision was always accurate. Those loyal to the cult had been in place to implement the Plan for a number of years, thanks to the Seeker's foresight.

The observer slipped out, smiling. The time of crises had arrived.

Cult of the Cloud
October, 1993

The Revelation filled Stevie Jackson's soul one fall evening

in 1993 as he trudged towards Metropolis on one of the many tracks in the spiderweb network of railways. A constant flow of pollution producing trains moved into and out of the city, bringing the food and supplies necessary for the millions of people living in and around the city. And of course, taking the fruit of their labor to markets outside. The planet could not sustain that level of pure human greed and domination for long. Eventually, it all had to collapse. Humanity had to be reduced to some level that the Earth could tolerate.

But Stevie Jackson knew that was to come. For now, he used the railways and trains as a way to move from city to city, searching for the perfect venue to further to cause of Earth Supreme environmentalism. He had no time or patience for the simps who wanted to work within the system and make changes through legislation and education. His way was better. Some obtrusive and expensive housing development to torch. An SUV dealership to bomb. He knew that many of the eco-warriors did not agree with his methods, but some did and he could always count on the support of a few of the more radical elements of the ecology movement. A lot of his colleagues had been arrested, but the police never seemed to be able to connect Stevie to the destruction. Sometimes it was as though some sort of guardian angel guided his steps, keeping him one step ahead of the law and their cold jails. He could almost sense when it was time to leave. He was lucky that way.

His luck was about to run out.

Metropolis seemed to be a good mark to hit. Lots of people with more money and things than they would ever need, producing enough pollution for a small nation. And too few police to worry about a few burned mansions or destroyed sport utility vehicles. There were always few clues and even less chance of catching someone who had never been in any police database, and never left traces that could have implicated him even if they had his full life history on record. Metropolis was not as dark or dangerous as Gotham City, and more affluent than Central City.

In that time, there was no Superman. No reason to fear a blue shape dropping from the sky when someone yelled "Help!"

Perhaps if Stevie had been concentrating less on the golden prospects of Metropolis available to someone with a burning drive to save the planet and no conscious, he might have avoided his Revelation.

Somewhere in the depths of his soul, he wondered if his obsession with environmentalism had anything to do with his lack of success in the capitalist society that he hated so vehemently. They were all out to enrich themselves, with no regard to the consequences to the planet or the atmosphere or the ecosystem. Why couldn't they see that the rewards should be distributed so that there were no poor and no rich, only people?

He stared into the distance, thinking about loot filled homes just the same way that pirates had once regarded silver-laden Spanish galleons. With envious greed and resentment. What made them so special? Why did they have so much when he had so little?

He didn't stop for an instant to consider that they might be hard working people dedicated to taking care of their families in the best way possible. The thought of fifteen hour days at a difficult job for years or even decades never occurred to him. Stevie never considered the possibility that the people who had all those things he coveted were not special but just men and women who worked a little harder, saved a little more, and took control of their lives. Sure, he took enough from the houses to sell and survive before he burned them to the ground, but that was only fair. He had to finance his campaign somehow. He had to live.

The easiest way was to steal what he needed.

Not that he minded occasional work. Once, many years ago, he'd even had a job. It only lasted a week or two before he

decided it was too confining and took too much of his valuable time. Then he quit. He hadn't worked a steady job since.

It all seemed so logical in his mind.

So instead of sleeping in a comfortable bed somewhere, resting for another day of work where he would actually do something productive for society, Stevie Jackson stumbled over a protruding spear of rotting, asphalt tinged crosstie. His arms windmilled and he fell forward, trying to get his feet under him. For just an instant, his fate was held in the balance, not unlike the balance Stevie fought to regain and avoid falling flat on his face. Finally, years of physical neglect and lack of any athletic ability decided his future. Stevie lost the battle, and slammed his head sharply into the metal rail. It rang as though struck with a hammer.

When the world returned to him, the first thing he saw were random sparkles of light whirling in shifting patterns. Stars, he realized. The stars of heaven. They settled into their silent, slow orbits through the galaxy. Beautiful, quiet, and eternal. Except they were not. A discordant amorphous shape drifted from the edge of his vision, obscuring the stars, blocking their radiant light. The cloud, he muttered. The cloud had arrived. As the dark shadow engulfed the yellow star he knew to be earth's, the true meaning of the dark shape was revealed. Hidden in the depths of the hot interstellar dust, a fleet of sleek warships waited for a report from their spy, a powerful being already gathering intelligence for the invaders. Before too long, he knew that the being would reveal himself to the world, purporting to be a hero, but he was instead a treacherous, deceiving harbinger of a horde of invading aliens.

Somehow, Stevie Jackson could see a foggy outline of the future. A future that held the death of mankind and the planet. That was the purpose of the invasion. To strip the world of it's resources and to destroy any remnant of humanity. They would come and stay and eventually - whether it took decades or hundreds of years — there would be only aliens, with no humans remaining except for a few pitiful, weak creatures the aliens kept as pets to remind them of how pathetic humanity was.

The Revelation was complete.

Stevie knew it was up to him to prepare the world for the coming of the cloud. Only he had the knowledge and the ability to guide a chosen few to the divine enlightenment of the cloud.

Stevie Jackson died in the blinding Revelation and the Cloud Seeker arose.

His eyes were still closed, but he knew that if he did not roll to his left, he would die. Without even opening his eyes, he easily shifted his weight, moving away from the rail just as a passenger train whipped by his head. The wind of its passage buffeted him roughly, but he barely noticed. Visions filled his head as though someone was projecting images of the future into his mind. He could see the path ahead, the obstacles in his way, and he knew what he had to do. His knowledge was incomplete, there were dark spots and unknown obstacles, but he was confident that, in the end, Cloud and his followers would triumph.

He could see the way to gather his army and find those he needed to complete his destiny. Unfortunately, it required compromise and alliance with some of the seedier dregs of humanity, but in the end, the results would be worth the price. There were certain associates who were not as tolerant of their fellow man if they were in any way different from themselves. A few hints about an alien invasion, planting the seeds that would sprout later when the flying hero appeared, would turn that intolerance to paranoid fear of the unknown. It would be easy to rally certain elements of the military to his cause. Fear and prejudice are remarkably sharp tools when used correctly. He had seen the face of a man who would be particularly helpful once he was convinced that mankind was in danger of being overrun by an alien invasion. That should be easy. The man was half mad already.

The first vision would be fulfilled tonight in Centennial Park in Metropolis. Ironically, the being who waited there was not human, but he had a gift for Cloud Seeker. Technology not of this world, needed to stop a man not of this world. A man yet unknown, but coming soon.

Like the Cloud. Coming soon.

Lois sat on the couch, a legal pad on her lap, chewing on the eraser end of a pencil. She glanced over at the numbers on the calculator and then back at the paper. In the kitchen, Clark prepared dinner, checking the spaghetti, buttering and sprinkling garlic powder on the bread. Lois watched him for a second. A burst of speed and the salad was shredded. He couldn't hurry the spaghetti, though, and he had to wait for it to cook before he toasted the bread. He looked so cute. Clark attacked the problem of dinner with the same concentration and focus he used on any mission. He paused for a few seconds and Lois decided this was as good a time as any.

"Clark," she said. He looked up. "These numbers don't work out."

He checked the progress of the pasta and walked over the couch, kissing Lois on the forehead as he sat beside her.

"Balancing the checkbook?" he asked.

"Give me a break," she answered. "When was the last time you saw me balancing the checkbook?"

He looked thoughtful for a few seconds. "That would be — never," he said.

"Exactly." She looked back at the numbers scribbled on the notepad. "This cloud is about nine billion miles away, right?"

"Something like that. It's programmed into the navigational computers. Dr. Klein has it all figured out."

"And it's supposed to take us about seven days to get there?" she asked.

"That's the plan." Clark looked at her curiously. "What are you getting at?"

"The way I figure it, to get there in seven days, we will have to have a speed of almost 15,000 miles per second." She shook her head. "That can't be right."

"You won't balance the checkbook but you can figure out how fast we need to go to get to the cloud in seven days?"

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist," she said. "I just took nine billion and divided it by the number of seconds in a week. The calculator did most of the work."

Clark glanced at the numbers. "You have to allow for acceleration and deceleration, but I think you're right."

"Clark, that's almost eight percent of the speed of light. Can you go that fast?" she asked. "Especially since you will be flying the space pod, too?"

"We — Dr. Klein and I — are not sure." He looked uncomfortable for a second. "I've never much of a chance to really push myself to the limit as far as speed goes because I haven't had enough room to really accelerate. The earth's circumference is less than 25,000 miles. At the speed you're talking about, I could circle the planet in less than two seconds. If I'm actually going somewhere, say Metropolis to Los Angeles, then I also have to allow for deceleration time."

"So if you go too fast, you could overshoot your destination," Lois said.

"Exactly." He watched her face, almost seeing the wheels turning. "Something else?"

"Uh, yes," she said. Lois didn't want to give him an excuse for leaving her behind, but she had to know the answer. "Can you accelerate to that speed without leaving a thin layer of Lois Lane on the pod's wall?"

Clark smiled. "You know jet fighter pilots experience a lot of extra gee force when they make sharp turns." She nodded. Just last year, she had been offered a ride with the Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron, the Blue Angels. She had been

surprised by the increased pressure of even a gentle turn. "Have you ever felt that when we've flown?" Lois shook her head. "I think it has something to do with the aura, plus Bernie thinks I somehow make mass and inertia vanish when I carry something. That's crucial to this mission, too. I have to 'fly' the pod and everything in it the way I fly you or anyone else I carry. We're breaking a lot of new ground here, Lois. That's why I still—"

"Clark," she warned. Clark glanced towards the kitchen.

"Whoops, gotta go," he said. "Dinner's almost ready."

"What if you're not that fast?" she called to him.

He shrugged. "For all we know, that seven day figure may be too conservative. We could get there in just a few days. We'll know fairly quickly," he said. "In case I'm not, though, I hope Dr. Klein has a plan B ready."

Lois nodded again. If she knew Bernie, he probably had plans B, C, and D ready to go.

Even Clark was over planning this whole mess. She couldn't believe it when he'd told her about the lead underwear.

"I have one condition about you going," he had said.

"And that is?" she asked.

"Two words," Clark said. "Lead underwear."

"What?"

"Dr. Klein has been working on some sort of lead impregnated clothing to help protect me against kryptonite, but he only has enough make something small. Something that would fit you around the middle. I have my doubts about something for me. We can't figure out a way to protect my head and hands. In any case, I don't care how much shielding that Ork thing has, I'd feel better if you had the extra protection of the lead clothing. Especially around your midsection."

"But, Clark. It's lead. Isn't contact with lead bad for me and the baby?"

"Normally I'd agree," he said. "But Dr. Klein has developed a form of lead encapsulated in an inert material. It's perfectly safe."

Lois agreed without protest. That was a problem she had not even considered.

She was beginning to feel a little nervous. Was she being foolish to risk her baby's life by taking a nine billion mile trip into space? She and Clark would be farther away than anyone born on earth had ever gone before. Of course, Clark came here from Krypton when he was a baby, and that was a lot farther than this trip. Okay, technically she was not human, but she also was not super human. Maybe Clark was right. Maybe she should stay home.

But then Clark would have to go alone.

What if something happened and he had no one to help him? Lois couldn't think of anything Clark could not handle, but she had a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. Almost a premonition. Somehow, she was almost certain that if she did not go with him, Clark would not be coming back.

Lois was not going to let that happen.

She would be at his side.

The workman pulled a box from within his coveralls, and another from his toolbox.

Just one more charge to set, he thought.

He snapped them together and they clicked into place. A low beep indicated the timer had been activated. It would make no more noise until the final detonation. He examined the assembly carefully. It looked just like a dozen other equipment modules that had been used to build the generator, down to the Star Labs logo stenciled on the sides. Satisfied, he positioned the construction inside the power generator, behind the lead shielding and attached two wires protruding from either end to contact points nearby. Now it looked like an integral part of the machine, indistinguishable from the rest.

All was in place. Once they were a suitable distance from

Earth, beyond any hope of rescue, the explosives would detonate, disabling the generator, and probably killing everyone on board. The charge was not large enough to destroy the ship, but that would not matter.

One thing bothered him a bit. There were rumors about where Cloud Seeker had gotten the device. Rumors of a dark park six years ago, and a darker craft from the sky, and a gift given with instructions on how to use it. No one would survive.

Including Superman.

Even if he lived through the blast, he would not be able to approach the equipment. Not with the kryptonite infused bomb. Most likely, he would die a slow death, powerless to fix the power system, or save his friends.

Had Seeker gotten the technology from an extraterrestrial source? And if so, why was some alien willing to help humanity stop another alien? There had to be some ulterior motive, and he was sure they would have to deal with that problem eventually.

Not now, though. One treacherous alien at a time.

The workman never thought to question Seeker's possession of the green alien substance or understanding of its significance at a time when no one on earth had heard of the last son of Krypton. As part of the Seeker's inner council, he knew the mission to the cloud was nothing but a ruse, anyway. The real reason the alien Superman was going into space was to meet the rest of his invasion force. There was no cloud threatening the earth. Only an army of super-powered aliens. They had to stop Superman before he could bring the rest of his people here.

God, he hated that smug, caped alien, especially after their first encounter. He knew he was supposed to be dead. He'd even heard the shot that should have killed him. But someone — or something — had frozen time, pulled him away from the pond even as he saw the bullet hanging in mid-air, and substituted a slack faced thing that was barely alive. It looked like his twin, but there was no intelligence behind those glassy eyes. It was as if it only had enough life force to remain upright long enough for the bullet to strike.

He didn't see it happen, though. He found himself in Cloud Seeker's office, the water pouring from him pooling on his carpet. Seeker looked a little surprised himself at his sudden appearance, and he was never surprised. He seemed to recover quickly when he realized what had happened. Their alien benefactor had rescued the dripping man. The two men had been working together for years, but now he would have to work undercover since he was "dead."

There were a lot of things about the incident that bothered him. If he didn't know better, he might think their alien friend had somehow edited his memory when he transported him out of danger. There seemed to be something important that he could not quite remember. Something to do with Superman and his friend, Kent.

They learned that the police thought he was dead. They had a body, after all. And Superman and his friends were safe.

But sometimes, he couldn't decide whether his hatred or his fear of the Kryptonian was greater. Soon it would not matter though. His job here was finished.

Jason Trask closed his toolbox and slipped away. No one saw him.

Soon, the alien would be dead. And Earth would be safe again.

Just as the Cloud Seeker had foreseen.

"Hey, CK. Ready for the big day tomorrow?" Jimmy almost vibrated in excitement. "Shouldn't you be training or something?"

"It's not like a shuttle mission, Jimmy," Clark said. "Superman will be there doing most of the grunt work. All we have to do is watch and report. It's just an overgrown camper, for gosh sakes."

"That thing looks like an egg somebody flattened on the bottom, if you ask me," Jimmy said. "But you guys are going to be spending almost two weeks alone with Superman. Aren't you excited about that?" He sat on the edge of Clark's desk.

"I guess we've been a little more focused on the mission to save an entire planetary system," Clark told him.

"You remember that, don't you, Jimmy?" Lois said walking up to them. "Planets, asteroids, moons, several billion people and lots of other living things?"

"Well, of course, I remember," Jimmy protested. "I just thought—"

"Lane! Kent! In my office. Now." Perry had disappeared back inside his office before they could even turn.

"Sorry, Jimmy," Clark said.

"Gotta go," Lois finished.

They were still smiling at each other when they entered Perry's office, but the smiles faded when they saw his face.

"Something wrong, Perry?" Clark asked.

"Yeah, something," he said. "Remember this joker?"

He threw down an old copy of the Planet from a few years ago, open to a feature story on one Steven Jackson, small time hood turned doomsday preacher. He had gathered a few hundred followers in the early 90's, predicting the end of the world in a fiery cloud. He had his name legally changed to Cloud Seeker and founded the Cult of the Cloud. The byline on the story read "By Lois Lane."

"I'd forgotten about him," Lois said. "This was before you came to work here, Clark. This guy conked his head on a railroad track and suddenly he was seeing visions of the future and the end of the world."

"A phony messiah?" Clark asked.

"Probably, but one who has been preaching the end of the world for years," Lois answered. "Somehow his 'church' managed to raise millions of dollars through some very smart investments. He was actually investigated for insider trading, but he claimed his knowledge came from the heavens. By the time I finished writing this, I was half convinced he *did* have some kind of psychic ability. That's not the worst part, though." She paused and seemed to gather her thoughts.

"There was stuff I could never confirm. A source who relayed the information, then turned up conveniently dead before I could investigate what he told me, so I couldn't publish it. Most of the cult members buy the story about the end of the world," she said finally. "That was the party line until Superman made his appearance and then the rumors started. His inner circle has the 'real' story. They hate Superman."

"What?" Clark said. "How could he found a cult based on hating Superman when there was no Superman when he founded the cult?"

"Psycho psychic guy," Lois reminded him. "Cloud Seeker picked up a few former military and intelligence agency goons along with some of the Bureau 39 people, and they all think Superman is the vanguard of an alien invasion force. He's deceiving us, making us think he's here to help, when he is actually gathering information for the invaders. Or so say the rumors. It was never more than whispers that came up in the course of other investigations."

"That's ridiculous," Clark said.

"You got that right, son," Perry said.

"Now for the best part," Lois said. "They think that Superman and his army will interbreed with humanity and the offspring will be super powered aliens like Superman. In a century or two, there will be no humans left. Only Kryptonian hybrids." Lois met Clark's glance. They both knew how unlikely that was. She wondered if Cloud Seeker somehow knew about the New Krypton children.

"He's still trying to stop the mission to the cloud, as though that would stop a real alien invasion," Perry said. "At the same

time, he is arguing that the mission infringes on his freedom of religion. He's managed to find some judge somewhere to issue an injunction against Superman, Star Labs and you two."

Clark held the newspaper for a second and scanned the article as only he could.

"Of course," he said. "This is what he has been predicting. The carbon-Kleinium cloud will pour enough fusion catalyst into the sun to destroy the earth in a 'fiery cloud.' A nova. But that will really happen. He's pulling a double cross on his own people. The ones out to get Superman don't realize they are signing their own death warrants if he manages to stop us."

"Can he do that?" Lois asked.

"Darlin', this will be laughed out of the first appeals court that hears it," Perry said. "That's not what has me worried. Cults like these are battier than the Memphis Kings baseball team. Mr. 'Seeker' has got to know this isn't going to work. I'm worried about his backup plan."

"Come on, Perry," Lois said. "He's not crazy enough try to sabotage the mission, is he?"

"I just don't know, Lois." Perry rubbed his chin as he leaned back in his chair. "I've had experience with nutjobs like this before, back in the days when I was the best investigative reporter on the beat." He smiled at them. "Before you two came along.

"You've got to remember that guys like him don't give up easily." He pointed at them and looked Clark directly in the eye. "Be alert. Have Superman check that pod before you all take off into empty space."

"You better believe it, Perry," Clark said.

"Okay, that's it. Take care of yourselves — and the little one — on the trip." He followed them to the door. "And bring me back one whale of a story."

Only Clark heard the worried sigh after Perry had closed the door.

Martha and Jonathan Kent sat in the front row of the VIP section of the spectators. As parents of one of the reporters going on the historic trip, they were being given preferential treatment. Martha could see him constantly reaching into his pocket and touching the remote there, as if rehearsing what he had to do. She waved at Lois' parents sitting a few rows away.

"Jonathan," she said sharply. "Stop fidgeting."

He looked startled for a second, then realized what he had been doing. "Yes, dear," he said, patting her hand. "I'm just a little nervous."

"So am I," she said. She looked around at the press and the cameras and the crowd gathering to watch the departure. "So are a few billion others."

"They will be fine, Martha," he reassured her. "There's no one in the world like our Clark, or like our Lois, for that matter."

"I know, dear." Martha had been more than concerned when she found out that Lois was going with Clark in her condition. How Lois hated that phrase, but there was another life to consider. And Martha could not help but mention that concern to Lois. Reluctantly, of course, but she did. She remembered what happened.

"Lois, dear, I'm a little worried about you," Martha had said to her. "I know you sometimes want the world to remember that you're better, stronger, faster than anyone, except Superman, of course. But the little one ..." Martha had put all the love she felt for Lois into her words, trying to take the sting out of them.

Lois could have blown up, reacting to Martha's worry with anger, but instead her eyes had half-filled with tears and she reached out to touch her arm.

"Oh, Martha," she said. "I would never do anything to endanger this baby." Martha had nodded, but hadn't said anything, and Lois took a deep breath.

"You know about this bond between Clark and me, don't

you? I can close my eyes and feel him in the distance. I know when he's thinking about me and when he's worried. It's not because he is from another planet, but there is something eerie and otherworldly about the connection we have."

"I know," Martha had said. "It's real. I've seen it work."

"There is something else just as real and it is the certainty that I must go with him. I don't know why. It's something that every atom in my body screams for. I'm compelled to do this, Martha, and I can't turn back."

"He has gone into danger before, Lois."

"I know, Martha. Somehow, something is different this time."

Martha had nodded in agreement, trusting in the love and the bond between Clark and Lois.

So she found herself waiting for two of the people she loved most in the world to leave it.

Lois and Clark walked out onto the platform near the pod and waited for the crowd to quiet.

They looked at each other, and Clark pushed Lois up to the microphone.

"Hello, everybody," she said. "We're not going to take any questions right now, but I want to make a couple of points. You'll notice that we are just wearing these Star Labs jumpsuits, not spacesuits, though each of us — including Superman — has one inside. And this is a lot more comfortable than heels and a tuxedo for traveling." She flashed a Lois smile at them and the crowd clapped as they laughed nervously. "Finally, I would like to thank you all for coming to see us off." Martha elbowed Jonathan. She and Clark had used the latest computer technology to program the sequence so she and Jonathan could be in the audience. Time to start the holographic projector. He reached into his pocket.

"But," Lois continued, "I think you are really here to see—"

"Superman!" someone in the crowd shouted. Lois and Clark, along with a few thousand other people looked up to see the familiar blue and red shape floating down. Martha heard Jonathan let out a deep breath.

"Hello, everyone," Superman said. He hovered above them, his arms crossed, his toes pointed slightly downward. "Like Lois and Clark, I'm not taking any questions, but we are all aware of the importance of this mission and know that we can not fail. But let me make something very clear." He paused, as though making sure everyone was listening.

"This is not my mission. I am not the hero here, and without the work of Star Labs and Dr. Bernard Klein and hundreds of others working together, this would not have been possible. I literally would have been powerless to do anything if not for their expertise and ability. I'm just the muscle here. They are the ones who deserve your thanks."

"Uh, Superman," Clark called to him. "I think it's almost time."

"You're right," he said. "I'll see you and Lois inside." He looked back at the crowd one last time. "We will see you all in a couple of weeks." He streaked inside the vehicle.

Martha patted Jonathan on the shoulder. "You did good, honey," she said.

"It wasn't too hard," he said. "All I had to do was punch the start button and the projector did the rest."

She looked back at Lois and Clark, waving as they moved inside. "I'm so worried about them, Jonathan."

"Martha, dear Martha," Jonathan said. "When those two are together there is no force in the universe that can stop them."

"I know," she said, sighing. "But I will always worry about our Clark and our Lois."

His name was Q'antori Xen. He was not even remotely human, and he hated the Kryptonian because of what he had done to him on a world a thousand light years away and many years into the future.

His first attempt to kill this interfering Superman had been in

that future, but after the fact. Too late to prevent his intervention on Xen's homeworld. Though he was sure the Superman and Lois Lane of that time were killed by the trap he set, he realized that he had to go back in time and destroy him here. Years before he appeared in the skies over his home.

So he stole a time travel device and sought out this time.

Q'antori Xen was not that familiar with the nuances of time travel or the causality problems travelers often encountered. He wondered, for example, why the Superman who interfered with his plans was young and vital, while the Superman and Lois Lane that he killed shortly after those events were elderly by human standards. And here, many years in the past, they were young again. The Kryptonian looked just as he had during his attack on Xen's laboratory.

It made no difference. The Kryptonian would die here. The incursion would never happen.

Unseen, wearing the unobtrusive black clothing of the Cult of the Cloud, he smiled and left the crowd around the departure zone. He had seen enough. Those idiot humans, Seeker and Trask, had done their parts and the Plan was proceeding perfectly. Seeker thought he was psychic and never realized his "visions" were implanted in his mind by alien technology. The deception was necessary to kill the Kryptonian. Xen didn't concern himself with the billions of sentient beings who would die, or the destruction of an entire solar system. He had never before hesitated to make sacrifices to achieve the greater good. Even now, his own people suffered because Kal-El had destroyed the machine that would supply unlimited, free energy to his power-starved world. Of course, it would have caused the star of a nearby, inhabited solar system to nova, but that was a minor consideration.

Now, Q'antori Xen had places to be, times to visit, preparations to complete. Given his technological advantage and the preparations he had made, it was extremely unlikely that any of them would survive to return. But just in case, there was one more backup plan to put into place, and the Kryptonian would be nothing more than a footnote in this universe's history. Incapable of interfering in the affairs of others. The black figure turned a corner and disappeared in a column of rippling light.

Clark held Lois for a few moments after sealing the airlock door. "Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," she answered.

"Better get in the suit for the lift off." A momentary blur and Clark became Superman. "This would have been a lot simpler if they hadn't insisted on that video feed for the departure."

"Count your blessings," Lois said. "Even though everybody gets equal access to our reports, the world's media was yelling bloody murder the whole time. They could have put half a dozen cameras in here and we would really have problems. It's going to be tough enough for you to pretend to be both of you at the same time."

He grinned at her. "Do you know what you just said?"

She thought for a second. "Yes, I do. And it makes perfect sense. Besides, it's only for a little while." She smiled, twirling her fingers around the "S" on his chest. "Then I will have you all to myself for two whole weeks."

Clark's eyes widened in mock surprise. "So that's why you wanted to go? So we could be alone?"

"Why else?" she purred.

"Careful," he said. "I'll need a little energy to move this thing, you know."

"Good," Lois said. "Then I'll leave as little as possible." He leaned over to kiss her and Dr. Klein's voice interrupted.

"Back to business," Clark said, then took a second to kiss her anyway. He activated the microphone.

"Dr. Klein," he said in Superman's voice. "We're almost ready in here."

"Excellent, Superman. Lock yourself into the harness when expedient. We will be monitoring stress levels on the pod's structure."

One more time, Clark swept every crevice and corner of the vehicle with his x-ray vision but could not find anything that did not belong. Cloud Seeker had either given up or could not find a way to sabotage the mission. Everything looked normal.

The Ork was shaped roughly like a squashed egg with the small end pointing up and three support fins around the base for stability. There was a round central room roughly ten feet in diameter with a series of smaller rooms around the outside of the pod. Two rooms on one side contained the fusion power supply, and the solar radiation generator. The solar radiators were positioned so that the central area was always filled with a gentle yellow glow, plus there were additional panels in one of the two bedrooms. It wasn't enough to give Lois a suntan, but more than enough to maintain Clark's energy levels.

The living quarters and kitchen were on the opposite side of the pod, with the bathroom and storage in between. More was stowed in compartments above and below the main level. Though they only planned to be gone a week, Clark has insisted that they bring enough supplies for a month for three people, and spares for all the critical systems. Since he could get along without food and water for extended periods, there was for three months for Lois alone. Clark walked to the central axis of the ship and stared at the Vehicle Ascent Device.

The VAD was more than a harness and not quite a full body suit. First he slipped into the upper body assembly, not unlike football shoulder pads that extended down his chest and back to his waist. Lois helped him snap the titanium steel straps into place. Thick cables ran from the pads to the floor, then into the structure of the ship. Clark slipped his feet into a boot-like arrangement bolted to the floor. He flipped a switch on the panel in front of him, and the lower half of the suit locked into place around his waist and legs. It had been designed to provide as much contact as possible between his body and the ship on the theory that his aura would more likely be transferred. It seemed to work well in the preliminary tests. Dr. Klein thought this extension-of-aura effect allowed Superman to lift large objects — like a shuttle filled with space colonists — without the object disintegrating in his hands.

On either side of the harness, the reclining seats had been built to lessen any gee force Clark and Lois might feel. In flight, Superman was going to "fly" with his arms at his sides so the passengers could easily touch hands, again to protect them with his aura.

Of course, there was no "them" and only Lois would be occupying a seat. She checked the last of the harness latches, fastened the belts on the empty chair then settled into position and locked her own safety belts. Only Bernie knew about it, but Clark had prerecorded video of him strapped into the seat that the doctor would insert into the camera feed at the appropriate time.

The lead garment Dr. Klein had given her was fairly flexible, but tended to bind in the most uncomfortable places, so it took a few seconds before she could find a soft spot in the seat. She reached out and took Clark's hand, kissing the tips of his fingers. He glanced at her, but kept his face impassive since a few billion people were watching him. Lois grinned and held her cheek close to his skin. The video feed showed only his face at this point so she wasn't worried about being seen. She could depend on Bernie to keep that under control.

Superman looked away from her and asked, "Are you ready, Mr. Kent?" To Lois' amazement, Clark's voice came from somewhere to the left.

"Ready when you are, Superman."

"How about you, Ms. Lane?"

"Uh, sure. Ready to go." How had he done that? His lips never moved but it sounded like Clark was sitting next to him in

that empty seat. That man never ceased to amaze her.

"Release the restraints," Clark said. A slight vibration shook the pod for a second. "Restraints clear. Beginning ascent."

Slowly at first, but with increasing speed, the egg-shaped pod rose into the air. Besides the screens showing views from cameras pointed along their flight path, there were windows set at sixty degree intervals above the first level, so she could see the sky above them. Clark also looked up as though that helped him focus on his destination, his arms by his sides, his right hand encircling Lois'.

A few minutes into the flight, she radioed back. "Okay, we're shutting down the video and voice feed until the first break. This is Lois, Clark, and Superman on the Ork signing off."

Lois watched the stress gauges and the external temperature display. Until they cleared the atmosphere, Clark would have to go slowly enough not to overheat the pod. Once in space, he would really begin to accelerate. Everything looked good. No unusual vibration, no aberrant sheer force on the ship, and so far, no gee forces beyond normal. She checked the speed indicator and whistled. She should have felt the weight of an elephant on her chest based on the indicated acceleration. Clark was really doing this.

The ship left the atmosphere and Clark seemed to find another realm of speed. Thousands of miles per second were being left behind them. Lois worried about the energy he was expending, but it was never in the plan for him to fly continuously. They had decided that he would accelerate for two hours, then they would check the speed and decide how to proceed. He pushed himself ever upward, adjusting his direction based on the navigational computer output.

Lois sat quietly while he worked, holding his hand, sometimes kissing his palm, marveling at the man she loved. Finally, she could not take it anymore. She had to talk to him, even if it did break his concentration.

"How's it going, Clark?" Lois asked. Though there was a constant stream of data about the condition of the ship and the journey, the internal microphones had been turned off.

"I'm okay," he said, the strain evident in his voice. "How much longer?"

"Timer says another ten minutes. Can you make it?"

"No problem," he answered. A small bead of perspiration had formed on his forehead.

Lois held his hand and tried to reassure him, willing him to draw strength from her touch. Amazingly, he breathed a little easier and some of the strain left his face. Still they accelerated, building more and more speed.

Finally, the timer chimed once and Clark relaxed. Lois looked at the speed indicator. Almost 11,000 miles per second and holding steady.

"I guess you are that fast," she said, helping him out of the harness. She looked at him. "Do you have to wear that suit?"

He spun and said, "No. Is this better?" He was back in his jeans and sport shirt, but had not bothered to put on the glasses.

"Much," she said, wrapping her arms around him and just holding him close to her. "How do you feel?"

"A little tired. I'll rest under that sunlamp on steroids after I contact Star Labs."

Lois looked worried. "We must be halfway to Mars by now —"

"If we had been going toward Mars in the first place."

"So can we still reach them?" Lois continued, ignoring the interruption.

"Those Voyager probes at the edge of the solar system still transmit back to earth, so I figure all this high powered equipment can do as least as well."

"I can't wait until we start taping the video diary," Lois said. "You know it's going to look odd if Superman doesn't show up once in a while."

"Well," Clark said. "I have a couple of ideas about that."

"Like during take off? How did you do that thing with the Superman voice and then your voice from the other chair? You never moved your lips."

"Did you like that?" He grinned at her, his eyes twinkling. "I've been practicing. I got the idea after I saw that guy on TV last week, so I developed this new power."

"Let me guess," Lois said, rolling her eyes.

"Yep. Super-ventriloquism."

She leaned against him, chuckling. "Lord, save me from super-comedians," she said.

Martha and Jonathan, along with the rest of the world, listened to the reports from Lois and Clark as long as they remained in radio range. After two days, the transmissions from the ship faded to mostly static. The telemetry data feed continued for another day or so, then it too finally disappeared. The solar system did not have a true boundary, a place where you could say that the system ended and interstellar space began. But the ship was well outside the major planetary orbits by then, and now all they could do was wait for them to complete their mission and return.

They looked at each other and sighed after the last transmission.

"Only two weeks," Martha said.

"Not long at all," Jonathan agreed.

"All we need is a little patience."

Jonathan pulled her close to him. "Then it's good that we have each other, Martha," he said. "Because patience is something we don't have right now."

Martha smiled and hugged her bear of a man.

Only two days later, their world fell apart with a call from Perry White.

"Martha, is Jonathan there?" Perry asked after identifying himself.

"Here, Perry."

"Turn on LNN," he told them. "They received a video from that blasted Cult of the Cloud." Jonathan took the cordless phone with him while he found and fumbled with the remote for a few seconds. "I just want you folks to remember that no matter what that madman says, those two have been through things most people couldn't imagine. They got more guts than Elvis had sequins. They'll be just fine."

Only after he hung up did they realize Perry had not mentioned Superman at all.

"To repeat," the anchorwoman was saying as the television flared to life. "All the major media outlets have received a video tape from the former Steven Jackson, now calling himself Cloud Seeker, claiming to have placed a kryptonite laced bomb aboard the Ork, the Star Labs mission to save the solar system. Here is a portion of that tape." She looked off the side, waiting on the video to roll.

"My name is Cloud Seeker," the man said. He was dressed all in black, his head in shadow and a beard hiding the details in his face. "The deception by Superman and the traitorous scientists of S.T.A.R Laboratories has been thwarted by the cult of the Cloud and our acolytes. The Kryptonian's true mission is not to save earth, but to contact an armada hiding within the cloud. I have sent a detailed schematic of the explosive device along with this tape. Have your scientists examine it.

"I urge all people to reject the hypocrisy of the so-called hero and his sycophants and bow to the sacred inevitability of the Cloud. Only then will the earth be saved. Otherwise, humanity's soul will be lost to the darkness." The video cut off.

"There was more," the anchorwoman continued. "Primarily, it detailed how the invasion of earth had been planned for years. Cloud also asserted that there was no danger of the sun going nova, and that it was a deception by the authorities and

Superman.” She looked a little shaken, even though she must have been through the report several times.

“We have Dr. Bernard Klein of Star Labs on the line. He has examined the documents sent with the tape, and just finished his analysis. Dr. Klein, have you reached any conclusions?”

A still of Dr. Klein appeared on the screen that looked as though it had been taken from a bad drivers license picture.

“Well, yes,” he said, clearing his throat. “Based on the design I saw, it is plausible that the device is capable of at least severely damaging the fusion reactor.”

“Are they in danger from the radiation?”

“Not from the reactor,” Dr. Klein answered. “The shielding is specifically designed to collapse around the radioactive material in case of catastrophic failure.”

The anchorwoman consulted a sheet of paper. “What would the loss of this generator mean, Dr. Klein?”

“No power to warm and light the ship. The solar radiation generator would cease to function and Superman would lose his energy source.”

“Surely they have emergency power?”

“Of course,” Dr. Klein said. “In fact, we have redundant backups for all major systems, including the fusion impeller. However, our planning rely on Superman’s ability to move and install equipment.”

“So you take their kryptonite claim seriously?”

“So it seems from the design. The device is supposed to contain a form of powdered kryptonite in a gelatinous compound that will contaminate the area around the generator. If that is the case, then Superman will be weakened and unable to install the backup generator.”

“Just how powerful is the explosive device, Dr. Klein?” she asked. “Does it pose a direct threat to Lois Lane, Clark Kent, and Superman?”

“The kryptonite is a very real danger to Superman, of course, and it will be difficult for him to avoid the radiation in the small confines of the craft. As for Lois and Clark—” He paused and Martha and Jonathan clasped their hands together. “It depends on where they are when the device detonates. If they are in close proximity, then they could be severely injured. At this time, we don’t have enough information to make that determination.”

Jonathan hit the off button and the picture faded. They had seen enough. He and Martha held each other for a few minutes.

“Oh, Jonathan,” she said, wanting his strong arms around her. He said nothing, but a bit of moisture rolled down his cheek.

Still, all they could do was wait.

Even though she had read the mission manual Star Labs had given them, and suffered through a week of “training” that was actually an endless series of lectures from Dr. Klein, Lois was surprised at how little time she had for relaxing. There always seemed to be something else to do, an instrument to watch, a minute course correction, an adjustment in the recycling system, or a hundred other things. Even without an engine and propelled only by Superman power, the Ork was a complex collection of machinery, technology, and inspiration thrown together if not hastily, then with little delay.

Plus, the two of them were having to do the work of three.

Of course, it helped that one of them was a solar powered Kryptonian who was extremely good at multitasking.

Before the flight, it was assumed that Superman and Clark would handle most of the technology and that Lois would handle the reporting. She wasn’t quite sure whether to be insulted or complimented by the “assumed” division of labor. There were some reporting jobs that only she and Clark could do together, and a few technology jobs that required simultaneous adjustments of widely separated instruments. Since even Superman could not be in two places at once, Lois gradually became more comfortable and proficient with the machine they currently called

home.

She also had a few suggestions concerning the layout and amenities. Bernard Klein may have been a great scientist and competent spaceship engineer, but he knew squat about good RV design.

The Ork had an early warning radar that helped them avoid any space debris, though the chances were small that they would run into anything large enough to damage the pod. Their path took them out of the plane of the elliptic of the solar system — where the planets and asteroids orbited — and into relatively clear areas of space. Still, they made it a point to check the radar system periodically. Clark could always move the ship out of the way of something big if they had enough warning.

For the first part of the journey, Clark spent a couple of hours a day accelerating the ship and adjusting their course. At the midpoint, he began decelerating, gradually adjusting their speed so they would find themselves stationary relative to the dense cloud when they arrived. Then they spent at least that much time going over the ship’s systems, reassuring themselves that everything was going as planned. Finally, after all that, they taped entries for the video diary that would eventually be edited into a report the entire world would see. Lois was a little nervous about that at first, but there was no live audience watching, and she enough public speaking experience and sheer, determined Lois Lane-ness that it didn’t bother her after a while.

They even worked out how to get Clark and Superman on camera apparently at the same time. Lois worked the camera, focusing it on Clark as he described the day to day tasks of traveling a few billion miles away from the earth.

“Boredom is not a problem,” he was saying. “We haven’t had time to get to those movies on the new DVD disc format. We’ve been too busy.” Clark stopped and looked off to his left.

“Superman is over there adjusting an external sensor. Say ‘Hi,’ Superman.”

Lois swung the camera away from Clark and in that instant, a blue blur arced behind Lois, and when she finished the pan, Superman stood at a panel with some sort of instrument in his hand. Wires draped between the device in his hand and an open hatch in the wall. Superman smiled at the camera absently and waved. “Hello,” he said. Lois panned back and Clark stood there, smiling a Clark smile, warmer and more human than Superman’s. It was easy to tell them apart. Lois smiled at that thought.

“A man of few words,” Clark said.

Once, she was interviewing Superman, and Clark was somehow off to the side, or at least he was when camera lens pointed in that direction. Another time, she and Clark were in the frame when she looked to the other side and made room for Superman to stand beside her. At the same time, this pushed Clark out of the frame. He moved back to Lois’ side when Superman moved away.

A neat, precise dance of deception and misdirection.

There was no true night, of course, but there were scheduled rest periods where they were expected to go to bed and sleep. Sometimes, and after a while, they slept. They had no trouble keeping themselves amused.

They were a full one hundred and thirty hours into the flight and drifting near their destination when hell exploded around them.

Of all the powers and abilities of Superman, none of them could quite match the one super-human ability that Lois seemed to possess. Even in the years before Superman, she had herself found in situations that Perry would have described as “ass deep in alligators and still trying to drain the swamp” and she had always managed to survive. Kidnapping, cloning, brainwashing, a villainous fiancé, and attempted murder were not enough to stop her. It was as if the universe had arranged itself to protect her, even to the point of destroying an innocent planet called Krypton so that a baby named Kal-el could come to earth, grow

up to be a newspaper reporter, and fall in love with the only woman who seemed to have been made to order for him. As though it was programmed into his genetic code that he would fall helplessly in love with her because the universe had bigger plans than just death for Lois Lane.

What other explanation could there be? What were the odds that Clark would come to Metropolis at the exact time in her life that she needed him to save her? Or that he would fall in love with her before she said one word to him? Or that she would fall equally in love with him not long after (even if it did feel like an eternity to one particular Kryptonian)? The entire cosmos seemed to be changing the laws of physics and chance just to protect one dark haired, dark eyed, long-legged bundle of beauty and brains.

Either that, or Lois Lane was just damned lucky.

So they had arrived at the densest part of the cloud, a dark shape filled with random sparkles that blotted out the stars behind it.

Lois turned off the lights inside the Ork and they crowded onto Clark's mostly unused seat and reclined it so they could lay together and enjoy the view through the overhead windows. A band of dusty light seemed to circle them, the Milky Way unimpeded by a thick, murky atmosphere.

"Beautiful, isn't, Lois?" Clark said. "Like a million brilliant diamonds sprinkled on black velvet."

"Clark," Lois said. "That's very lyrical." She raised her head and kissed his cheek. "Ever try writing poetry?" She snuggled back against him. She felt rather than heard him chuckle, a tingling vibration in his chest against her cheek.

"Remind me to show you some of those journals from when I was a teenager," he said. A pause. "On second thought, remind me to burn those journals before you can see them."

"Don't you dare!" she said, swatting him on the arm. "Now I *have* to see them." Her fingers made small circles on his tee shirt. "What kind of things did you write about? Girls? Fields of wheat shifting in the wind? Cows?"

"Well — cows?" Clark sounded incredulous. About the same tone of voice he might have used if Tempus, Luthor, and Mxyzptlk had shown up to sing "Happy Birthday" to him.

"You think I write poetry about cows?" he asked.

"We-llll," Lois replied, stretching out the word. "How do I know what Kansas farmboys write about? I thought there might a cow you were particularly fond of."

"Right," he said, and thought a second, then continued.

"Old Betsy was a good old cow.

"The milk she gave was never sour.

"She ate grass all day,

"And at night a little hay.

"I sure miss Old Betsy right now."

Lois swatted him again.

"You're laughing at me, aren't you?" she asked.

"Maybe a little," he said, grinning. "Cow poetry."

There was enough light from the stars for her to see his face, his smile that was her guiding light. She rolled over on top of him and took his face in both hands. Tiny dots of reflected starlight twinkled in his eyes. Lois kissed him, molding her body to his, feeling his hands on her back and lower, touching, caressing, finding those sensitive spots he knew so well.

"We have to go—" Clark began.

"Go where?" Lois interrupted, her lips a millimeter from his, her body screaming to shed the coveralls.

"Our room," he muttered. Something had happened to his voice. The Kryptonian voice that could shatter a mountain was barely audible. "The shielding."

Somewhere, in the deep recesses of her brain where a tiny grain of rationality remained, Lois knew what he was talking about. In addition to the heavy lead shielding of the Ork, he had insisted that more be installed in their quarters. He was taking no chances with Lois and the baby.

"Never," he had said, "leave that room without your lead lined maternity top." His eyes and voice had left no room for discussion.

The speck of logic shouted for attention. Get to the room.

Lois pulled away from him, sitting on his body, breathing heavily. She put her hands on his chest and leaned on them as if she did not have the strength to hold herself upright.

"Well," she said between breaths. "You gonna just lie there or what?"

They slowly rose into the air, Lois riding Clark like a warm, breathing, flying carpet, and drifted toward the open door of their room while he stroked her cheek with his hand. They settled onto the bed as a puff of air from super lungs closed the door behind them. It did not latch, but it was closed.

Just damned lucky, again.

Consider the possibilities if Clark and Superman had been two different people, and Lois and Clark were along just because they were good friends with Superman. If there had truly been three of them on board, and Lois and Clark had been in their quarters — celebrating — while Superman stood watch, they would have all died because he would have been caught in the Kryptonite explosion and no one else could have repaired and moved the ship. If they hadn't been celebrating, all three would probably have been caught in the explosion and died. And, no, don't even consider the possibility that all *three* would be "celebrating" together. That was totally alien to the nature of Superman and Lois and Clark.

It was only the fact that there were two of them and that one of them was Clark/Superman that allowed them to survive the initial holocaust.

They lay together, arms enfolded around the other, striving as always to enjoy the electrifying touch of skin on skin. Lips against lips. Soul touching soul.

Clark heard the sound, soft and quiet, and knew instantly that it was out of place. A small "tick" as a tiny relay jerked in response to an infinitesimal jolt of electricity. A hiss, almost a sigh, as power surged through a volatile compound. An expanding blast of gas and chemicals as the bomb exploded. Clark was super human and still had only enough time to flick his eyes open.

Then the blast and radiation exploded through the unlatched door and found him. He covered Lois' body with his own, praying that he could somehow save her.

Then his eyes closed again. For a very, very long time.

The pain was not so bad, Clark decided, lounging in a black pool at the bottom of a well at midnight. It was like spicy hot sauce on a burrito, but more irritating. Why couldn't he see? Why did he feel like there was a vise clamped around his body? He tried to move and couldn't. But he was still breathing. He tasted salt and copper. No. He tasted blood. His blood. A faint odor of something burning swirled around him. The sharp tang of ozone from arcing electrical wires. Then a voice. A high pitched, droning, irritating and irritated voice.

"Safe as crossing a street," the voice said. "That bald headed brother to a babootch. What the hell does he know about crossing streets? Probably never leaves that shiny white lab." A scraping sound seemed to punctuate each word. "Probably." Scrape. "Never." Scrape. "Had." Scrape. "A." Scrape. "Girlfriend." Scrape. "Either." The voice sighed and paused, as though knowing what it said was not the truth and not caring.

"So here I am," the voice continued. "Scraping little blobs of kryptonite flavored gelatin off the floors and walls, acting like the cleaning lady for a multi-million dollar egg-shaped hunk of metal which — by all rights — should have exploded into a thousand bits. Or at least had a few holes punched in it. But, no! It just made a hell of a mess that *I* have to clean up. Lucky, that's what I am. Lucky to be alive. Lucky we're all alive. Just call me Lucky."

Gabble, he thought. Chatter. Gush. Gibber. Prattle. Burble. Blabber. No, that wasn't right.

Babbling. The voice was babbling. That meant the voice was Lois. Why couldn't he see?

He tried to speak, call out for Lois. Her name came out as a weak groan with no resemblance to a word in any language he knew.

"Oh, God," Lois said, the sound suddenly by his head. "Thank God, you're awake."

Clark tried to clear his throat and even that came out as a dry cough.

"Can't see," he said, forcing the words out.

"I know, sweetheart," Lois told him. "Just hold still and listen to me." Clark couldn't see her but he could hear her. He knew by the way she stopped and took a deep breath that she wasn't going to give him any good news.

"A bomb exploded," she began. "It looked like it was inside the fusion power system and we are running on battery backup for now. It was -" Clark could tell she was trying to stay calm and not give in to the fear he could hear in her voice. "It was laced with some sort of jelly mixed with kryptonite. Clark, it's on everything and it looks weird."

"Weird?" Clark's throat burned with every word.

"Besides the green slime thing, I mean," Lois told him. "The color is a little off somehow. It's almost turquoise."

"Any good news?" he rasped.

"No," she said. "It gets worse. Somehow, some of the kryptonite hit you in the face and stuck. Luckily, you protected me enough so that I only had a few minor scrapes and bruises so I was able to get the kryptonite off you quickly. Your eyes are bandaged. I used the spare lead impregnated maternity top to cover your head and protect you from the kryptonite."

"The baby." Clark felt his heart speed up, dreading the answer.

"The baby is fine, but danced a fandango before I could get the lead top back on."

"Kryptonite."

"Yes, that's what I figured, too. Our baby doesn't like it any more than you do."

"Okay." His voice was sounding a little better. "Why can't I move?"

"Um, well, there's a seventy pound door on you. The explosion knocked it off its hinges, and I had to drag it over here to cover you. I hoped it would shield you from the worst of the radiation."

His sense of body awareness was returning. He could feel the metal pressing into his skin. And something else.

"Lois," he said. "I'm naked."

"Yes, well, neither of us was wearing a whole lot in the first place," she told him. "Stripping you made it easier to scrub you down and wipe away the kryptojelly."

"Kryptojelly?"

"I had to call it something." Lois stopped and Clark heard an almost silent sob.

"I-I was so scared," she continued. "The explosion knocked me out and then I couldn't hear. And you were so still. And green blobs of glowing goo were all over everything. And the baby was squirming so much. And smoke. There was smoke coming from some of the panels and it took me forever to find the extinguisher. I put fires out and then I could hear and the alarms were blaring. Then I had to get the kryptojelly off you and cover you with the door and scrub the room. And now you're awake and Clark, I love you so much." Clark let her babble until she ran down. Though he could not see her, he could feel her hand grasping his, as if she were falling and holding on to him for dear life.

"We will be okay, Lois," he said, wishing he could hold more than her hand. "I love you, too, sweetheart." He felt her warm lips against his fingers.

"Now," Clark said, his voice a little stronger. "What's our uh — kryptojelly situation?"

"I've got almost all of it out of this room except for a couple of small spots that won't take more than a minute or two," Lois answered. "I've been putting it into the airlock." Clark would have nodded if he could. That chamber was lead lined, too, so the kryptonite would be harmless in there. "I figured we could open the outer airlock door when it's all cleaned up and blow the stuff out into space," she continued.

"Good plan," Clark told her.

"Hold on a second," she said. He could hear her moving away from him, more scraping sounds, then fading footsteps as she moved into the main area. The inner airlock door cycled and she returned.

"We need to get this door back up to shield you from the kryptojelly still out there," Lois said. "Think you can help me a little?"

"I think so," Clark replied. "I'm feeling a little better. Not super, but better. Almost normal. Human normal, that is."

"Good. Push up on the door and help me get it upright. I think I can balance it and walk it into position."

Clark pulled his elbows in close and put both palms against the metallic surface of the door, then pushed. It was surprisingly heavy, even against the weaker artificial gravity of the Ork. Together, they raised it into a vertical position and held it there. His knees felt wobbly, but held. He had a feeling Lois was doing most of the work. Evidently, so did she.

"Let me have it. No, don't take off the bandage," she warned as his hands moved to his face. "I want you to keep your eyes covered for a while."

"How much light do we have?" he asked. "Can you see?"

"Let me get this in place," she answered. Clark heard a rhythmic clanging as she walked the door into place. "We're on batteries only, but I have the solar radiation gadget on maximum." A final clang as she set the door in place. He felt her hands on his arm, guiding him backwards. "The bed is behind you. Just sit down and I'll get you something to wear."

"You should try to conserve the batteries, Lois," Clark told her. "We'll need that power to get home."

"Think it through, Clark," she said. "If we don't get you recharged with solar energy then we're going nowhere."

As always, Lois had a point.

"Besides," she said, "when you get your powers back, then you can fix the generator and we will have all the power we need."

"Do I hear a bit of tentative optimism in your tone, Ms. Lane?"

He felt the bed move as she sat beside him.

"More than a bit, Mr. Kent," she said. "You're alive and I'm alive and we have a baby to take care of. Not to mention saving the solar system." Her hand started at his knee, moved up his thigh and onto his stomach, then his chest, making a slow circle.

"As much as I'm enjoying your current state of undress," she said, "I think you need to rest, while I see if I can scrub up more of that green slime out there." She pushed what felt like a scrap of cloth into his hand. "Here are some shorts. Put them on and lay back on the bed. The panels in the ceiling will help re-power you." He started to protest, but Lois stopped him.

"Listen, Mr. Clark Kent. If we can't get those batteries of yours charged up pronto, we may be in bigger trouble than we've ever seen before. I've shut down the solar radiation panels everywhere but in this room to conserve power, so I want you to lay back on the bed and act like a sponge." Lois stopped speaking and the shorts disappeared from his lap.

"On second thought," she continued, and he felt her warm hand on his thigh. "Maybe I'll keep the shorts. You should expose as much skin as possible to the solar radiation, you know."

"Lois..."

“Spoilsport,” she said as the shorts hit him in the chest. He felt her hand behind his head as she pulled his face to hers. Just the touch of her lips seem to send a jolt through him more powerful than a blast of solar radiation. That kiss would have sent a lesser man back into a coma like state.

“Now lay back and do your job,” Lois said. “Try to rest while I clean up that kryptojelly out there. Don’t wait up. This is going to take a while.”

“Yes, dear,” Clark answered, reclining on the bed. He knew when he was beaten. No sheets or blankets. They must have been contaminated with the kryptojelly — he really had a problem with that name Lois had given it — and she had not had time to replace them. No problem, he thought. There was no way he was going to be able to sleep, anyway.

In exactly 43.7 seconds, having been blasted with kryptonite and lost his powers and knocked unconscious for an hour or two and still weak from the ordeal, Clark was asleep.

At some point in the next hour, comforted with dreams of Lois almost as good as the real thing, he mumbled, “Yes, dear,” in a low voice familiar to their bedroom. Then he settled into a deeper sleep and smiled.

“Are your powers magic?” Lois asked, her head against his shoulder and her hand making small circles on his chest. Clark was recovering, but still spent most of his time under the yellow sun lamps. Almost two days had passed since the explosion, and Lois had spent every spare minute scouring the area for any traces of the Kryptonite compound. Finally, she could find no more and had joined him in bed to relax. Well, she had actually stripped down and slipped beneath the sheet beside him and Clark suddenly realized he was feeling much, much better. Lois had calmed him with a kiss that promised greater things later.

“Well, I think the conventional wisdom is that I absorb energy from the sun,” Clark answered. “Lois, you know that.”

“Or sunlamps,” Lois observed. “I know, but it doesn’t make sense that you could absorb enough energy to power your abilities. And those sunlamps sure don’t produce enough power to ‘super’ you up. But they do.”

“Super me up? I don’t think anyone has phrased it quite that way before.” Clark blinked and resisted an urge to rub his eyes. Lois had removed the bandages an hour or so before and his vision, while blurred, was returning, much to his relief. One bout of blindness was enough for him. He hated doing nothing — except that holding Lois in his arms was far from nothing! — but knew he had to wait for at least some of his power to return before he could repair the ship or tackle the cloud. If they were to complete the mission and make it home, he had to be Superman again.

“Well you know me,” Lois said. “Award winning journalist, and all. But think about it, Clark. Last year, we did that series on alternative energy sources, and you know that even with all the hype about new technology, it takes a football sized field of solar panels to get any significant amount of energy. Your entire body is just a tiny fraction of that surface area — though admittedly a hunkalicious fraction — and you absorb a lot more energy.”

“Hunkalicious, Lois?” Clark felt as much as saw her grin. He kissed her forehead. “I know Bernie is not your favorite person right now—”

“That goofy poor excuse for a mad scientist,” she interrupted. Dr. Klein might live after all. Her voice had lost that knife edge that promised death and destruction, but the good doctor would still have to watch his back for a while.

“But,” Clark continued, “he seems to think that the whole yellow sun and red sun situation has something to do with a zero point energy field.”

“Uh, oh,” Lois said. “Sounds like a technobabble alert to me.”

“Fraid so,” Clark said, smiling. “The zero point energy field

is a potentially infinite reservoir of energy that basically permeates the entire universe, and he thinks that is the ultimate source of my power.”

“Oh, yeah?” Lois said. Clark was amazed she could make those two short words drip with sarcasm and skepticism at the same time. ““Luke, use the Force,”” she quoted. “Then why do you need the yellow sun?”

“Klein thinks the yellow sun radiation acts like a catalyst and enhances the Kryptonian ability to absorb zero point energy and red sun radiation suppresses it.”

“And the yellow sun lamps would work the same way,” Lois concluded.

“Exactly. With no yellow radiation, I’m just an ordinary guy.”

“Never,” Lois said. “Never just ordinary.” He could tell by that cute frown that she was on the track of something. Clark could almost see the gears turning. “If the cloud wasn’t going to cause our sun to nova, could it have blocked the yellow radiation?”

Clark looked thoughtful. “That’s sounds like a Dr. Klein question. I guess it would depend on whether it would absorb radiation in the first place, and then whether the wavelengths would match what I use.” He shook his head. “It sounds unlikely. The density is so low that I can’t see how it could block any sunlight. Maybe if it shifted the frequencies so it was something like red sun radiation.”

“So if some bad guy came up with a red sun radiation generator, the he could potentially take away your powers,” she said.

Clark rolled his eyes. “I hope you never go to work for the bad guys.” He squinted, happy to be able to see his wife’s beautiful brown eyes. “On the other hand, I don’t lose my powers immediately under a red sun. They sort of just fade away gradually. Just like they come back gradually under the yellow sun.”

“Bet I could still figure out a way to use it against you,” she said.

“Just what I need. Lois Lane, arch enemy of Superman.”

She grinned at him, a brilliant, flashing smile that lit her face and brightened his heart. “I know for a fact,” she said, “that I can bring Superman to his knees.”

“Lois!” His face reddened.

“Well, I can.”

“Okay, okay. I concede the point.”

“Good,” she said. “So what does that mean out here away from any color sun? How long before the old batteries recharge?”

Clark closed his eyes for a second and they both rose a few inches off the bed.

“Soon,” he said. “Very soon.” They floated down to the mattress and Clark’s face relaxed.

“That’s pretty fast,” Lois said. “I wonder if it has anything to do with the turquoise kryptojelly? Maybe it’s not as good as the real stuff.”

“Maybe. Dr. Klein will be able to tell from the samples you saved.” He stopped, and sighed. “Could you call it something else other than kryptojelly? It sounds like some sort of weird Kryptonian marital aid.”

“Now that’s a thought,” Lois said, grinning. “Do you think we need some sort of weird Kryptonian marital aid?”

“No!”

“Maybe some kryptonite flavored—”

“Lo-is.”

Lois was covered with a thin sheet to protect her from the solar lamps, while he wore only shorts to maximize his exposure. Clark pulled the sheet away and rolled over so his body covered hers. The bulge of her abdomen was barely noticeable and he touched her skin there with loving gentleness. He had been exposed to Kryptonite in the past and he usually hated having to wait for his powers to return.

He looked at his wife, her endlessly deep brown eyes half

closed, her lips slightly parted, her breath rapid and shallow.

Not always, though. Sometimes, the waiting was good.

The heat and radiation he felt on his back was nothing compared to the warmth and power from his wife's body beneath his hand.

Something bothered Lois. Like an itch about two inches behind her left eye that she could not scratch. Something was wrong. She didn't have enough facts to come to a logical conclusion, so of course, she did anyway.

"Clark!" she yelled suddenly. "Stop whatever you're doing or whatever you were going to do. I need a second here."

"Lois, what is it?" He sounded a little impatient, but she knew he had stopped moving around in the storage compartment below. He floated up through the open hatch.

Clark was dressed comfortably, in jeans and a tee shirt, ready to replace the fusion generator with the spare from the storage area beneath their feet.

Lois tried to scratch that elusive itch, her brow furrowed as she considered it from different angles. Of course.

"These guys were pretty clever about sabotaging the generator, right?" Lois asked.

"You better believe it. There wasn't much left of the explosive, but some of that technology looked almost alien. Not Krypton-alien but completely-unknown-world alien, and maybe something more than that."

"So why would they overlook the backup generator?"

She could see his eyes almost light up when he realized what she was talking about.

"They wouldn't," Clark said. "I'd better check it out and see if it's okay." He began sinking through the hatch.

"Don't, Clark," Lois told him. He popped back up like the little plastic figure in a Whack-A-Mole game. "The first bomb was on a timer, but the second one would only be needed when you replaced the destroyed one. So what's the first thing you would normally do?"

"X-ray it to make sure it's okay."

"Exactly," Lois said. "So if they wanted to place a bomb that would either kill one or more of us or destroy all hope by blowing up the generator, what would they use as a trigger?"

"X-rays," Clark said. "The first time I used my vision on it —"

"—it would explode," Lois finished.

"And we would have no generator."

"And no way to save the solar system."

"Wait — why didn't it explode when I scanned it on earth?"

"It was probably inactive until the first one detonated."

Clark stared at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"Have I told you lately how brilliant you are?" he asked.

"Well, not lately, but it's not like I'm keeping track or anything." He grinned at her. "Okay, it was this morning, and before that, yesterday after lunch and . . . dessert." When had he developed the superpower to make her turn red? Lois decided it was about two seconds after she realized she was in love with him.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked. "Don't you have something to do?"

"Yep," he said, then floated to her side. Lois smiled, knowing what was coming. She always liked this part.

She lost herself in the kiss for half an eternity, and couldn't help smiling when he pulled back slightly and kissed her hand.

"You meant fixing the generator, didn't you?" Clark said.

"Not necessarily," she answered, then sighed. "But we will never get home if you don't. And I would really like to get home, to our own house and our own bed."

Clark kissed her forehead. "My thoughts exactly," he said. He floated back to the hatch and sank out of sight.

"Be careful," Lois told him. "Look for other traps without

using the vision gizmo."

His head popped back up. "Yes, ma'am," he said, then disappeared again.

"Listen for anything strange. You hear pretty good."

He reappeared. "Good idea." Clark hovered in the hatchway.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she asked.

"Oh, just wondering if you had any more advice."

"Yes," Lois said. "Don't irritate your wife."

"Yes, dear," he said, grinning. "Excellent advice." He sank through the hatch once more, then stopped about halfway down. "By the way, I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you would move into the bedroom."

"But—" Lois began.

"If there is another explosion, who will rescue me," Clark asked, "if you're injured, too?"

"I must be rubbing off on you," Lois said. "That actually makes sense."

"Uh, thanks. I think." He started floating down again, waving as he disappeared. Lois moved into the bedroom and half closed the repaired door.

"Ready?" Clark called from the storage hatch.

"Ready," Lois answered.

"Good. Cover your ears for a few seconds. I'm going to bang on the bulkhead with a wrench. I don't think the sound will bother you, but I'd rather be cautious."

"Good grief," Lois muttered. She covered her ears with her hands. "Ready, Mom." He was probably laughing at her now, she realized, but decided against uncovering her ears.

Two seconds later, she was glad she hadn't. There was a series of three ringing bangs she felt through her feet all the way up to her teeth.

"What the hell was that?" Lois called after a short silence.

She peered around the corner and saw him rising again, a thoughtful frown on his face as she walked towards him.

"Sonar," Clark answered. "I closed my eyes and listened to the echoes when I hit the metal bulkhead and built up a mental image of the generator. Another little trick I've been working on."

"Like super-ventriloquism?"

"Exactly," he said, grinning again. "I got the idea from that movie about the blind guy—"

"I know the one," Lois interrupted. "Did it actually work?"

"Not as well as I'd hoped. But there does seem to be a hollow chamber near the generator electronics, and it was connected through a very thin wire to this." He held out his hand and showed her a small silvery ball about the size of a BB in his palm. "I think it's a sensor."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"This," he said and turned away from her and stared at the sphere. As the x-rays touched the surface, it glowed briefly then turned a dull gray. "I guess it was sensitive to my x-ray vision."

"Are you nuts?" Lois asked. "I thought I was the rash, impetuous one."

"What do you mean?"

"What if that thing was an explosive with a creamy kryptonite center? We'd both be in serious trouble."

He shook his head. "This metal is too light to be lead and only lead can block kryptonite radiation."

"That we know of. Didn't you say this was alien technology?"

"Um, right." He rolled his eyes as though wondering how he could be so stupid.

"No harm done," Lois said, patting him on the arm.

Sometimes it was reassuring to be reminded that Superman was Clark, after all. He wasn't a god in a cape, despite what she — or a certain society reporter — might have thought in the past. He was Clark, and sometimes Clark made mistakes. "But this also means that since this was the trigger, there's a big blob of kryptojelly surrounding an explosive somewhere in that

generator. We still have to find it and send it out the airlock.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clark said. “I’ll try to do better.”

“Sweetheart, if you were any better,” Lois said, moving close to him. “I’d have to ...” She put her lips against his ear and whispered a few words. Clark turned a satisfying shade of red as she nibbled his ear for a second.

“Not exactly what I meant,” he said. “But we will discuss the possibilities later.”

“Count on it, flyboy,” she said. “Back to work.”

Clark looked a little disappointed, but they both knew time was becoming more critical. The longer they delayed, the tougher it would be to collapse the cloud.

“Right,” he said. “Back to work.”

Lois sat in Clark’s empty seat, listening to him moving around as she watched the open hatch. She remembered the last time she was there, snuggled against Clark while he recited cow poetry. Just before the explosion that had put them almost two weeks behind schedule. She shuddered. It was an unlikely series of events that saved their lives. Almost too unlikely to believe.

If they hadn’t chosen that moment to go into the bedroom.

They were going to the bedroom because of their love for each other.

They couldn’t stay in the main area because she was pregnant and Clark was paranoid about stray radiation.

If they were not in love, they would not have married and she would not be pregnant and Superman would be here alone on the mission and he would have likely died and the solar system would have been destroyed when the sun turned into a expanding torrent of gas and radiation.

But now the earth and solar system was saved because she fell in love with some hack from Nowheresville.

How many times have I heard that before? she thought, smiling just a little. How many times will she hear it in the future?

“Uh-oh,” she heard Clark say from the hatch.

“What?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

“I found the explosive,” he said, floating through the hatch with the backup generator above his head. “It’s attached to the inside of the case between the power coupling and electronic control board.” Using his fingers, he removed the access hatch bolts and pulled away the cover. “I can see it with my regular vision, but somehow, it’s invisible to my x-ray vision. Like there’s nothing there. A big void.”

Lois peered inside the machine and saw a rounded cube a little smaller than a baseball. “It’s not very big,” she said.

“Big enough to worry me, though,” Clark said. “I don’t know if it’s has a proximity switch that will cause it to explode if I move or get near it, so we have to be careful. But we have to get it off the ship so if it does explode it won’t damage anything else. We’re running out of spares.”

“Super speed,” Lois said. “Snatch and throw it out the airlock before it has time to explode.”

“I can do that, but we’ll have to leave the airlock doors open.”

“So we have to put on the suits and pump the atmosphere into the reserve tanks. Also, we’ll have to put anything that can be damaged by a vacuum in one of the bedrooms.”

“Which will take time and power,” Clark said. “If it doesn’t work and the generator is damaged, we’ll be almost out of energy without a backup.”

“Do we have a choice if we want to stop the nova?”

“No,” Clark said, frowning. “We don’t.”

An hour later, they were finishing preparations for the attempt. Each of the bedrooms was designed to be an airtight compartment in case of a hull breach. They activated the switch to seal the vents and moved all of their food and supplies into the spare bedroom that was supposed to be used by Superman. The storage areas above and below the control room were also

airtight, and contained mostly electronics in any case. They had donned the spacesuits and stood, each of them holding their helmets, while they looked around, wondering if they had forgotten anything.

“I think we’re good,” Clark said.

“Better believe we’re good, flyboy,” Lois told him. “And we just keep getting better.”

Clark laughed and touched her cheek with his bare hand. He had to leave the glove off since it was too bulky to fit inside the generator. He would have to grab the bomb bare handed, throw it out the airlock, then hit the close switch, all at super speed. If everything went as planned, even if the bomb had a proximity fuse, it would be a half mile from the ship before it exploded.

He ran his fingers through Lois’ hair and pulled her closer. “Time to enter your bunker,” he said, kissing her gently. She grabbed his head and intensified the kiss until it left both of them a little off balance.

“For luck,” she said.

“With that much luck, we’ll be making wishes for years.”

“Just be careful, Clark,” she said. “You get one chance at this.”

“Yes, dear,” he said, smiling again. He touched her cheek once more before they both fitted their helmets into place, and he started the pump down procedure as she entered the bedroom. A gauge on the panel showed the air pressure dropping rapidly and when it was nearly zero, Clark opened both airlock doors. “Are you okay in there?” he asked over the radio.

“Fine,” Lois answered from behind the closed door. She watched the control room through a camera focused on the open airlock over Clark’s shoulder. He positioned himself between the generator and airlock so that he could reach inside the machine, remove the bomb, and throw it into space in one fluid movement. She could see him practicing the move, reaching back as though grasping the bomb, then throwing it through the open hatch. He did it slowly a couple of times, then in a blur of silver, went through another practice run at full speed. He nodded to himself.

“Time for the dress rehearsal,” his voice came over the radio. Lois wrapped her arms around herself as he set up a tripod from one of the cameras and placed a baseball sized hunk of metal on the top. Clark had compressed a sheet of stainless steel until it was about the size and shape of the actual bomb. Before trying it with the real thing, Lois had suggested using a surrogate so he could get a feel for the motion. She did not reply. Clark didn’t need any distractions at this point. She saw him take a deep breath, then reach for the ball of metal with his bare hand. Another silver blur and there was an explosion of vibration that she felt through the hull since there was no air inside the ship to conduct the sound. The metal sphere bounced back and forth inside the airlock a couple of times before it slowly fell to the floor in the lower gravity of the ship.

“Oops,” Clark said.

“Oops?” Lois asked. “What do you mean, ‘Oops?’”

“Sorry, Lois. I made a rookie mistake. I took my eye off my target when I grabbed the ball.”

“Well, you are going to try again with the dummy bomb, aren’t you?” Lois asked him.

“Good idea,” Clark answered. He retrieved the now battered hunk of metal and pushed it back into something closer to its original shape before replacing it on the tripod. This time, he positioned his hand so his fingers formed a cradle around the ball, almost touching it. Then he turned his head and locked his gaze on the airlock opening. A slight pause, then another blur of motion.

Lois knew he must have thrown it out the airlock into space, but it was as if it just vanished from atop the tripod. She never saw him grab or throw it, but one instant the metal blob was there, and the next Clark was staring out into space, as if watching it vanish into the distance. He turned toward the camera

and she could see the grin on his face.

"I think this is going to work," he said, removing the tripod and replacing it with the generator.

"Let's hope these aliens didn't have access to thiotimoline," Lois said.

"I probably should know what you are talking about, but for some reason, I'm glad I don't."

"Don't get too distracted," Lois said. "I'll tell you about it later."

"Right," Clark answered. He flexed his fingers as if anticipating the feel of the bomb in his hand. After a second, he looked directly into the camera. "This is going to work, honey, but I just want to tell you how much I love you. How much more I love you every minute we're together."

"Get rid of that bomb, Clark, and then you can show me," she said.

He nodded once and stared at the open airlock before he turned and placed his hand inside the generator. Then he looked back at the airlock, his arm locked into position and rock steady.

When the moment came, it seemed to Lois that it was almost anticlimactic. Clark must have been moving slower in the practice run. This time she did not even see a blur. He vanished from near the generator and reappeared next to the airlock, his finger already on the button to close the door. It was not quite closed when the bomb exploded, but it didn't matter in any case. The flash of faintly green light, when it came, was far from the ship. Clark stood at the airlock for a few more moments, watching the distant explosion through the quartz porthole. Lois hit the switch to pump air back into the ship as Clark continued to stare. She almost ran to his side as the pressure rose. When he removed his helmet, there was a strange mixture of anger and worry on his face.

"What is it, Clark?" Lois asked. "Is everything okay?"

"Sure," he said. "No damage at all. We should be fine now."

"Listen, Kent," she said. "I've seen that look before and it's never had anything to do with everything being fine."

Clark relaxed and pulled Lois into a hug, a rather remote and unsatisfying hug since both of them were still wearing spacesuits. "I'm serious. The bomb is gone and we're okay. After I get this generator installed, we should be back to one hundred percent."

"But?" she prompted.

"Yes, there is a 'but,'" he said. "The bomb was like nothing I'd ever seen before. From everything I saw using every bit of special vision I had, I'm pretty sure that in addition to containing alloys never seen on earth, the technology was alien and completely unknown to earth or Kryptonian science."

"That means that whoever tried to sabotage this mission and kill us was not from earth," Lois said. "Could they be out here somewhere, watching us?"

"I don't know," Clark said. "I haven't seen any indications on the radar or with my long range vision, but I have a problem seeing their stealth technology, anyway."

They stood for a few moments, holding each other before Lois reluctantly pulled back.

"We can't afford to waste time, can we?" she asked.

"No. Whatever happens, we have to use the equipment and deal with this cloud and divert it from the sun as quickly as possible."

"And then," Lois said, "we find these alien bad guys and kick their butts."

Clark grinned. "My thoughts exactly." Lois wasn't fooled. Behind that grin, Clark was worried. The advanced alien technology had him spooked, but he was going to do his best to complete the mission and hide his fears. He was always a "meet a problem head on" kind of guy anyway. Until there was a tangible threat, all they could do was stay alert. Given the efforts already put forth by their unseen enemy, the wait for the other shoe to drop would probably be a short one.

One last time, they both inspected the generator for more hidden bombs or traps and found nothing. At that point, they had no choice but to install the device and hope for the best. Clark bolted it into place, then made the final connections as Lois ran a diagnostic program that tested each step. Only when the program gave the okay to proceed did they continue to the next item on the list. Finally, the last bolt was tight and the last connection was made, and they were ready to power up. The batteries on the ship couldn't take much more, and it seemed to them that the lights had dimmed noticeably in the past few hours.

"Would you like to do the honors, Lois?" Clark asked, indicating the breaker on the instrument panel.

Lois crossed her arms and stared at him. "Do I get the blame if it doesn't work?"

"I'm willing to share."

"In that case, I'd be glad to," she said. She took a final deep breath and crossed the fingers on her left hand while she flipped the breaker into the "ON" position with her right. A high pitched whine briefly filled the control room, and the lights brightened so much that Lois had to squint. "Is that normal?" she asked.

"I think so," Clark told her. "We've become so accustomed to the reduced light level that this seems too bright."

After a few seconds, the generator still hummed and there were no red lights on the panel. The battery levels began to climb as the generator recharged them.

"We did it," Clark said. Lois realized she had been holding her breath for a few seconds, and let it out.

"Let's get this over with," Lois said. "There are probably a few billion people back home wondering if the sun is going to explode."

"Well, we are a couple of weeks overdue, but they couldn't know what's been happening out here."

"Unless that loony cult leader told everyone about the bombs," Lois said. "If he did, they must be going crazy. Especially our families."

"Do you think we should try to send a message?" Clark asked. "Some of the radiotelescopes may be able to pick up our transmission from this distance."

"Fix first, message later," Lois said. "I don't want anything else to go wrong before we divert the cloud."

Martha Kent sat up abruptly in the bed beside Jonathan, suddenly wide awake. She gasped and inhaled deeply.

"Martha, are you okay?" Jonathan wrapped his arm around her, almost afraid to hear what had startled her out of a deep sleep. He felt her shudder in his arms, then sob once. "Dear Lord, Martha," he said. "What is it?"

"Clark and Lois," she said. "They're okay. I don't know how I know it, but they are fine. I — I think they are on their way back."

"Martha," Jonathan began.

"Don't say it," Martha interrupted. "I might not have the same connection to Clark that Lois has, but I am his mother. If there was something wrong, I would know it. In this case, something is right and I know it."

"I would never doubt you, Martha," he said. "I was going to suggest we turn on the news. If they have fixed the problem and are on the way home, then some of the telescopes might have picked up a change in the cloud."

Before either of them could move, the telephone rang. They exchanged a quick glance before Martha answered, Jonathan holding his head close to hers so he could hear, too.

"Perry White here," came the voice from the phone. "Great news, folks. Late last night, scientists with some of the big astronomical telescopes reported that the section of the cloud threatening the solar system had vanished from view. They think it's been compressed into a black hole and is heading away from earth."

“Thank the Lord,” Martha said.

“That’s not all,” Perry continued. “The VLA radiotelescope complex in New Mexico picked up a signal from the Ork. It was weak and brief, but Lois and Clark are fine and on the way back. It sounds like they had a hell of a time, but managed to pull our buns out of the fire, as usual.”

“That’s great news, Perry,” Martha said. “I’m so glad you called.”

“No problem. The news will be breaking soon, but I figured I’d give you two a heads up.”

“We appreciate this so much, Perry,” Jonathan said over Martha’s shoulder.

“Listen,” Perry said. “If you see those two before I do, give them a hug for me. Then swat them and make them promise to never scare us like that again.”

“Count on it,” Martha said, laughing. Perry said something about getting back to work, then hung up. Again, he never once mentioned Superman.

“Oh, Jonathan,” Martha said, tears in her eyes. “Our babies are coming home.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he said. “I know.”

It was a beautiful sight. A blue globe with streaks and swirls of white against the darkness of space. The sun was off to their left and illuminated the scene in an almost beatific glow. Clark had taken a break as they approached the earth, taking time to hold Lois and savor the wonderful planet waiting for them. He couldn’t remember leaving Krypton, of course, but he could imagine what it would feel like to return to his planet of birth. He was feeling a lot of that now. That blue world had been his home for all but a brief part of his life, and for all intents and purposes, was his home planet.

“Have you ever seen such a wondrous sight?” Lois asked.

Clark looked into her eyes. “Many times,” he answered, kissing her on the forehead.

“You know what I mean,” Lois said. “But the sentiment is appreciated.”

“I do know what you mean, Lois.”

“This is something so few people have seen with their own eyes. The earth hanging there like a floating ball of blue light. I’ve heard astronauts talk about it, but it doesn’t hit you until you see it yourself.”

“The beauty of our home?”

“That and more,” Lois said. “It’s our birthplace, where we lived and became all that we are. It protects us from this airless, radiation filled void we’ve endured for the past few weeks. It feeds us and clothes us and gives us air to breath. All of what humanity has ever been comes from there. All the goodness and evil that we are. It looks so vulnerable.”

“It is,” Clark said. “Robert Heinlein said ‘The Earth is just too small and fragile a basket for the human race to keep all its eggs in.’ This cloud could have wiped out every trace of mankind and the universe would never have blinked.”

“We can’t stay here,” Lois said.

“What?”

“I don’t mean us personally, right now, silly.” Lois linked her hands behind Clark’s neck and looked into his eyes. “I know there are problems on earth that we should deal with and there’s this whole utopia thing H. G. obsesses about, but humanity has to find a way to expand beyond that one small basket.”

“You mean space?” Clark asked. “I never figured you for the ‘explore the universe’ type.”

“Okay, so I’m not the scientist that Bernie is,” she said. “But something tells me that if we don’t expand to other planets and maybe even to other star systems, mankind will have a tough time thriving in this universe. We know there are others out there. Kryptonians, and that assassin thing that came after you, and now whatever alien it was that tried to sabotage our mission.”

“The universe is a tough place, Lois.”

“So, we get tougher,” she said. She placed her hand on her abdomen. “We’ve got a good start on a pretty tough little guy or girl right here. Just the kind of person who could go out and conquer the universe.”

“So a mutant human/Kryptonian hybrid would be the perfect person to explore space?” Clark asked.

Lois stared literally into space for a moment. He could see that she was on the verge of some wild leap of logic that would defy all conventional wisdom, but in the end, would turn out to be correct. Something in their discussion had triggered memories and facts that had probably been churning around in her subconscious for months, waiting for the right phrase or circumstance to force some weird conclusion to the surface. She seemed to be focusing on the planet below them, as though looking for some epiphany. He followed her gaze and waited.

“I think -” she started and then stopped abruptly, a small squeak of fright escaping her.

Clark stared out the port, speechless. Where just a second ago the earth had glowed like a giant blue globe, there was nothing. They held each other and looked out.

The dark of space was empty. The earth had vanished.

THE END

To be continued in “When Friends Gather”