

# When Friends Gather

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Clark enjoyed his life as editor of the Daily Planet, husband to Lois Lane, and father of two of the greatest daughters on the globe. But two strange visitors threaten to upset that life, and make him question everything he believed about himself.

Part 4 of the “When ...” Series

“When Friends Gather” is the fourth of a series. “When Butterflies Gather” is the first, “When Changes Gather” is the second, and “When Clouds Gather” is the third. You should read them at some point, but aren’t *completely* 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.

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No one knows exactly what happened when the space ship carrying Lois Lane and Clark Kent/Kal-El inexplicably vanished on their return from the cloud. Ground and space based radar and telescopes could find no trace of the ship, or any debris that might indicate the ship’s destruction. Neither Lois Lane nor Clark/Kal-El ever revealed any details about the occurrence. There were rumors that no one could or would deny or affirm. It is just another of the many alluring mysteries surrounding the couple.

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

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Clark Kent took a deep breath and pushed back from his desk, rubbing his temples to ease the tension. For a few seconds, he closed his eyes and leaned back, remembering some of the relaxation techniques he had learned in India. They helped, and he switched to a Chinese method. The tightness drained out of his body. His muscles relaxed. His breathing slowed. He took a final deep breath, and opened his eyes, automatically glancing at the wall clock. Nearly five. Lois should be home by now, he realized. Better give her a call before his appointment.

Clark turned to the laptop on the corner of his desk. He smiled. It had been years since anyone had a real laptop, and the name still lingered among the old timers. His daughters called it a CompCard, or C-Card for short. His actual computer was a wafer of high density electronics about the size of a credit card, and he usually kept it tucked away in his wallet. It connected quickly and flawlessly to his keyboard and touch screen monitor, or any convenient keyboard and monitor, for that matter, whenever he needed to use it. In the field, when the external devices were not available, he could take the card out and it projected a virtual keyboard and monitor that he could use just like the real thing. In addition, it took the place of most credit cards and identification and was linked to his particular bioelectric field. If it was ever stolen, it became a useless collection of random silicon and

plastic.

Clark loved technology.

Of course the LTG, or Look-Touch-Gesture, technology that had pushed the mouse into obsolescence and voice recognition was similarly pressuring the keyboard, virtual or not. Clark still preferred typing, though. As fast a typist as he was, he felt the “finger to text” interface allowed him to time to think and process the flow of words. He wasn’t all that fond of the “face twitcher” option, either.

Based on rudimentary technology developed to help Stephen Hawking and others with similar disabilities, this allowed anyone to look at a spot on the screen and make an activating gesture to select a particular icon or option. The flexibility built in to the system allowed the user almost unlimited options on choosing a gesture, and most selected a facial gesture for convenience. There were a lot of standards available, as well as customizing your own. There was the Vulcan, which selected using a raised eyebrow. Then the Witch, using a twitch of the nose, and the Genie, which used a blink. The Cheshire used a quick twitch of the lips. The Eastwood was just a quick half squint, not quite a blink. More than one sitcom had done sketches on the hilarious, or not so hilarious, results of an inadvertent sneeze. Clark had to smile sometimes, watching a room full of reporters manipulating their computer with combinations of facial twitches and hand gestures. He sighed. He would just stick to the old fashioned touch screen and voice recognition.

He touched an icon on the screen and said, “Call Lois.” Within seconds, Lois received and answered the call on her own computer. She was home, in the kitchen, so she used the screen there. He glanced at his own image in the lower left corner of the display. Even at fifty-seven, he didn’t think he’d changed much. A few gray highlights at his temples and extra laugh lines were the extent of the damage. He had never had any problem controlling his weight or staying in shape. The running kept him as slim and trim as he had been in his thirties.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she said, blowing him a kiss. “About ready to head home?”

“Depends,” he said, looking past her. “Are you trying to cook something?”

“You wound me,” Lois told him. “I’m just making a cup of coffee, thank you very much. I still need to review the articles for the weekend supplement. Unless you want to.”

“No thanks,” Clark said. “I have enough problems of my own. Did you remember that those two feature writers from National View were coming to interview me today?”

“Oh, yeah. You’ve been editor of the Planet for almost twenty-five years, and how many of these interviews have you had to do?”

“More than I ever wanted to,” he said. “Maybe I can get rid of them and we can have the entire evening to ourselves. Alone. Just you and me and a little pasta and later ...” Clark stared at her and smiled.

“And later, dessert?” Lois asked.

“Yeah, dessert,” he said. “That, too.”

“Mr. Kent, will you ever act your age?”

“Not if I can help it, Ms. Lane.” He held his hand up to the screen and Lois did likewise. As if they were touching the opposite sides of a pane of glass.

“Okay, Kent,” she said. “I know you say you want to hurry home, but I also know that some eager young thing with big blue eyes will give you a puppy dog gaze, and you’ll sit there, feeling sorry for her, and take the time to give her the story.” She grinned.

“I’ll have you know,” he said, “that it’s a husband and wife team, so there won’t be any puppy dog eyes involved. From either of them. I’ll try to make this as quick as possible.”

“Famous last words,” she observed.

“Listen, if the Olsens get there before me, put them to work helping you with those articles.”

“Jim and Lucy will kill me,” Lois said. “And probably leave as soon as possible.”

“Good,” Clark said. “More time for ... dessert.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Good grief,” Lois said, rolling her eyes. “See you later, sweetheart. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” They blew each other kisses. “End call.”

Clark glanced at the clock again. Four fifty-five. If the Kings were punctual, he had about five minutes to gather his thoughts before they arrived.

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Thirty years, he thought. Thirty years since Clark Kent first walked through Perry White’s door, not really looking for a job, of course. He’d been out of college about four years by then and his professional football career was at its height. He probably made more in a single season than the entire operating budget of the Daily Planet, if he had stopped to think about it. But he never did. The money and acclaim were just peripheral side effects to the life and career that he loved. He would have done it for free. Or paid them, if he had to.

Perry White had been initially skeptical when Clark first approached him. Why would one of the preeminent sports figures in the United States want to spend the off season as a part time reporter in a job that paid less than peanuts compared to his regular salary? But working as a reporter was another job Clark would have done for nothing. He spent all of his off time working for one news organization or another, if nothing else, to stay in touch with the business. His desire and enthusiasm had impressed Perry. Journalism was the only other great passion in Clark’s life that could match his love of football and sports.

Then a petite brunette exploded through Perry’s door and into his life, claiming his head, heart, and life as her own. Clark repeated her name quietly after Perry introduced them. “Lois Lane.”

“Nicetomeetyou,” she had said before turning back to Perry.

After she left, Clark had used every bit of his charm and persuasive ability, and clippings of work from some of the biggest newspapers in the country to convince Perry to hire him. Thinking about it three decades down the road, Clark was a little ashamed that he was so desperate that he had even played the celebrity card. He would have done anything to work at the Planet. Alongside Lois Lane.

The day after Perry hired him, Clark called a news conference and announced his retirement from professional football. If he was a little ashamed for cashing in on his celebrity status, he was even more embarrassed by the salary they offered him to keep playing. And mortified when they doubled the offer. But not once did he consider accepting the money. He already had more money than he would ever need and the Daily Planet had something more precious to him than all the cash, gold, and jewels on the planet.

Lois.

At first, she refused to consider him anything but an arrogant jock, an athlete who used his talents on the playing field to convince the starstruck management of the Planet to hire him. Clark didn’t think Lois would ever look past the public icon created by sports writers and gossip columnists. For such a long time, he despaired of her ever seeing the real Clark Kent, the one not dressed in a skintight football uniform that left little to the imagination. He knew his body had some sort of effect on her from the beginning. That time right after they met when she picked him up at the Lexor and he came to the door with only a towel wrapped around his waist. She’d said, “It’s after nine, I thought you’d be naked.”

Then, together, they had saved the space shuttle from

destruction. Clark still had a scar on his knee where debris from the warehouse explosion had hit him. A succession of Kerth awards and eventually a few Pulitzers followed as they became the “hottest team in town.” It seemed that every nutcase in the country decided to come to Metropolis to exhibit whatever craziness had warped their psyche. The Pheromone Queen, invisibility suits, cyborg boxers, arsonists with flamethrowers, and their first year culminated in the destruction of the Luthor criminal empire and Lex Luthor’s death. That day still haunted Clark. He and Lois and the police had confronted Luthor in his office with the evidence that would send him to jail for the rest of his natural life, but only Clark was close enough to grab his jacket when he threw himself over the ledge. He could still remember those burning, madness filled eyes staring at him. “Lex Luthor will not be caged,” the billionaire had said just before he twisted out of the jacket and fell to his death. The man had been an evil monster, but Clark hadn’t wanted him dead. Just locked away from the rest of humanity.

Weirder things followed. Clones, resurrected criminals (who would have killed Clark if it hadn’t been for the bulletproof vest Henderson had insisted that they both wear), space rats, crazy inventors. A little guy who managed to temporarily get some weird powers when a bolt of lightning hit a rack of chemicals he was sorting. And finally, Lex Luthor brought back to life by a crazy (of course) doctor who was in love with him.

Clark’s athleticism had saved both their lives more than once through all their adventures, but she eventually looked past the sports hero image. Clark and Lois became close. Friends first, then more than friends. When they began dating, the only ones surprised were Lois and Clark. But neither of them were surprised when Clark proposed and Lois accepted.

Clark had been with the Planet for seven years, he and Lois married for almost five, when he became the Daily Planet’s youngest ever Editor in Chief. It had taken almost an intervention style assault from Perry’s friends and colleagues before Perry eventually conceded that maybe they had a point. If he wanted to live beyond the one to two years the doctors had warned him was left, he had to retire, take care of himself, and rebuild his life with his family.

Instead of two years of descending into disability, Perry gained another ten good years with friends and family, occasionally dispensing advice that made Clark ten times the editor he would have been without his old boss. In the end, Perry had grudgingly admitted that the retirement was almost the smartest thing he ever did and he treasured every extra second of his life. Of course, he claimed the smartest thing he ever did was somehow talking Alice into marrying him in the first place.

Clark’s twenty-fifth anniversary as editor was only a couple of years away, Clark knew, but a more important anniversary was about the same time. That’s when it would be thirty years married to Lois and it all seemed just an instant.

He looked at her and still saw that bouncy young reporter that made his heart beat a little faster. They were both older, but she still turned much younger heads. The years were more than kind to both of them, he knew. Just the other day, she was still complaining that he ate like an eight year old and had the body of a god.

A twinge in his calf made him wince, then push his chair back from the desk even more and lean over to gently massage his leg. He was still feeling that 15K race from Saturday. There was a time he could run a marathon, go dancing with Lois in the evening, and not notice the barest hint of fatigue then or the next morning. Must be the years finally catching up. Of course, he had to admit that he had pushed himself at the end. Even at fifty-seven, the competitive drive to be the best and the fastest still pumped adrenaline through his veins in prodigious amounts and made him battle for that little bit of extra speed more than was

good for him.

The results were worth it. First overall, an accomplishment that had escaped him for the past ten years or so. There was always some younger guy just a little faster. Things had been different Saturday. He'd felt good, and maintaining his race pace had been almost effortless. At times, it was almost as if his feet were barely touching the ground. Even though it seemed that everything came together for the event, he was surprised when he crossed the finish line with a time of forty-seven minutes, twenty-eight seconds — an overall pace of five minutes and six seconds per mile. He tried to remember what he had done that morning that might have made a difference in his run. But he had followed his regular pre-race ritual. A banana a couple of hours before the race, followed by an energy bar about an hour before. In the next thirty minutes, he warmed up and stretched in the early morning sun and finished off a "power drink" that was mostly caffeine and sugar. The kind of stuff he thrived on. Fifteen minutes before the race, he sucked down a caffeinated energy gel, and stored another in a pocket for the halfway point in the race. All the same things. Well, he had been training hard for the Metropolis Mayhem Marathon, so maybe that was the answer.

The twinge had disappeared with a little massage and that made him wonder if the whole thing hadn't been psychosomatic after all. Real injuries did not go away this quickly. He smiled to himself. The winner's trophy was going to look good on his trophy shelf. At fifty-seven, he'd beaten everyone to earn it and he was a little embarrassed to realize how much pride it brought him. He knew the other, younger, guys in his running group were genuinely happy for him, but they also genuinely wished that he would retire from running competitively. Or least slow down a little.

He *had* slowed over the years. Back in the old days, when he was still playing professional football, he would have won the 15K with a time in the mid forties. In recent years, he was lucky to break fifty, so it had really surprised him when he saw the clock as he crossed the finish line. He looked at the number he'd doodled on his notepad earlier. "47:28." He hadn't been that fast in years.

In college, the football, running, and basketball coaches — all from the same Kansas State, his own school — were always fighting for the chance to use his talents. Football had always been his greatest passion, but he enjoyed almost every sport he had an opportunity to play. Luckily, he earned that old nickname, the Man of Steel. He never seemed to tire or burn out. At various times, he'd run cross country and track, played basketball, baseball, and football. And he'd loved every tiring, pounding minute of it. He still held collegiate and national records in most of the sports.

At the same time, he excelled in his journalism and media classes, eventually graduating Summa Cum Laude, number one in his class, from Kansas State. In his introduction, the Dean had praised him as the Man of Tomorrow for his accomplishments on and off the playing fields.

Now, it seemed his twin daughters were following in his footsteps. For all his accomplishments in the world of male sports, their success in the world of female athletics easily eclipsed his fame. Harking back to their dad's days in college, the term "Maids of Steel" was thrown about with abandon, too. They played basketball, ran track and cross country, and played lacrosse, a sport whose nuances and appeal, Clark had to admit, escaped him. But they loved it, and that was all that mattered.

He *did* understand basketball, though, and that was both his daughters' passion. They were not identical twins, though both had similar tall, slender physiques with strength that was deceptive to those who hadn't played against them. But they were both lightning quick, could post up and out jump much taller opponents, and shoot the three from distances that made NBA

players envious. Indefatigable, too. The coaches had a hard time balancing their domination of the game with the desire to balance playing time. It was a rare night that both of them didn't score thirty plus points each.

Clark had worried that the other players would resent his daughters' abilities, but came to realize that they were just too darned likeable to resent. They made friends easily and seemed to keep them for life. Everyone who knew them were fiercely loyal to Cara and Christie. For their teammates, it helped that playing with the twins made everyone better.

Now juniors, they had dominated the college ranks since their freshman days. They were well on the way to helping Kansas State establish the longest winning streak in NCAA basketball. Two national titles in a row so far, and no sports writer or commentator saw a chance of any other team beating KSU before the Kent girls graduated. There was talk of drafting them into the NBA, but Clark Kent, dad, knew that his "Maids of Steel" were too much, well, girls, to ever consider playing professionally against guys. They had been toying with the idea of moving to the WNBA after college, but Clark suspected they had other career goals in mind. Cara wanted to follow her Mom and Dad into journalism and media. Christie was more interested in her maternal grandfather's profession and was pre-med at Kansas. As with their father, money or lack of it did not figure into the equation.

The only thing that surpassed their athletic ability was their intellect. They made their "Summa Cum Laude" Dad look positively average and it did not bother him a bit. "Genius" was a word often associated with both of them.

Whatever they decided, Clark knew, they would be the best in their chosen field and use their abilities to make the world a better place.

Clark looked up. It was as though the tiny touch of a whisper had reached him, but there was no one in sight. For a second, he thought someone had said his name. He looked through the open blinds out his window. The bullpen was full, as usual, but no one was looking in his direction, and everything looked normal. Actually, everything looked clearer and crisper and sharper than normal.

He had never needed glasses, of course, but over the years it seemed as though he had lost just a bit of the clarity he'd had way back when. He still tested as 20/20 at the optometrist, and the doctor said his vision had always been more than perfect, so it was normal just to lose a little bit with age. But lately, it seemed that the clear vision and sharpness that he remembered was coming back.

He was faster, his vision was improving, and now that he thought about it, he felt better than he had in years, even with the calf twinge. He laughed, but not loud enough for someone to think the old editor was getting senile. Well, maybe that was a possibility. Either he was going senile, or he was going into a second childhood.

Someone knocked at the door and Clark glanced at the clock. Two figures were silhouetted against the glass. Right on time. At least the Kings were punctual.

"Come in," he called, standing as they entered.

"Thank you for meeting with us, Mr. Kent," said the man holding out his hand to shake Clark's. "I'm Charlie King and this is my wife, Wanda."

She smiled broadly and shook his hand. They were a striking couple.

Charlie King was a young man with olive skin that almost matched his own. Unlike his own light brown hair, though, the other man had dark, almost black, hair that fell across his forehead. He wore glasses and an odd tie with green stripes and lightning bolts on it. He must have gotten it as a present, Clark decided. He didn't think anyone would buy that thing for

themselves.

Wanda was beautiful. Almost pretty enough to give Lois a run for her money. Her blond hair fell almost to her shoulders and that smile of hers was enough to cause a flutter even in a fifty-seven year old's heart. Not quite the electric shock that Lois still managed to deliver, but interesting, nonetheless.

She was also very obviously pregnant.

"I'm glad to help, Mr. King, Mrs. King," he said. "There's a best selling author named Charles King."

"Sorry," Charlie said. "That's not me. I use 'Charlie' so no one mistakes me for him."

Clark nodded. There was no chance he would think that, of course, since he knew exactly who "Charles King" was. "Aren't you starting the twenty-fifth anniversary story a couple of years early?"

"Please call us Charlie and Wanda," the woman said. "You're going to get pretty tongue tied with all the Mr. and Mrs. King's flying around. And this is not strictly an anniversary story, Mr. Kent."

"Okay, if I'm calling you Charlie and Wanda, you have to call me Clark," he said smiling. "What kind of feature are you doing then? Knowing that might help me focus on the areas you need for the article. I might even have a few suggestions for questions."

"Always the editor?" asked Charlie.

"Old habits are hard to break," Clark admitted.

The two glanced at each other, almost as if they were communicating on a level that did not require words. Clark felt a little shock of recognition. That was so much like how he and Lois looked when they worked on a story together.

"We've done quite a bit of research already," Wanda said.

"The Planet bio, a couple of unauthorized biographies, and your autobiography. Planning a volume two anytime soon, by the way?"

Clark laughed. "Maybe," he said. "If anything else interesting happens to me. It's hard to live up to those early days when villains and crises lurked around every corner."

"You never know," Wanda said, smiling as if there were some secret she wasn't ready to share.

"We've read a lot of the stories by you and Lo- your wife,"

Charlie said, glancing at Wanda. "I was just a baby then, but your series on the Nightfall asteroid seemed to really capture the tension and despair of that time."

"You must be older than you look," Clark said. "I would have thought you were one of the 'Night Fallout' babies."

"Born nine months after the asteroid was knocked off course," Wanda said. "That was me, I think."

Clark nodded. "Quite a boomlet of births, if you will forgive the alliteration," he said. "Did you know the Nightfall situation led to our investigation of Lex Luthor?"

"That's not in any of the biographies," Charlie said.

"The creep took Lois into his subterranean survival enclave, and offered her a place there," Clark said. His jaw muscles clenched tightly before he consciously relaxed them. "Sorry. I just can't be the objective journalist about this, no matter how long ago it happened."

"No need to apologize, Clark," Wanda said. "Let me assure you that we understand completely."

Clark smiled and nodded slightly.

"We'd both had suspicions about him before, but his offer showed us he wasn't the benevolent benefactor that he wanted the world to see." He shook his head. "Lois was so angry. He had a perfect copy of her apartment, almost down to the dust bunnies under the bed, and she felt violated. She went home and rearranged all of her furniture, then came over to my place and we made plans to bring Luthor down."

"A smart woman," Wanda said. "If only we all could be so

perceptive." Charlie reached over and patted her hand. "So your wife was a little upset by the intrusion?"

"Yes, and it's never a good idea to make Lois Lane angry."

"You'll get no argument from me," Charlie said, smiling. For some reason, Wanda's eyes narrowed and she hit her husband on the shoulder. Clark raised his eyebrows.

"We female reporters have to stick together," she explained.

"A sentiment that I'm sure Lois shares," Clark said. He stared at the couple, his chin in his hand. Something about the way Wanda spoke reminded him so much of someone else. They looked at each other again, as if exchanging a silent message. "Something is not quite right."

"Uh, Clark, you're adopted, right?" Charlie asked. "So am I."

"Welcome to the club," Clark said. "If my biological family couldn't raise me, I couldn't have asked for better parents. I lost my dad a few years ago, but my mom lives in Metropolis now."

"M. C. Kent," Wanda said. "The creator, artist, and writer for Ultrax, the first and best of the comic book superheroes. How did that happen?"

"The 'M. C.' part was because the comics industry was a male dominated business in the early sixties," Clark said. "It was a few years before the fans knew she was a woman, but I think it only increased sales when they found out. But before she had her inspiration, comics were mostly about magic and fantasy, with wizards and witches and magic spells and evil demons, or about private eyes and cops, or soldiers, or cowboy westerns. Using her love of science, she combined the best qualities of all the genres and created Ultrax, strange visitor from a distant galaxy who was sent here as a young boy by a dying civilization."

"You've told that story before," Charlie said, grinning.

"A time or two," Clark admitted. "Ultrax wears a bright red costume with a blue cape. She loves those capes. He can fly under his own power, see through anything but gold, has enormous strength, is invulnerable, can hear the sigh of a cricket a thousand miles away, and is as fast as a lightning bolt from the sky. That's all from the television show, by the way."

"The character seemed to catch on," Wanda said.

"You could say that," Clark said. "And Mom was smart enough to retain control of all rights related to the series. She knew there was something phenomenal about the ideals the character represented, but more importantly, kids and teens were going to love the series. She was right. She did okay on the comics, graphic novels, and books she wrote, but didn't get mega-rich until the TV shows and movies. Imitators followed, but they were never as good as the original."

"What about real life imitators?" Charlie asked. "I've heard rumors, but with your contacts, I thought you might know something."

"Well, I don't think I'm betraying any confidences here since Bruce is writing a book about his experiences and it happened so long ago. But there was one instance of a self-described 'superhero,' though not one with any real powers, of course." Clark leaned back in his chair and linked his fingers behind his head. "He's a Gotham City billionaire whose drive for revenge was really a cover for a death wish. He'd seen his parents murdered by a mugger, and it affected him later in life. He dressed up in a bat costume and roamed around the city looking for bad guys. He stopped a few bank robberies, captured some lowlifes attacking victims in the park, and even rescued a family from a house fire. A sad story, though." Clark leaned forward again.

"When he was wounded in a shootout with a couple of uncooperative goons they found out who he was. Discovered his 'secret identity,' so to speak. He received treatment by some of the best psychologists in the country. When he finally saw that his behavior was self-destructive and that his nocturnal wanderings were not a help to himself, the police, or the public, he gave up the night life, and devoted his energy and money to

developing new methods of police work, including advanced forensic science and better police equipment. His company invented the new lightweight body armor as flexible and light as a sweatshirt but stronger than multiple layers of Kevlar. The one that's standard issue in almost every police department in the country. I'm talking about Bruce Wayne, of course." Charlie nodded as though familiar with the man. Maybe he was, even though Bruce tried to keep a low profile.

"I've seen an advance copy of Bruce's book," Clark continued. "He admits that he was tempted to put on a new bat suit made from the bulletproof fabric, but his ongoing therapy sessions made him see the danger of going down that road again, to himself and his family. Personally, I think having a wife and two sons did more to cure him than all the doctors he ever saw."

"So no more super heroes in the real world?" asked Wanda.

"No, thank goodness," Clark said. "Mom was really distressed by this whole Man Bat incident. It wasn't her fault that Bruce's parents were killed or that Bruce was mentally ill. But she seemed to think that if she had never invented the hero genre then Bruce Wayne would never have gotten the idea to wear the costume. She was enjoying some of the most successful times of her life, but it was bittersweet for a while. Bruce heard about how she felt and decided to meet her and tell her it wasn't her fault. He convinced her it was because he watched Zorro movies as a kid and read the Scarlet Pimpernel in college. They became friends, and later I met him through Mom and we became friends, too. He and Vickie usually visit when they are in town."

"Your Dad helped your mother a lot, didn't he?" Charlie asked.

"Mom still says she made the money but Dad made them rich. He had graduated from Kansas State with a degree in agriculture and a minor in business and was planning to develop a farming empire around Smallville. When Mom first came up with the concept for Ultrax, and all the other supporting characters around him, he leased out the farm and became her manager and adviser before she even had it published. Mom also said he was the perfect manager. Hard working, honest, smart, determined, and hopelessly in love with his client." Clark smiled. "She still is in love with him, and talks to him on a daily basis. When somebody asks about that, she says it's just like when he was alive. She talked and he mostly listened anyway." He shook his head.

"It was tough growing up, though," Clark said. "They both worked from home, and it was hard for a teenager to get away with much with Mom and Dad always around."

"What do you know about your own adoption?" Wanda asked.

"Mostly what's in the book," Clark said. "Sheriff Harris found me in a muddy ditch, near a burning mass of metal. The Sheriff figured my biological parents must have been transporting explosive or flammable material, and I was somehow thrown clear when the car exploded. Whatever was in there must have been something like thermite because there wasn't anything left of that vehicle except molten pools of metal. I landed in a patch of soft dirt, so I wasn't hurt, but Mom said I looked like a cute ball of brown mud. The Sheriff knew Mom and Dad couldn't have children of their own so he and a friendly judge helped them adopt me after they couldn't find my biological parents. It didn't hurt that they were both so successful in their careers."

Again the glance between them.

"Okay," Clark said. "What's going on? You've been playing this 'I know something but you don't' game since you got here."

"Clark — Mr. Kent," Charlie said, as if he knew his next words would revoke his right to use the older man's first name. "I'm sorry that we lied to you."

"We're here under false pretenses," Wanda said.

"So you are not doing a feature article on my time at the

Daily Planet?" Clark asked.

"I'm afraid not," Charlie said. "But although we are very interested in your story —"

"You wouldn't believe how interested we are," Wanda interrupted.

"— and tried to do as much research as possible to get to know you," Charlie continued. "That's not the main reason we're here."

"Go on," Clark said.

"We need your help, Clark," Wanda said. Evidently, she had no problem continuing to use his name. "From everything we've learned in our research and from talking to you, I think you will help if there is any way you can."

Clark shrugged, not committing to anything.

"We're stranded here," Charlie said. "We need your help getting home."

"If it's money you need, why go to all the trouble of this whole deception? There are people and agencies willing to help people in need." Clark leaned forward. "Hell, I probably would have given you the money myself."

"You would, wouldn't you?" Wanda said.

"It's not money," Charlie told him. "All the cash in the world couldn't help us get home. But I'm hoping you can."

"Charlie — if that's your real name — I'm just the editor of a newspaper, not a travel agent. If you don't need cash, what is it that you *do* need?"

"Your help," Charlie said. "And you're right, my name isn't really Charlie." He stood and closed the blinds.

"I think it's best if we have a little privacy for this," Wanda said.

"Well," Clark said. "You don't look dangerous, but neither did Luthor, at first."

She sighed, and Charlie nodded when she looked at him. Clark couldn't help staring at Wanda. There was something about her. "Maybe this will help," she said as she reached up and removed the blond wig. Dark auburn hair fell out around her face. "My name is Lois Lane, and this is my husband, Clark Kent."

Charlie/Clark smiled a smile that was so familiar once he looked for it.

"You're right," he told Wanda/Lois. "I'm going to need a volume two on that autobiography."

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"Clark, are you going to be all right?" Charlie/Clark asked. "Do you need some water or something?"

The older man waved his hand. "A couple of bottles of vodka might help," he said. "Lois and Clark, huh?"

"That's us," Wanda/Lois said. "But you'd better keep calling us Charlie and Wanda or we are all going to be living in the land of confusion."

"Does alcohol really affect you?" Charlie asked.

Clark considered the younger man. "Out of all the things you might have asked me, I wouldn't have put that one in the top ten," he said. "I don't know how this is related, but it takes a *lot* of alcohol to even give me a tingly feeling. The sheer volume I would have to drink to get a buzz has always stopped me in the past. Never been really drunk, and I won a lot of drinking bets in college. Back when Lois and I were going undercover, it helped that the bad guys could never drink me under the table." He stopped, thinking. "You know, more than one of my non-admirers tried to drug me, too, and it never seemed to affect me. The flip side was that pain killers never did much good and I had to learn a lot of relaxation techniques to help control any pain." He looked up. "I'm sure you're going to tell me how this is relevant, right?"

"We hope too," Charlie said. "If you don't call the cops to come lock us away."

"I once saw an imp from another dimension," Clark said. "At

least, that's what he said. He went away mad when he saw I was wearing a cast on my broken arm — I slipped on a patch of ice — and we never saw him again. And we never understood why he came in the first place or what the hell he said his name was, either.

"After you see something like that, there's not much that can throw you off balance." Clark tapped the table. "I don't think you're time travelers because I don't ever remember this happening. Besides, you don't look exactly like I did at your age. Your hair is different, and I don't have that little mark above my lip. While you," he said pointing at Wanda, "look a lot like Lois, you are not her. Not even a younger her."

"You're right," Wanda said. "I am not your Lois and we are not time travelers."

"Clones?" Clark asked. "Possible, but unlikely. Still not identical to me. Shape shifters? I have no experience in that area. I've never encountered a shape shifter, but as a wise man once told me, 'My knowledge is limited but my ignorance knows no bounds.'"

Clark nodded. "My best guess is a parallel universe," he said. "Maybe time flows differently across dimensional lines and your universe is a few years behind mine." Charlie and Wanda looked at each other, then back at him, their eyes wide.

"How in the hell did you guess that?" Wanda asked.

"Well, I'm not editor of the Daily Planet just because I can play a guitar," he said. "Lois has taught me a bit about leaps of logic over the years." He looked at their faces and groaned. "There's more, isn't there?"

The both nodded.

"This may be a little difficult to take," Charlie said.

"Guys," Clark interrupted. "We just established you are from a parallel universe and you are younger editions of me and my wife. How much more difficult can it get?"

Charlie shrugged, crossed his arms, and levitated off the floor until his head brushed the ceiling. He drifted around the room for a few seconds before returning to Wanda's side.

Clark closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I had to ask." He looked as though he just remembered something important. "You know, I used to dream about flying when I was a kid. A lot. It was so realistic that for a few seconds after I woke up, I would believe it was true. I've been having those dreams again lately." He looked a little worried.

"Maybe we'd better get together with Lois so we don't have to tell this whole thing again," Wanda suggested.

Clark nodded absently, still thinking, and touched the icon to place the call. Lois answered from the living room this time and her voice anchored him back in reality.

"Feeling lonely, yet?" Clark asked her.

"Jim and Lucy are still here," Lois said. "They were actually a big help deciding which articles to use."

Clark looked at Charlie and Wanda.

"It's your world and your call," Charlie said. "You know them better than we do."

"Tell them to hang around," Clark said. "I'm bringing home company and I want to introduce them. Maybe we can put Lucy's big brain to use for a change."

"Hey, I heard that," Lucy said somewhere off screen.

"I know," Clark said. "We'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Five," Charlie said, holding up five fingers. "Maybe less."

"But the traffic —" Charlie held up five fingers again. "Okay, five minutes it is, Lois."

"That will set some kind of new speed record," Lois said. "You want me to come down to the precinct and bail you out later?"

"We'll be there," Clark said. "I have a little surprise for you."

"Ooo — I just love surprises." Her words dripped with sarcasm. "See ya. Love ya."

"Love you," Clark said, and ended the call. "Now what?"

"Now, we take the - uh — Charlie express," Wanda said. "Care to go with us to the roof?"

Clark had the feeling that he wasn't going to like this.

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Lois continued to stare into the air after the screen cleared. Clark was acting so strangely. What in the world had happened during that interview that made him want to bring those writers home with him? Despite what he said, though, Lois didn't expect him for another twenty minutes, at least. Traffic this time of day was so bad that it was quicker to walk than take a cab or drive your own car. Unless he found a jetpack somewhere. One of the feature articles was on a new breakthrough in gravity research that promised personal anti-gravity belts within ten years and starships in twenty. But there were always predictions of marvelous inventions that were overly optimistic. Feature writers had gushed about video phones for decades until computers and universal wireless broad band had made them a reality.

In any case, she didn't think Clark had a prototype Tom Swift-like flying belt.

"So, is he on his way?" Lucy asked. "I'm not sure how long we can stay. Connie seemed a little frazzled when I called her."

"With those little darlings of yours?" Lois said.

Lucy snorted. "I'm under no illusions about my 'little darlings,' Lois. I'm surprised the both of them don't have police records by now."

"Come on, Lucy," Jim said, handing her a cup of coffee. "They're only eight and ten years old. Give them a couple more years before they start building that rapsheet portfolio. They're just kids."

"Yeah?" Lucy said as though she didn't believe that for a minute. "Phillip has a habit of deconstructing and rebuilding every electronic device in the house, and Fred is there with a screwdriver and plans to reassemble it all into a working time machine. They drive their sister insane. I'm surprised she agrees to babysit at all."

"She's a mercenary capitalist," Lois said. "She needs the money and I think she hopes to bust them and convince you what little hellions they are."

"No need to convince me," Lucy said. "I blame you and the girls, anyway."

"What?" Lois said.

"You and the girls are always telling them stories about the early days at the Daily Planet and the adventures you and Clark managed to find. They never even met your editor, but they still ask me where Perry was during all the excitement. As if he could have stopped you."

"Lucy," Jim said, shaking his head. "You know that the boys love to tinker a little, but there isn't a malevolent bone in either of them. And they love their sister and would do anything for her. They just don't see their antics as anything but innocent fun. Besides, someday they will both win a Nobel Prize and we'll be the parents of

the most famous scientists in the world."

"Or," Lucy said, "they will invent a device that causes half the world's population to go bald and we will be the parents of the most infamous scientists in the world."

Lois covered her mouth, suppressing a giggle. Jim and Lucy adored those boys, but knew they tended to be a bit adventurous. They had complained more than once that the tykes took after their aunt. Like Lois and Clark, the Olsens had waited to have children. Lucy was five years younger than Lois, and Connie was born when she was thirty-four. When Phillip and then Fred came along when she was forty and forty-two respectively, both had been surprises. Pleasant surprises, but shocking, nonetheless. After Fred, they had taken steps to insure there were no further surprises.

Lois started to make a comment about them when a whooshing sound, with a strange vibration mixed with it, interrupted her. They all looked at each other, the unspoken question hanging in the air.

What the hell was that? It was nothing quite like anything they had heard before.

Lois ran to the door and opened it in time to hear her husband say, "That was amazing!" There was a sparkle in his eyes as though he had seen something so wonderful and fantastic that he could not believe it. A young man and woman stood slightly behind him, smiling.

Lois had two immediate thoughts. The two looked familiar. And she and her husband's lives would never be the same again.

"You're here," she said, unnecessarily. She looked past them. No car in the drive. "I know we used to do at least three improbable things before lunch in the old days, Clark, but you can't be here. No one can get here that quickly from the Planet and that's where you called from because I could see the office behind you unless you used one of those cheater backgrounds they are selling that philandering husbands use to fool their wives. But I don't think so, and you are here, but that's so improbable that it's impossible."

Clark grinned and kissed her in mid-babble. Lois returned the kiss, losing herself in his arms for a few seconds, then pulled back and looked at him.

"That smile is not all for my fantastic kissing ability," she said.

"Au contraire," Clark said. "Your kisses are always enough to bring gladness into my heart and a smile of pleasure to my grateful lips."

"Well, I kind of liked it, too," she agreed. She looked at young man and woman, both watching with amused interest. "Would you like to invite our guests in, Clark?"

"Oh, yes. Guests," he said. "See, you made me forget."

"Me and my kiss of forgetfulness," Lois said. "Works every time." She took her husband's hand and motioned the two inside. "Please excuse the dull witted football player and come on in. I'm Lois Lane-Kent, the dullard's wife." She held out her hand.

The young woman took her hand in both of hers and said, "Well, as strange as it may seem, so am I, except that I belong with this dullard here." She pointed to the young man who shrugged and nodded.

Oh, yeah, Lois thought. Things are definitely going to change.

"To avoid even more confusion," Clark said, "we'd better use the names they gave me originally. Charlie and Wanda."

Lois glanced at him, then back to the couple. "As in Charlie King and Wanda Detroit?" she asked.

The younger couple nodded, and Clark looked a little bemused. "There's lots of Charles Kings in the world," he said. "But I should have suspected something with the Wanda name. It wasn't until after she removed her wig that I realized I had wandered into the Twilight Zone."

Lois led them all to the living room, where Lucy and Jim had obviously been listening. Both stood as the rest entered, but looked like they needed to sit again soon to let the blood rush back to their faces.

Everyone but Clark sat, and he headed for the kitchen to bring back pots of coffee and tea for everyone to help themselves. While he gathered everything, Lois looked at Wanda.

"When's the baby due?" she asked. For just a second, a flash of concern and worry had passed over Wanda's face, but she quickly hid it.

"About three months or so," she said. "Maybe less."

Lois nodded. "How old are you? Twenty-six? Twenty-seven?"

"I'll be twenty-eight my next birthday," Wanda said, looking

a little puzzled.

"I'm not giving you the third degree, Wanda," Lois said. "You're a little younger than I was when I had the twins. I was thirty-five." Lois was not surprised when Wanda was able to follow her line of thought.

"You're right," Wanda said. "I'm not you at a younger age. We're so much alike, but so different, too."

"How can this be, Lois?" Lucy asked. "She looks almost exactly like you at that age, except that you weren't so ..."

"Pregnant? Big and round?" Wanda supplied.

"Glowing," Lois said. "Radiant."

Jim looked at Charlie. "And you look a lot like CK, but more like a younger brother. You're not identical."

Clark carried the tray back into the living room and set it on the table. "In more ways than one, Jim," he said. "But I'll let them tell the story in their own way since I've heard only part of it." He nodded toward Charlie and Wanda.

"So," Charlie said. "You know about the Charlie King and Wanda Detroit names?"

Lois pointed at a four foot wide bookshelf packed from floor to ceiling with books. "About half of those I wrote as Wanda Detroit and the other half are by Charles King," she said. "It's not common knowledge, but most of our friends know."

"Lois tends to write when she's upset about something," Clark said. "And I write when I'm happy. We seem to have established a pattern where at least one of us is working on a book at any given time. They add up over the years."

"I'm impressed," Wanda said. "What do you write?"

"I've done a few romances, adventures, suspense, and combinations of all of the above," Lois said. "Clark writes science fiction and some spy stuff. We've collaborated on a few books, too. It keeps us out of trouble. Mostly."

"These two also keep a couple of agents and a lot of publishers happy," Lucy said. "They've had more best sellers than Kerths or Pulitzers, and that's saying a lot."

"I'm surprised that with all the technology that you still have old fashioned paper books," Clark said.

"Not all of those on the shelves are paper books," Jim said. "I'm one of those agents they keep very happy and profitable by the way. I represent them in the 'hard' publications. The paper softcovers and hardcovers. I think there will always be a market for old fashioned books, the feel of them, the tactile feedback of turning pages when you're reading. But some of the 'soft' publications come close. They're light, durable, have an almost inexhaustible power supply, and they are lots cheaper than 'real' books to manufacture. They even look like paper books until you open them up."

"From what I've read about the memory storage on your computers since I've been here," Charlie interrupted, "why don't you load a lot of books on one machine? Then you wouldn't have to carry a bunch of computer books around with you."

"Ebooks," Jimmy said. "We have those and they are very popular, too. And you're right. Most models can store thousands of books of all kinds. They're great for traveling when you want your whole library with you, or to save space, but most people just use their CompCards in those situations. The inexpensive, single ebooks are for libraries, or people who want individual copies. There's still a market for them, but I think printed books will outlast them in the long run. Too many electronic alternatives." He looked at Charlie and Wanda curiously. "I have a feeling you two could write a great book, too."

"No doubt," Clark said. "This is one of those situations that's going to get both of us writing, I think." He set his cup of tea on the tray, and stood. "Lois, Jim, Lucy, I'd like you to meet Clark Kent and Lois Lane-Kent from a parallel universe that seems to be running about thirty years behind ours." He watched his friends for a few moments, looking from Lois to Lucy to Jim and

back through the sequence. “No screaming, yelling or fainting?” he asked. He shook his head. “Tough crowd.”

Jim laughed at him. “After all you and Lois have put yourselves and us through over the years, you think we should get freaky about a couple of trans-dimensional travelers?”

“Maybe not,” Clark admitted. “But Charlie and Wanda haven’t finished yet. The best is yet to come.” He sat again, looking at Charlie and Wanda.

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Well, that was their cue, “Wanda” thought. The other four sat there calmly, sipping their tea or coffee, not quite knowing what to expect. For that matter, neither did she. She and “Charlie” were stranded more completely than any shipwrecked sailor in the middle of nowhere. At least the sailor had some chance of a passing boat or plane. They had nothing but themselves, and now these four.

She looked around the older couple’s home, not exactly dissembling since she was interested in them and their lives; how similar and different they were. But also, she was using the interest as a delaying tactic. To give herself and Charlie a couple of minutes to take a breath. From the air, she had seen a single floor home that seemed to sprawl out over a half acre, but Clark — when he regained his composure — told them it was a three bath, five bedroom home with a den, a huge kitchen and dining room, and a recreation room.

“No partridge in a pear tree?” Wanda asked.

Clark admitted they did have pear and apple trees planted out back, but he hadn’t seen any partridges in them.

Unless property values were seriously depressed in this universe, or Daily Planet editors and writers were way overpaid, Wanda wondered how they could afford the house. She had chalked it up to good investments of money he made playing pro football, until she found out that both Clark and Lois were best selling authors. The proceeds from just one of their books probably exceeded what both of them made in a couple of years working at the Planet. All of this pointed to them being more and more like “Charlie and Wanda.” They didn’t work there because it was going to make them rich, but because they wanted to.

Once they entered, Wanda was further impressed by how beautiful the place was inside. It was decorated much as Wanda might have, for good reason, of course. And immaculate. She wondered if Clark-without-powers was as much of a neat freak as Clark-with-powers. It was more likely that Lois and Clark shared the housekeeping duties. Or hired a service. Nope, she decided. They did it themselves. That’s what she and her Clark would have done.

Clark and Lois were sort of older versions of them, but had lived different lives even in the early days. Without the powers, Clark was necessarily a different person, and his family history and later athletic fame caused even greater divergences. In their discussions before going to meet the older man, they had decided he had no clue about his actual origins and the fact that the molten mass of metal was not a car or van or truck, but a spaceship from another solar system. If anything, Clark may have thought his biological parents were drug smugglers or terrorists involved in transporting explosive material. None of the routine medical tests over his lifetime found anything unusual. As far as he knew, he was a normal human being, though extraordinarily gifted when it came to athletics. She took a deep breath.

“Okay, Charlie,” she said finally. “Time to do the floaty thingy.”

“Floaty thingy?” he said. “That’s a new one.”

“New world, new people,” she said.

Charlie shrugged and stood. He crossed his arms and rose from the floor. When he cleared the couch, he tucked in his legs and did a slow backflip and ended by floating in midair with his legs crossed. He settled back on the couch and put his feet back

on the floor.

“And for his next trick,” Jim said, “he will saw a lady in half.” But his eyes were wide and his mouth half open. He knew that had been no trick.

“Now that was exceptional,” Lucy said, almost clapping. “I’d love to get you to the lab with a few thousand recording devices pointed at you.”

Charlie looked decidedly uncomfortable.

“He has this thing about labs,” Wanda said. “His dad always warned him growing up that scientists would take him to a lab and dissect him like a frog if anyone ever found out about him. Wait until he tells you the story about high school biology.”

Lucy shook her head. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know. Let me assure you that no one will ever hear about this from us, and we won’t dissect you like a frog. No matter what.”

“Lucy tends to take her work home with her,” Lois said.

“She’s the leading researcher and chief administrator in charge of S.T.A.R. Labs.”

Wanda looked at Charlie. This could be a break.

“Is there a Dr. Bernard Klein on this world?” Charlie asked. “He helped us a lot in our universe.”

“Bernie retired about two years ago,” Lucy said. “But we can’t keep him out of the lab. He says he likes it better now that he can come and go as he pleases and work on ‘whatever he damn well wants to.’ He’s been a great help to me, too. I’m sure I would have blown the place up by now if it weren’t for him.”

“Bernie came close enough himself on a number of occasions,” Clark said.

“Listen,” Lois said seriously. “I can tell that somewhere along the line you’re going to be asking for help. If it’s anything related to any scientific field or research, then Doctors Bernard Klein and Lucy Olsen are the best in the world. If they can’t find a solution for you, then no one on this planet can.” Lucy blushed and Jim hugged her.

Wanda held and squeezed Charlie’s hand. Finally, a sign of hope.

“Let’s start with who I am,” Charlie said. “On my world, I am Clark Kent, an orphan raised by Martha and Jonathan Kent after they found me in a spaceship in Shuster’s field.”

“Spaceship?” Clark said. All the color had left his olive skin. Lois moved closer to him.

“Yes,” Charlie said, almost apologetically. “I was born on the planet Krypton and sent to Earth as a baby by my parents just before their world was destroyed. Until my early teens, I was just like any other kid, maybe a little stronger and I didn’t get sick or hurt, but that was the extent of my differences. Until I hit puberty and I began to change more than most guys. My strength grew exponentially. I could lift refrigerators and cars and pretty much anything I wanted. I started to hear things I shouldn’t have been able to hear. See through solid materials. Start fire with my eyes. Expel super-cold air from my lungs. And other things.”

Something in his eyes must have touched a chord with Clark.

“You flew.”

“I was almost eighteen when it happened for the first time, and I thought I was in heaven.” He smiled and looked at Wanda. “But I wasn’t, really, until I met Lois. Wanda.”

“Good job, flyboy,” she said.

“Something in the sun’s yellow radiation affects people from Krypton. Gives them these special abilities,” Charlie said. “I felt compelled to help with these abilities, but it took Lois, Wanda, to show me how. I became a hero called Superman, and wore a bright blue and red costume to distract people from my real, ‘Clark’ appearance.”

Lucy had been looking into the distance, as though distracted. “Oh, God,” she said. “The cloud.”

They all turned to her.

“Did you say that the yellow radiation from the sun gives you



your powers?" Lucy asked.

Wanda smiled. Her 'little sister' had figured it out. "That's what he said," she confirmed.

"But he's probably just tapping into the universal zero point energy field or more likely dark energy," Lucy said, as if talking to herself. "The yellow radiation must enhance that ability — that's the only explanation. And the cloud has inhibited and shifted certain frequencies over the years. Not really enough to notice, but maybe enough to —" She stopped and looked at them. They were all staring at her. "What?" she said.

"Go ahead, honey," Jim said. "I think you're on to something."

"I think so, too," she said. "Did you know that the solar system has been drifting through an interstellar cloud for the past few thousand years? It's not something you can really see, of course, and the density is more like a high grade vacuum instead of a cloud like you might see on earth."

"The same in our universe," Charlie said. "But the composition of the cloud is a little different there. Our solar system was about to drift into a very dangerous part containing elements that would have caused the sun to nova. Scientists in our universe figured out a way to neutralize the danger. We were returning from the mission to implode a portion of the cloud when we were sidetracked."

Lucy nodded absently. "In our universe, an interaction between the unique elements of the cloud and the upper atmosphere filters certain wavelengths, preventing them from reaching the surface of the earth. Others are altered, shifted slightly down the spectrum."

"And?" Clark prompted.

"And that would mean the particular yellow radiation needed to power up Charlie doesn't reach the earth's surface. If he lived here long enough, he would lose most of his abilities. Except ..." Lucy's voice trailed off.

"Except what?" Lois asked. "There's something going on with the cloud, isn't there?"

"It's been known for decades this was going to happen eventually," Lucy said. "Bernie was at the forefront of the research about fifteen years ago when we discovered that the solar system had reached a rather abrupt edge of the cloud. Bernie calculated that we would go from being fully engulfed to completely out of the cloud in just a matter of weeks. An instant in astronomical time."

"When is this going to happen?" Clark asked. There seemed to be an edge of panic to his voice.

"It's already happened, Clark," Lucy said. "The earth completed the transition sometime last week. Nobody made a big deal about it because only astronomers were interested and it wasn't going to affect anything." She looked at Clark. "Or so we thought."

"Maybe it's not the same," he said, the panic still in his voice. "Maybe I'm not from another planet." He looked at Charlie. "You said yourself that things were a little different here."

Charlie sighed. "I don't know whether to offer congratulations or condolences," he said. He pointed at his eyes. "I checked your cell structure and physiology. You are as Kryptonian as I am, Clark."

Clark lowered his face to his hands, shaking his head. Lois pulled him closer and brought her mouth close to his ear.

"It's okay, sweetheart," she said. "We'll be okay."

"I know," he said quietly. "But what about the 15K last Saturday? I was fast, but not inhumanly fast." He seemed to be looking for loopholes. "Why didn't I run the race in about five minutes?"

"Or five seconds?" Lois asked. "The same reason you didn't fly to work on Monday. Your brain didn't know what your body could do."

He nodded slowly. "You're probably right. I was just thinking about the race. How it felt to cross that finish line after beating a bunch of young upstarts at their own game." He shook his head again. "The competition. I think I'm going to miss the competition most of all."

"Leave it to a jock," Lois said, rubbing his shoulder. "The guy gets powers far beyond those of mortal men, and he's worried about not being able to compete in a nine mile race."

Wanda knew, as did every person in the room, there was more to it than just the competition. Clark had just found out he wasn't human and he was grasping at anything to tie him to that lost humanity. Wanda, of all people, knew how he felt. At least Charlie grew up with the knowledge that he was different and the possibility of an "exotic" origin. She, and Clark, had been told as adults, "Oh, by the way, you're not human. Have a nice life." Which reminded her, the other Lois had a couple of shocks still to come.

Someone knocked on the door.

Charlie lowered his glasses and got that "Uh, oh" look on his face. What now? Wanda wondered.

Clark opened the door, and two young, dark-haired ladies stood there, a look of wonder and unease on their faces. Both were dressed in athletic warmup suits with "Kansas State" across the jackets. Their hair and clothes were a bit disheveled. Wanda figured it was about time for the other shoe to drop. Or other shoes.

"Dad," one of them said, her voice almost breaking. "Something has happened to us."

"Something wonderful," the other girl said. She seemed more exhilarated than bothered.

Clark gathered his daughters into his arms. "Cara, Christie," he said. "I have something to tell you. Come in and join the crowd."

Wanda noted that any trace of unease that Clark had shown earlier was gone. His daughters were here and they needed him, and that was more important than anything else at the moment. Even his humanity.

Were these girls her future? she wondered. None of the sonograms had shown twins, so probably not. Plus she was pregnant when she was almost eight years younger than the Lois of this world. Thinking back to what Dr. Klein and H. G. Wells had said to her a few months ago — though it seemed like years — Wanda wondered if she would find herself pregnant with twins at age thirty-five. Looking at the girls, she decided if they were anything like them, she might learn to like the possibility.

They sat on the couch between their mom and dad. "This is Christie," Clark said, indicating the young lady beside him. "And this is Cara beside Lois."

Both were tall, raven haired beauties that combined the features of their parents in different ways. Christie might have been a fraction of an inch taller, with the dark olive skin of her father. Her hair was dark and reached almost to her shoulders. Her features were a little sharper, better defined, and she had cheekbones that would have made her an up and coming model on the runways of Paris. She seemed to be always in motion, her hands fluttering around as if seeking a place to rest. She was excited. Whatever had happened sent adrenaline flowing through her veins by the gallon, and she was ready to go out and conquer the world.

Cara's features were softer, her skin more like her mom's, but she was no less beautiful. Her hair was cut shorter and surrounded a face that could break a young man's heart without half trying. She seemed more apprehensive, but also more thoughtful, as if considering the consequences of whatever had brought them rushing home. Her eyes darted around the room, analyzing every nuance of gesture and breath of those around her. The implications scared her, but she was fighting the fear with

her intellect, and there was no doubt as to which would be the victor. Cara wouldn't seek to conquer the world, but she would anyway.

All four of them intertwined their fingers, forming a chain of love and support. Strong. Unbreakable. Indestructible.

"Cara, Christie," Clark said. "Things get complicated from here, but we're calling these two Charlie and Wanda. They are visitors from very, very, very far away."

The twins looked at each other, then at the book rack. "Pseudonyms," they said together.

"But you look like Mom and Dad," Christie said.

"Except you're younger and you are pregnant," Cara said pointing at Wanda.

"And you," Christie said, pointing at Charlie, "have different hair."

"But that could be because of the age difference," Cara observed.

"It's a twin thing," Lois said, raising her eyebrows. "It gets worse."

"But what we want to know," Christie said.

"And more to the immediate question," Cara continued.

"Why can we suddenly fly like Ultrax?" they finished together.

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Martha Clark Kent.

Her name was written on the outside of the yellowed envelope in an ornate, expressive script. Below her name was a date two years in the past. According to the instructions that were given to her along with the envelope almost sixty years ago, she was to wait until that date before reading the contents.

Presumably, that would have given her time enough to prepare for today. The author of the letter inside was either terribly naive or did not know Martha Kent very well. Possibly both. Martha showed remarkable restraint, however. She had waited a full forty-eight hours before she slit the top of the envelope and removed several sheets of paper dense with meticulous handwriting. The penmanship of a man unaccustomed to computers or typewriters and more at ease with the intimacy of precisely formed letters.

Over the years, she and Jonathan had read and studied the sheets of paper, trying to extract just one more tidbit of implied information, one more nugget of knowledge. Of course, what it explicitly said in those black curves of ink against the ivory paper was startling enough in itself without metaphorically reading between the lines, but that never stopped them. Together, they had analyzed every word, each comma, whole phrases and individual apostrophes. One significant, glaring implication was that when that date arrived, only Martha Kent would be there to read the text. Jonathan was not mentioned on the envelope or anywhere in the letter inside. Martha had cried for two days when she finally realized that, trying to hide her sorrow from her husband, but failing. He'd seen it, too, of course, but had hoped she missed that fact.

"Fat chance of that," she remembered him telling her. "Never happened before so I should have figured it wouldn't now."

When Jonathan died a few years ago, many years after they received the letter, Martha continued to take it out periodically, discussing it aloud as if he were there to listen and nod at the appropriate places. Perhaps it was a sign of her age that she yearned for and embraced the past so ardently. But her beloved Jonathan lived only in the past, so who could blame her for spending so much of her time there?

Time, apparently, was not as rigid and unceasingly a one way street as she had once believed. While she reached for the past, the pages spoke of the future. Of that day. Of today.

There were a few, oh, so tantalizing bits of information. A mention in passing of her grandchildren's names decades before

they were born. A casual assumption that she would live to that day, though she would be in her eighties when it arrived. She had fought the urge during the years since she first read the letter to live a life of adventure and peril, with little regard to her own safety just to see if she could prove the letter wrong in some regards. But since that could lead to messy situations involving her death, she had resisted. Also, the bothersome warning about how free will could negate destiny was disturbing. It was as though time was a spoiled brat who could do as he liked without regard to rationality.

Then there was Ultrax.

Though the character was already established and well on the way to becoming a perpetual source of cash and fame for Martha before she received the letter, she had wondered about the character's origin. Had her love and bond with Clark somehow caused information about the future to ripple back through time, teasing her subconscious with details of flying superheroes? It didn't really matter. Ideas were a penny a pound. The characters, the plots, the artwork, the totality of the Ultrax world were all her vision. It wasn't the concept of a flying man that had grabbed the public's imagination, but the flying man's ideals and character, and response to being an alien in an alien world that made him an icon for justice and truth.

Some called it comic book trash. Martha called it a magnifying glass view of life. It was her art and she was proud of it. She was proud of him.

Ultrax, and his alter ego, Morgan Gant, had lived and loved, suffered and lost. He had periods of self-doubt and overwhelming confidence. Once, he accidentally killed one of the most ruthless villains ever created in any media. Martha made him wallow in his own remorse until even her staunchest fans were begging her to kill him or let him get past the guilt and pure self-hatred he felt for what he had done. In one way, she thought it almost amusing that the readers had become so involved with the fictional character that they were willing to let him go, to be put out of his misery, so to speak, rather than see him suffer. In another way, she wondered at her ability to push people over that line between reality and fantasy, until sometimes it was difficult to tell where the line was drawn. In her case, it sometimes seemed that she had slipped across it at some distant point in her life and she was firmly in the fantasy side.

Ultrax eventually decided that if he let the accidental death ruin his life, stop the good things he did, and destroy the symbol of hope for the people of earth, then the villain would win, even in death.

Martha, in the ultimate analysis, believed in happy endings.

Even before Clark came to her and Jonathan, her life was filled with creativity and joy and happiness with her work and her husband at her side. She remembered reviewers who had never deigned to look at a "comic book" called her work remarkable. More like panels of full color paintings than comic panels. Her publisher developed new ways of printing and new papers to capture the vivid life in her drawings. As she grew older, the work grew more complex and intricate. More filled with passion and life. The way she used color and shading made it almost three dimensional. The reader felt as though he could touch Ultrax's hand as he battled and loved. Of course, she also slowed down as the years passed, so other artists and writers came on board to help her keep the voracious public satisfied with stories of Ultrax and his circle of friends, enemies and acquaintances. At all times, she maintained control to be sure that the writing and artwork at least came close to her standards. Fans and critics agreed that no one could match M. C. Kent in either area, but her editorial control assured a consistent quality.

Now in her eighties, she only occasionally and painfully supplied a cover or two for the primary Ultrax book, and spent most of her time outlining her hero's future for many years to

come. Training Jillian Lambert was a large part of that. Jillian had a love of the character and a breathtaking ability to tell a story with exquisite pictures and words. Someday soon, she would be better than Martha. Maybe she already was.

Martha looked at the date on the envelope. Two years ago, but she had been making preparations for this day long before then. The instructions inside had been explicit, and given the date all those plans would be used. No more assurances of a certain future past today. Perhaps it was a good time to retire.

It was almost eight pm. She had long ago moved just outside Metropolis to be near Clark and his family. He thought it was because of his nagging and insistence that she be close by so they could help take care of her. That was one reason and another was because it made her happy to be with him and Lois and the girls. But she knew that on this day, she would be living in Metropolis, and was more than willing to go along with destiny in this instance. She sighed, her breath soft and almost silent in her aging body. Time to make the call. Time to make the future history come to be.

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Charlie saw the girls' hands clench as they both tightened their grips. Clark did not even blink, but Lois winced and touched Cara's hand.

"Ease up, sweetie," she told her. "You've got a death grip on my hand and I think I hear bones beginning to crack."

"Oh, God, Mom. I'm sorry," Cara said, releasing her hand. "Are you okay?"

Charlie lowered his glasses briefly. "No harm done," he assured them.

"Easy for you to say," Lois said, shaking her hand and flexing her fingers. She grasped her daughter's hand again and smiled at her. Charlie could see that she focused every bit of the love she felt for the girl in that look. "Go easy on your dear old mom, Cara. I have a few more books to type with that hand yet."

Cara nodded contritely.

"Now," Lois continued. "Why don't you explain all the what's and how's and wherefore's of your — uh — situation?"

The two looked at each other for a full ten seconds, as though communicating on some twin wavelength that no one else could access. Then they turned back to the others.

"It started during a little one-on-one session after practice this morning," Christie began.

"We like to play against each other after the regular workout because it seems that no one else is fast enough to stay with us, especially lately," Cara continued.

Somehow, through the ping pong narrative bouncing from one girl to the other, they got the story.

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Since they could remember, Cara and Christie had been able to have conversations that no one else could hear. They always figured it was because they had such good hearing and knew what the other was thinking anyway. They were twins, after all. Didn't most people think twins could read each others' minds? Their latest discussions had been about how slow everyone seemed to be lately. On the court, they observed that it was like everyone suddenly was wearing sneakers made of lead. The drills seemed slower, more sedate, not as intense as they should be. But the coach didn't seem to notice, praising everyone for giving one hundred percent during practice. Everyone seemed winded and exhausted, too, while Cara and Christie hadn't even broken a sweat.

"What the heck is going on?" Christie asked Cara over their private channel. "Is it us, or is everyone moving in slow motion?"

Cara watched her teammates and coaches, especially head coach Dalton, for a few seconds, observing their moves and reactions. The coaches' body language told her they were happy with what they saw in practice. As far as they were concerned,

everything was normal.

"It's us," Cara replied. "Everyone else is moving at full speed, just like they always do. Let's take it down a notch to match everyone else and we'll talk about it at the after practice workout."

Christie nodded. None of the other players had heard a thing.

But the twins heard plenty. At the end of practice, a group of players had gathered around the bright orange water jug, breathing hard and waiting for their turn at the precious liquid. Though Cara and Christie were retying their shoes at the opposite end of the gym, it was as if the other group were standing beside them. They could hear every word and whisper.

"What's up with the wonder twins?" Lisa asked. She didn't seem vindictive or spiteful. Just curious. "They were in another gear today. Like they found overdrive or something."

"I noticed that," Vickie said. "They were running circles around all of us."

"Well, I hope they save some for the game this Saturday," Adrienne said. "We're going to need every bit of it against U-Conn. They gave us a fit last time and Coach Dalton says they've improved since then."

"Hey, so have we," Vickie said.

"Man, it's great when they're in the zone like that during a game," Lisa said. "I love those girls to death, but still it's kind of freaky."

The twins looked at each other. The really freaky thing was that they could hear the other girls whispering across a full size college gym.

Everyone gathered with Cara and Christie on the sidelines while the coach talked about the game with the University of Connecticut. The coach kidded the twins about their energy, and their teammates warned them to bring it the game Saturday. No one seemed resentful or envious. They knew a win would require a good team effort and almost flawless performances from their two stars.

"Okay, girls," said Coach Dalton. "I have a pop quiz for you." They all groaned and she grinned. "What is the first thing I say to my teams every year before we even have a first practice?"

"Don't be afraid to shoot," they all said in unison. It was an old, familiar phrase. Coach Dalton had even used it a few times on Cara and Christie when she thought they were being a little too generous with the ball instead of taking the open shots. She had told them more than once that their generosity was their only weakness. But she smiled as she said it, which told them she was only half joking.

"Exactly," Coach Dalton said. "You can't score unless you shoot, and every single one of you was recruited because you're not just good, you are exceptional. You have other valuable skills, of course, but without the shooting touch, you would be playing college ball for another team."

"Let me repeat that. Don't be afraid to shoot." She stood. "Okay, that's it. You ladies worked very hard today, so easy practice and shoot around tomorrow. Otherwise, rest and get ready for Saturday."

Cara and Christie remained seated while the others waved good-bye and headed for the showers.

"You sticking around for a while as usual?" Coach Dalton asked. They nodded. "Try to take it a bit easier, girls. You were moving like bolts of lightning out there today. We've got a few games to go and I don't want you to burn out. Try to relax a little, okay?"

"Sure, Coach."

"We won't stay too long."

Their coach left and they both grabbed a ball and began shooting. A few layups at first, just to get back into rhythm, then some shooting practice. It began as a standard three point shooting drill. Start at one side of the basket, outside the three

point line and receive a pass, catch, and shoot. Cara started first since she was the oldest by about a minute. Christie tossed her the ball, she caught it, went up with her usual perfect form, and swished the three. Nothing unusual. She did that more often than not. She moved to the next position, received the pass, and drained another three. She moved all the way around the three point perimeter, making shot after shot, never once touching the rim, the net snapping like a whip every time the spinning ball swished through. Cara felt almost invincible. The net was a mile wide and she was dropping tiny peas into the center. It was Christie's turn.

"Let me go again, okay?" Cara asked her sister. Christie shrugged.

"Sure," she said.

Cara ran back to her starting position, but moved back five feet. Now she was a foot beyond pro basketball three point range. She caught the pass, the ball arced up perfectly, and the bottom of the net snapped again. She moved all the way around the perimeter again, five feet away from the three point line, and never missed a shot. Never touched the rim. Christie watched the performance, her eyes getting wider and wider, shaking her head in disbelief with every shot.

"One more time," Cara said, her hands shaking a little as she received Christie's pass. She took a deep, calming breath, and dribbled to the top of the circle, then to the halfcourt line, nearly forty-two feet from the basket. With no more apparent effort than a short jumper, the ball tore through the net. Christie passed the ball back and Cara quickly dribbled to the three point line of the opposite basket. Almost seventy-four feet. Again, another perfect arc and another perfect shot. An easy, effortless shot and the ball snapped through. Tiny pieces of nylon fluttered to the floor.

Barely able to stay on her feet, Cara took the pass standing on the out of bounds line at the other end of the court, close to ninety-four feet from the basket. She focused down the court, stood as though shooting a foul shot, and the ball tore through the net at the other end of the court. More nylon floated beneath the basket.

"Holy macaroni," Christie said, shaking her head. "How did you do that?"

"I don't know," Cara answered. She felt as if the room were wavering slightly, but focused on her sister and it stabilized. She retrieved a rack of basketballs and motioned her sister down to her end of the court. "Your turn."

Christie looked at her sister as though she had just grown another head and a couple of extra arms. But she jogged down next to Cara and took the basketball she offered.

"You really want me to try this shot?" Christie asked. Cara nodded.

Christie took the ball and looked at the basket at the other end of the court. It looked so tiny and far away. Like in another time zone, she decided. But as she stared at the target, something changed. A subtle shift in attitude and bearing. An intense focus on the basket and what she needed to do.

As easily as her sister had done, she tossed the ball towards the goal at the other end of the court and it arced through the net. Her attention stayed focused on the opposite basket as her sister passed her ball after ball. Almost in a trance-like state, ten times she shot and ten times the basketball tore through the net. Nylon gathered in a pile beneath the goal, and the net itself was in tatters.

"What is going on?" Christie asked. Cara just shook her head.

"Let's play," she said, tossing Christie another ball. "One on one. First one to eleven and you have to win by two."

Standard rules. Christie nodded and tossed the ball back to her sister. "Check the ball," she said.

Cara caught it, turned it around in her hands, then said, "Looks okay to me."

"Smart alec," Christie said. "Toss me the ball so you can get

your butt kicked."

"Dream on, little sister," Cara said, passing the ball back.

"Hey, I'm taller than you," Christie protested.

"But I'm older," Cara said. "That makes you my younger, little sister."

"Okay, old lady," Christie told her. "Get your decrepit bones ready for a butt whipping." She did a little ball fake to get her sister off the ground, then moved to the left to dribble around her. But Cara was there waiting for her, moving so quickly she seemed to burst into being in her path. Christie dodged right in a blur but still Cara was there to cut her off from the basket. Christie pulled up to take the shot. Cara left her feet to block it, unwilling to let her sister get a shot off. After their performance earlier, neither was likely to miss anything. Christie was off her feet, her shooting hand aligned with her target in perfect form. Not on my watch, Cara thought and reached even higher to block the shot.

And higher. And higher.

Then Cara was in the air, her head above the rim, floating towards the ceiling. Christie gave a startled yelp, then jumped for her sister's feet. She missed as she, too, soared into the air beside Cara. Both of them flailed around in midair, each trying to reach the other. After a few seconds, they bumped into the ceiling girders, and grabbed hold. They climbed on to the girders and stood there, looking first at one another, then at the floor far below. They moved closer to each other and locked their hands together.

"Well," Christie said at last. "Should we laugh or should we cry?"

"I vote we avoid both," Cara said. "I'm afraid if I start either one, I won't be able to stop."

"Good point," Christie agreed. They were having a semi-rational conversation as though they floated around the gym on a regular basis. "How about we call for help?"

"And just how do we explain how we got up here?" Cara asked. "Think the truth will work?"

"Uh — probably not." Christie looked down again. "Maybe we can get down the same way we got up."

"Sure," Cara said. "Just what way was that, dear sister? Explain it and I'll do it again."

"Think happy thoughts?" Christie said hopefully.

"I have a better idea. Think floaty thoughts."

"Floaty thoughts."

"Yes," Cara said. "When I jumped, all I could think about was getting high enough to block that shot. So I was thinking 'up' a lot."

"I was trying to grab hold and stop you, so I was thinking almost the same thing. I was trying to get up there and help you."

Cara looked at her, then at their surroundings. "So far, I'd have to say your efforts are insufficient to alleviate the situation."

"Yeah," Christie said. "Well, you're not doing so good yourself."

"Infant."

"Crone."

Cara sighed. "Well, that was fun, but we're still stuck up here."

Christie looked thoughtful for a few seconds. "Think floaty thoughts, huh?" she said. "What the heck, it's worth a try." She waved at her sister, let go, then stepped into midair.

And dropped like the proverbial stone.

"NO!" Cara screamed, grabbing for her. The impact of her sister's body hitting the floor echoed through the gym, an awful, gut tearing wet thud that Cara felt in every cell of her body. She screamed again, and suddenly she was standing beside Christie, with no realization of how she got there. Had she jumped? Teleported? She shook her head. That didn't matter. Christie needed help.

Or so she thought.

Her sister sat up and looked around. “That’s one way to get down,” she said. “Did you fall, too?”

“I’m not sure,” Cara answered. “I was too busy trying to save your sorry butt to notice.”

“I’m not sure the floaty thoughts thing is a useful technique,” Christie said. She looked around her. “I think the floor got the worst part of the deal,” she said pointing. A spiderweb of cracks scarred the hardwood floor. A few of the boards protruded slightly above the floor level.

“Oh, great,” Cara said. “At least you missed the playing area of the court.” She reached out a hand and helped her sister to her feet. “This part is usually covered by the bleachers, so maybe we can push the boards back in place and no one will notice.” Christie nodded. The seating area for the spectators had been folded against the walls during the week to give them more practice room. The spot where Christie hit would be hidden once the bleachers were rolled out.

They both got on their hands and knees and pushed the boards back together. The board popped into place with surprising ease. After they finished, only a faint network of cracks was visible and they agreed that someone would have to know the cracks were there and be looking to find the damage.

“Do you know where the controller for the bleachers is?” asked Christie. “Maybe if we roll them out now, the facilities people will all think one of the other guys did it.”

“Sis, you get more devious by the day,” Cara said. “It just so happens that I know where the control room is, and where they keep the key. Follow me.”

“Does this have anything to do with that guy you dated a couple of months ago?” Christie asked. “The P.E. major who helped out with the equipment and facilities?”

“Maybe,” Cara said.

“So, what were you and Tad doing in the control room?” Christie grinned.

“None of your business, little sister,” Cara said. “Besides, you’re too young to know about these things.” They stopped before a closed door. “Your turn. Use some of those lock picking skills Mom taught you.”

“Cara, I swore an oath to only use my powers in the service of good,”

Christie said. Cara stared at her with her arms crossed. “Okay, so this may qualify. I need a couple of paperclips or something.”

They looked around for a few moments before Cara finally said, “Ah, ha.” She walked behind a stack of boxes and came back with an entire box of paperclips. “Somebody must have dropped these when they were restocking their office supplies.”

Christie took the box and stared at her. “How exactly did you see them behind that stack of crates?” she asked.

“In the past fifteen minutes, we shot three pointers from the opposite end of the court, floated up to the ceiling, then you fell forty or more feet to the floor and cracked it and not yourself, and heaven knows how I got down, and you’re worried about how I found a box of paperclips?” Cara threw her hands up. “Either I’m psychic, or I can see through solid objects, or I heard the paperclips whispering to one another. Choose one and let’s move on.”

Christie shrugged, then unfolded two paperclips. Inserting one above the other, she moved them around, trying to feel for the tumblers like her Mom had taught her. So quickly that it surprised even her, they fell into place and the door opened.

“I knew that someday having a sister who could crack a safe would come in handy,” Cara said.

“How come you never learned this?” Christie asked, folding the paperclips back into shape. “Didn’t Mom offer to teach you?”

“Sure she did. I just figured you could handle all this kind of

stuff.”

“I’m not sure,” Christie said. “But I think I’ve just been insulted.”

“I’m sure,” Cara said, grinning. She hugged her sister. “Let’s get this over with before somebody shows up.” She walked over to a rack of keys and looked at the labels before choosing one. On the wall at the other end of the room was a wall of keyed switches. Cara found the one marked “Retractable Gym Seating.” Underneath the keylock were a series of push buttons for various sections of the bleachers. “I think we’ll just do the wall seating on both sides,” Cara said. “It’s usually like that when we come in the day before the game, anyway.”

“Great,” Christie said. Cara frowned as she stared at the buttons. “What’s with you? You look like the cat who swallowed the sour canary.”

“Nothing,” Cara said, inserting the key and unlocking the switches. “Nothing at all.” But she knew, as she pushed the buttons to extend the seating, that it was definitely something. And her sister had not figured it out yet. She was too excited about what was happening to them to see the ramifications. Too see what it would mean to them and the people around them. Their friends, their family, and their teammates.

They extended the bleachers before anyone showed up, then replaced the keys and locked the door behind them. There was no visible damage anywhere in the gym.

“Perfect,” Christie said. “Ready for us to play this Saturday.”

Cara just nodded. She still hadn’t realized.

“Listen,” Christie said. “You think anyone else is still around?”

“If that noise didn’t bring anyone running, then nothing will,” Cara said.

“Good. Let’s see if we can get this thing under control.”

“This thing?” Cara had a bad feeling about what Christie was talking about.

“This flying thing,” Christie said. “And I know who can help us.”

“Your infant brain has gone over the edge,” Cara said. “Who can possibly help us with this?”

“Grandma Martha and Ultrax,” she said. “How many Ultrax comics have you read?”

“All of them, of course,” Cara answered. “So we use his technique of thinking our selves weightless, then willing ourselves to move in a particular direction.”

“Yep. Desire made reality. More focus will give us more speed, too. At least, that’s how he — or rather, Grandma Martha — said he learned to control his flying.” Christie closed her eyes and floated a couple of feet above the floor. She opened her eyes, then focused on the far wall. She began to drift in that direction, slowly at first, but then she picked up speed.

“Easy!” Cara yelled. “We can’t hide the wall, you know.”

Christie slowed just before she could cause any damage. “You try it,” she said.

Why not? Cara thought. She didn’t bother closing her eyes, but rose above the floor. She willed herself towards her sister and stopped beside her.

“Great,” Christie said. “Now, let’s really see what we can do.”

She levitated straight up, turned until her body was parallel to the ground and shot like an arrow around the gym, her body banking and turning as she came to a corner. Cara followed her, amazed at how easy and instinctual the movement was. Almost as if she were born to fly and she was just now remembering how.

They rose. They drifted. They streaked. They cruised. They twirled.

They played tag and raced from one corner to the other. They did spins and loops and whorls in the air.

After two hours, they collapsed laughing in each others arms.

Even Cara had momentarily forgotten her apprehension and glimpse of reality from before. Christie's words brought it all back, though.

"We have to go see Mom and Dad," she said. "Tell them what's happening and see if they know what's causing this."

"I know," Cara said, her shoulders falling. She knew at least one thing their Dad would say. Something that neither of them wanted to hear. "Let's go."

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"Then we were here," Christie said. "But I'm still not sure why the old woman here," nodding at Cara, "is so gloomy. This is great."

"I know why," Clark said, shaking his head. "And you're not going to like it."

"What?" Christie said. Charlie knew what was coming, of course. He had faced some of the same problems when he was playing college football. Looking at Christie's face, a strange but familiar combination of Lois and Clark's features, he could almost see the thought processes as she followed the logical consequences of what had happened to them.

"The game," she said finally. "What are we going to do about the game Saturday?" She covered her face with her hands. "We can't play," she said slowly. "It wouldn't be fair." Christie looked up. "Would it?" It was as though she was asking someone to tell her it was going to okay. That she and Cara could play the game. Nobody answered. "I didn't think so."

"Dad, what has happened to us?" Christie asked, almost pleading. Charlie could tell that Clark felt the pain like a dagger. And he probably thought it was all his own fault. He knew that he would have in his position.

"Girls, it turns out that I'm not exactly from around here," he said with a small smile. He quickly explained what he and the others had learned from Charlie and Wanda about Krypton, the cloud, and the abilities they were all developing.

"To recap this," Cara said. She pointed at Charlie. "You're really Clark Kent from another universe."

"Who was born on the planet Krypton, but sent to Earth by your parents to save your life," Christie continued.

"You developed lots of different powers and abilities under the earth's yellow radiation."

"Radiation that is slightly different in our universe because of the cloud the solar system is drifting through."

"Except that we just came out of the cloud," Cara said.

"And Dad and Cara and I are becoming super-charged because of the solar radiation," Christy said.

"Which means we can never play basketball again," Cara said, her voice dropping.

"Not necessarily," Charlie told them. Their eyes lit with a glimmer of anticipation. "I played college football while trying not to use my abilities. By then, I had learned to precisely control the powers, but it was more difficult than you'd think because I didn't have a baseline for my natural athletic ability. My goal was to play like the 'average' college player, but I felt like I was trying to hit an always moving target. Sometimes I was above and sometimes I was below average. You girls may have it a little easier." They weren't identical twins, but the hope on their faces made them mirror images of each other for a second.

"You already know how you play as non-superpowered athletes," Charlie said. "You just have to maintain that level. Some of your ability may be because you're half Kryptonian. Maybe there's something in the Kryptonian physiology that makes them — us — better athletes. I don't know. You have a couple of days to learn to control the abilities and play the same game you always play."

Clark looked at his younger counterpart and nodded. "He's right," he said, then grinned. "Of course, he is me and I'm always right and don't forget it." He hugged the girls. "Two days, girls. If

you can learn to control the powers and only use your normal, spectacular skills, then you can play. I'll leave the decision to you. You will know whether you can compete fairly. Let's face it, your regular game is almost superhuman anyway. Take shots from the same places you always do. Miss the same percentage. Err on the side of caution and make that pass to the open shooter." He saw the alarm on their faces.

"I know Coach Dalton will have a fit," he said. "But these are special circumstances, at least until you're completely sure you have the necessary control. We'll see how things go."

The twins stared at each for a brief instant, then both nodded.

"Sounds like a plan," Christie said. "We have a couple of unanswered questions."

"Number one is why Charlie and Wanda stopped in for a visit," Cara said. "Did they just happen to be passing through this universe and decide to drop by?"

"Second is how did Grandma Martha know so much?" Christie asked. "Ultrax just seems to be a thinly disguised version of Charlie's Superman. Or vice versa."

And, as was foretold in a letter written many decades ago, the phone sounded the distinctive ringtone associated with Martha Kent.

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Lois and Clark glanced at each other for a brief second before they turned into twin dervishes of activity.

"Clark and I will take the call here," Lois said, indicating the couch. "Everyone else move back behind the table."

"I don't think we need to tell Mom about anything yet," Clark said. "She's a very strong person, but I don't know if she can take a shock like this." He rubbed his hand through his hair. "Hell, I don't know if I can take a shock like this."

"We'll use the virtual screen so you can see what we do," Lois said.

"Except reversed since we're on the backside," Cara reminded her.

"Except reversed," Lois said, giving her eldest daughter one of the looks that had at one time cast fear into the hearts of strong men. Cara just returned the stare with a smile. "But Martha won't be able to see any of you."

Christie shook her head. "That's not a good idea," she said. "In the first place, you can't fool Grandma Martha. In the second place, Dad has got to be the worst, most awful liar on this or any other planet."

Lois looked at her husband. "I'll do the talking," she said.

"Better hurry," Cara said. "I bet she's already suspicious."

Clark placed his c-card on the table, making sure it was oriented correctly. "Answer call," he said. Martha Kent's smiling face appeared on the screen.

"Took you long enough," she said. "You know, at my age you can't keep me waiting around like that. Who knows what could happen?"

"Sure, Martha," Lois said. "You'd probably just wander off and write another best selling book."

"Hmmp," Martha said. "Look who's talking. It's been five years since my last book, and you two write one every two weeks or so."

"Quality instead of quantity," Lois said.

Martha's gaze seemed to focus on Clark. "You look a little nervous today, Son. Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine, Mom," Clark said. "I'm just glad to see your beautiful face again. How's Jillian?"

"Jillian's fine," she said. "Honey, my face has more wrinkles than Kansas has wheat fields, but I appreciate the sentiment." Martha stopped and studied her son and daughter-in-law. She seemed to be considering her next words carefully.

"So, Clark," she said softly. "Have you gone flying under your own power yet?" A beat or two of stunned silence. "Why

don't you expand the viewing field so I can see the rest of the crowd?"

Lois and Clark could see their daughters leaning against each other, trying to keep their laughter silent and not quite succeeding. Cara reached over and touched an icon on the c-card screen. "Panoramic view," she said.

The flat screen display turned into circle and Martha looked around the room.

"Hi, Jim and Lucy. Cara. Christie. Good to see you all." She peered at the two strangers for a few seconds. "And last, but not least, Charlie and Wanda." Martha's eyes twinkled and her smile rearranged her wrinkles into familiar patterns. "Welcome to our universe."

Cara and Christie could no longer contain their laughter.

"So much for fooling Grandma Martha," Christie said.

"And sparing her any shock," Cara finished.

"Girls, don't tease your parents," Martha said. She shifted her attention. "I want everyone at my house within the next ten minutes or so. Charlie, you get your ship and give a ride to those who can't fly." She looked at Clark. "Yet." She waved to them and broke the connection.

Clark looked more than a little stunned. He shook his head and looked up at the ceiling as if praying for divine help.

"After all these years," he said. "My mom never ceases to amaze me."

"You have a ship?" Christie asked Charlie.

"How do you think he got here?" Cara said.

"I don't know. Flew, maybe?"

"Girls, please," Lois said.

"Wait, you're this Superman character, right?" Cara asked.

Charlie nodded.

"Do you have a costume like Ultrax?" Christie asked.

"Uh, yes," Charlie admitted reluctantly. He didn't need psychic powers to guess what came next.

"Can we see it?" "Change into the costume, please?" "What color is it?" "Where did you get it?" "Is it really tight like Ultrax's?" "Do you have a cape? Grandma Martha says it's not a superhero costume without a cape."

Charlie held up his hands. "Yes. Okay. Blue, mostly. My mom made it for me. Unfortunately. Yes. My Martha likes capes, too."

"Let me go into the bathroom to change and I'll be right back," Charlie said.

"Why not do your spin change?" Wanda asked.

Charlie's face turned red. "Because," he said, moving closer and lowering his voice. "I'm getting undressed and dressed during the spin and at some point I'm not wearing — much of anything. Normally, I move so fast that no one can see me, but there are at least three people besides me in this room who have the ability to see motion at that speed." Wanda looked a little embarrassed herself.

"Go into the bathroom," she said.

Charlie walked to the bathroom, closed the door, then immediately opened it and returned to the living room. He crossed his arms and put on his best Superman face, mainly because that was the only way to maintain his composure and not have his face turn the color of a cooked beet. He wondered which one would laugh first.

"Wow!" Cara and Christie said together.

"That is great," Cara told him.

Christie touched his arm, looking at the material. "I have got to get me one of these!" she said.

"We'll talk about this later," Clark said.

"Dad, your football uniform was tighter than this," Cara said.

"Yeah," Christie said. "Mom told us millions of people watching you on tv could see your -"

"That's enough, girls," Lois interrupted quickly. "Martha is

expecting us."

"Be right back," Charlie said as he opened the door, then disappeared in a blue red streak. A few seconds later, he reappeared, already changed back to his civilian clothes. "The ship is outside. The interior space isn't much more than one of those big RV's, but I think we can all get inside."

"Not us," Cara said.

"We're flying to Grandma's on our own." Christie crossed her arms, ready to argue the point.

Clark and Lois held hands and seemed to sigh together.

"Well, you flew a couple of hundred miles from Kansas State to get here," Lois said. "I guess you handle a few more miles to Martha's."

"Be careful," Clark said. "Watch for birds and planes, and try to avoid being seen by anyone on the ground."

"Yes, Daddy Hen," they said together. Cara laughed and said, "Maybe we'll just stay behind the alien spaceship that's going our way."

"Good plan," Christie said.

Jim and Lucy walked out ahead of the others and were staring at the spaceship when they all came out.

"What do you think?" Wanda asked them.

"It sort of looks like an Easter egg with three legs," Jim said.

"This has to be a Dr. Klein design," Lucy said, walking around the ship. "He must have this thing for egg-shaped machines in your universe, too. Something to do with the condition of his cranium, I suspect." She shook her head. "What was he thinking? The man is a genius, but I can't say much for his sense of aesthetics."

"Well, in Dr. Klein's defense, we didn't have a lot of time to get ready," Wanda said. "This was supposed to be a prototype testing the concept, not an actual working spaceship. There wasn't even a place to install the engines, so Charlie had to supply all the motive power."

Cara and Christie followed them out onto the lawn and studied the ship. "It's got one definite advantage over the run of the mill UFO," Cara said.

"Yeah," Christie agreed. "Who's going to report a flying Easter egg? And who would believe them if they did?"

Cara held out her hand. "Time to show them what we learned, baby sister."

Christie took her hand. "After you, elder sister."

They rose a few feet off the ground, and began slowly turning in a circle, hands still joined. Then they drifted higher, turning as they went so their paths traced a giant double helix shape. They threw back their free arms, arced their backs, released their grips and did a back flip and rejoined their hands. They continued circling a common point, their attitude changing until they were parallel to the ground, then upside down, then parallel again, and right side up. Floating about twenty feet off they ground, they posed again, like ice skaters completing a routine.

"It's like a ballet," Wanda said.

"I knew all those lessons would be good for something," Lois said.

"Beautiful," Clark said. Wanda thought she could detect just the least bit of envy in his voice.

"Want to try, Dad?" Christie asked as they landed beside him. "We'll help."

"Go ahead," Lois told him. "You've been telling me about those dreams for years, and here's your chance in real life. If it's anything like what you described then you have to do it. You have no choice."

"But Mom's waiting. And Charlie and Wanda —" he said.

"Martha will understand, and Charlie and Wanda are on my side," Lois said. The young couple nodded and moved closer to each other.

"I don't know," Clark said.

The girls stood on each side of him. “Dad,” Christie said. “Hug your daughters.” They all knew that was an offer he couldn’t refuse. The three of them wrapped their arms around each other with well practiced ease. After a couple of seconds, they slowly rose into the air until they were about fifteen feet above the others.

“Did you do that, Cara?” Christie asked.

“Not me, Sis,” she said.

Clark smiled tentatively. “I think it was me,” he said. “This just feels so — so right.”

The girls kissed him on either cheek and pulled away from him, both of them holding a hand until they finally broke contact. All three drifted above the others, looking at each other in wonder.

“I’m flying,” Clark said. “I’m actually flying.” His voice was a low whisper, as if the slightest wrong move or intrusion from the real world would cause the fantasy bubble to burst. He held his arms out as though trying to maintain his balance on a rickety platform.

“Technically, that’s more like floating,” Charlie said, rising beside his older counterpart. “Flying requires that you actually go somewhere, I think.” Clark nodded and moved horizontally a few feet. “Good start,” Charlie said. “Follow me.” He grinned at Clark’s startled look. “Don’t worry, I’ll go slow so you can keep up.” Wanda knew that was exactly the wrong and the right thing to say to Clark the competitive athlete. As Charlie rose into the air, slowly at first but slowly increasing his speed, Clark watched him with narrowed eyes and lips pressed tightly together. He began awkwardly, but after a few seconds followed Charlie as he made a series of wide turns. Charlie increased his velocity to just shy of super speed, but Clark matched him turn for turn.

“I think he’s adjusting well to this,” Lois said.

“How about you?” Wanda asked her.

“Well, I’ve always thought he was exceptional. If you look at his career as an athlete and a journalist, you might wonder how a mere mortal could accomplish so much.” She shrugged. “Now, I guess I know how.”

“Lucy,” Wanda said to get her attention. She had been busy watching the flying game of tag above them. “Do you think there was enough of the right kind of radiation getting through the cloud to make Clark and the girls more than human? Is that why they were such fantastic athletes?”

“It’s hard to say,” Lucy said thoughtfully. “Over the years, there have probably been fluctuations in the amount of yellow solar radiation reaching the earth just because the cloud is not a homogeneous mass. But I never heard of any variations in their athletic ability from either Clark or the girls.”

“Maybe Kryptonians are naturally more advanced physically than humans,” Lois said.

“Speaking of which,” Wanda said casually. “Did I happen to mention that you may not be completely human?”

Lois slowly turned toward Wanda and stared at her.

“I thought I may have forgotten to tell you that,” Wanda said.

“Surprise. I’ll fill you in on the way to Martha’s.”

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Martha stood for a moment in the guest bedroom and fingered the dark, royal blue of the material, wondering how Clark would react when he saw it, before returning to the living room. H. G. hadn’t specifically mentioned a costume except in reference to the other universe Clark. But then he had made a point of describing it in detail. Though this was one was similar to his description, she had made a number of changes appropriate for a fifty-seven year old’s body and the reality of a world that had never known true super heroes. Though she was looking forward to seeing “Charlie” in costume, she didn’t think the skin tight pseudo spandex would work in their world. Besides, Clark was a celebrity in his own right because of his athletic and

journalistic career. He couldn’t suddenly start wearing glasses and expect people not to recognize him when he took them off and combed his hair back. And then there was Cara and Christie. If three heroes showed up at once, two young ladies and an older — though remarkably fit — man, even the densest of the media would be able to connect the dots and deduce who they were.

There were no obvious arch villains or world wide crime organizations in their world, and compared to the description of Charlie’s world, her universe was a few steps closer to the Wells’ Utopia. But even forgetting the possibility of danger to Clark and his family — including her — none of them would have another moment of privacy. Their lives would never be their own again.

Men and women who could fly? Impossible. It must be a hoax or some kind of trick.

Like Superman did in his world, Clark had to establish another persona that could not be connected in anyway to him or Lois and the girls. Martha sighed. And Cara and Christie, too. If she knew them, there was no way they would stand on the sidelines and let disasters — natural or otherwise - risk life and property without trying to help.

So Martha started with the bulletproof material developed by WayneTech.

The material was tight enough, but being thicker than regular cloth, there would be none of the sharply defined musculature that Superman’s costume displayed. It was more conventionally styled. A sweatshirt type tunic with belted pants that tucked into dark red boots similar to trail runners. Footwear that Clark was already accustomed to wearing. The whole effect of the costume was that it would be harder to see at night, except for the gold “S” symbol on the upper left chest. It was smaller than Superman’s, at least according to Wells’ description, but displayed the symbol of the house of El.

Martha had so wanted a cape, but finally settled for a modified overcoat of the Wayne material that had no buttons and was not meant to be buttoned, but hung loosely around his body. A high collar helped conceal Clark even more, but that was the real innovation in hiding his identity. Bruce Wayne had been working with Martha without asking why she needed the devices she requested. She was rich enough in her own right to pay for the development of the shadow masks if need be, but Bruce had been happy to help her. As long as she promised to eventually explain what was going on.

The shadow mask circuitry was woven into the fabric of his tunic, with tiny projectors near the collar. She hoped that the durability of the fabric and the aura that supposedly surrounded a fully powered Kryptonian would protect the devices. Bruce guaranteed that nothing short of a major explosion could damage them in any case, so she was not too worried.

The shadow mask projected an illusion of darkness around Clark’s features, even in the brightest sunlight. Any one looking at him or photographing him would see nothing but darkness around his eyes, nose and mouth, the major features used in identifying someone. It also almost imperceptibly altered his voice. He would still have to slick back the hair, she supposed, but there were more than a few slightly gray haired men in the world, so she was not too concerned about that. She considered trying to design some sort of hat, but finally decided that it would be too easy to lose even if he was not flying.

It was not Superman, and she did not even know whether Clark would use the name. It was rather pretentious and presumptuous, after all. And the connection to Nietzsche’s Superman was unfortunate, since both Clark and “Charlie” were polar opposites of a being no longer affected by “pity, suffering, tolerance of the weak.” If anything, Martha hoped that he would go by his Kryptonian name, and explain the significance of the symbol of the House of El. It was just a coincidence that it looked like the English letter “S.”



Superman/Kal-El had no history or tradition in this world. Clark may decide he doesn't want to do the "flights and tights" thing even without the tights. Or maybe make only occasional appearances when his help was critical.

Cara and Christie were different stories. Martha was sure Clark was going to have his hands full keeping their feet on the ground. Maybe she was going to be guilty of encouraging them when they saw the costumes she had made for them, but she had a feeling that if she did not give them something, they would end up flying around in ski suits and ski masks, fighting crime and rescuing people from natural disasters until something happened that revealed who they were to the world.

Using the same WayneTech material and shadow mask technology, she had made two costumes for the heroes she tentatively named Cobalt and Crimson for Cara and Christie, respectively. They were variations of Clark's outfit, though — of course — Cobalt's was predominately blue and Crimson's was red. Both had an unobtrusive House of El symbol on the belt of the costumes, with short half-capes that reached their waists. Martha sighed again. She had a feeling they would think the costumes were a bit corny, and not nearly tight enough, but she would let them fight that battle with their Dad.

Martha heard voices outside and realized with a start that they had arrived. Where had the time gone? She had figured they would spend more time letting Clark buzz around the house before coming over. She looked at the clock and was surprised at the passage of time. She had been daydreaming again, an annoying habit she had developed over the past few years.

Another indication that it might be time to retire and spend what time she had left with her extraordinary family.

The business woman in her could not help wondering for a second how the appearance of an actual flying super hero would affect sales of Ultrax. Would it make the series more popular, or relegate him to the fickle scrapheap of past fantasies? She had no idea. But it would be interesting to find out.

She smiled at the excited voices outside, and touched a button that projected her image and voice to them.

"Are you coming in any time soon?" she asked. "There's a lot we have to talk about, and I'm sure Charlie and Wanda are anxious to find their way home, too. The door's open, you know."

"Coming, Mom," Clark said.

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Wanda thought that Martha's home was more starkly furnished than Lois and Clark's. Somehow, it seemed more ultra modern than their more conventional house, which would not have looked out of place in their version of Metropolis. This looked like a house of the future that she would have expected to find here. So many things were similar or even the same, but thirty extra years of history inevitably made changes in the world. The books were one example. The credit card sized computers were another. The biggest difference was space travel.

Though it had no direct bearing on their current problem, the fact that this universe had functioning solar power satellites in orbit, a well established settlement on the moon, and even a small outpost on Mars helped in those first few minutes of panic when their Earth seemed to vanish into nothingness. A quick scan of radio frequencies told them that the Earth was well and intact, but shifted in its orbit somehow. A few more minutes of listening, and the gleaming necklace of pearl-like powersats told them they were nowhere near their Kansas anymore. It was more of a difference than only thirty years of history could account for, Wanda thought, and showed what different national leadership could accomplish. More than a few politicians would rather pander short term to special interests than plan for the long term good of everyone. Of course the scare they got with Nightfall and no Superman to save them might have triggered an interest in space travel, but their own universe had a similar scare and a

living, breathing alien in their midst for more incentive. No, there was something fundamental that made this universe more space friendly.

Since that day on the spaceship when she realized that in order for humanity to survive, it must be ready to meet the universe head on, it was almost as if some switch had been thrown inside her head. Earlier, while they were flying to Martha's, she found her eyes drawn to the sky and she felt a strange mixture of apprehension and anticipation. She unconsciously touched her abdomen. There was something she was thinking about just before they jumped into this universe. Something to do with her baby and Clark and space travel.

She noticed that everyone was quiet, and Martha was staring at her curiously. Evidently, the older woman had asked her a question, and Wanda had not heard a word.

She couldn't get over how much Martha looked like the Martha Kent she remembered, even if she was three decades older. She seemed smaller and frailer, but still more full of life than any five normal people she knew.

"Oh," Wanda said. "I'm sorry. I completely zoned out there for a few minutes."

"Baby on your mind?" Martha asked.

"And a few million other things," Wanda said. "What did I miss while I was away?"

"Nothing important," Martha said with a smile. "I was just trying to embarrass my son."

"And you do it so well, Mom," Clark said.

"I have so little to amuse me these days," Martha told him. She looked back at Wanda. "I asked you what you thought of how your husband might look in thirty years or so."

Wanda grinned, too, looking back and forth between the two men. "I think I have a lot to look forward to."

"You better believe it," Lois agreed.

"On the other hand," Charlie said, looking at Lois. "I think my future looks very inviting, too." He leaned over and kissed Wanda.

After only a few minutes, they had quickly established that not only was Martha aware of everything that had happened that day, but she knew about Wanda/Lois and Charlie/Clark and his alter ego. Before anyone could ask, she had assured them she found out about Superman only after Ultrax was well established.

Wanda looked at the group gathered in Martha's living room. Lucy sat in a large stuffed chair, with Jim perched beside her on the arm. They had made a quick call home to check on the kids and to make sure the boys hadn't opened a wormhole to Mars and shoved Connie through. She had assured them that all was well, and the boys were winding down from a long day of adventures that would have gotten them grounded for a couple of years if Lucy had seen them. Jim and Lucy just grinned at each other after they ended the call.

All four of the local Kent clan were seated together on the sofa, almost huddling together for comfort. It looked as though the one Kryptonian and the two semi-Kryptonians were dealing with more super power problems. Christie rubbed her eyes as if seeing things that weren't there, and Cara held her hands over her ears, trying to shut out a suddenly noisy world. Clark looked afraid to touch anything after what happened to the cup of tea he had tried to lift earlier. It had shattered like a paper-thin eggshell in his hand. Every move he made was slow and measured. It was worse than a bull in a china shop. He acted like a man living in a world made of tissue paper.

Even her own husband, sitting beside her in the comfortable loveseat, looked a little uneasy. If they had never stumbled into this world, and the resident Kents had never heard of "Wanda and Charlie" and Superman, they would still be facing the same problems and scary future. But Charlie was probably sitting there, trying to figure a way to make it his fault. She loved him

dearly, but he always had this Atlas complex that compelled him to take the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Of them all, only Martha Kent seemed completely calm and assured. Wanda figured it had something to do with her as yet unexplained grasp of the entire super-hero and alternate world situation. The older woman was brilliantly imaginative, but no more so than the Martha Kent she was familiar with. She had just focused her energies in a different direction. How did she know so much? It was almost as though she could somehow see into the future. And suddenly, Wanda knew exactly what was going on. Martha turned and met her eyes and nodded slightly.

“Do you know a small man with a bowler who talks with a British accent and looks at his pocket watch a lot?” Wanda asked Martha.

“Almost,” Martha smiled. “H. G. Wells in my world is a rather rotund fellow who is intensely focused on what he perceives to be the inevitable human utopia. He’s an avowed socialist. Cynical at times. One moment he loves all of humanity, and the next he is disgusted at their ignorance.”

“Mom,” Clark said. “You’re talking about him in the present tense. Hasn’t he been dead almost eighty years?”

“Sometimes,” Martha replied. “You never know with a time traveler. Most of what I know — or think I know — comes from a rather long letter he left me. But let’s proceed according to plan.” She turned to Lucy. “Dear, I think you have something to tell us about parallel worlds.”

Lucy looked a little startled, then took a deep breath. “Well, I have been thinking about it since Wanda and Charlie showed up.”

“Let’s see if you’re better at explaining to laymen than Bernie is,” Wanda said.

“Okay,” Lucy said. “But that’s not setting the bar too high, you know.” She paused a second before continuing.

“Even before the appearance of these youngsters,” she said, nodding toward Charlie and Wanda, “the existence of parallel worlds has been generally accepted by the scientific community. There’s some question about which of the parallel worlds theories is correct, but it’s also possible that some or all of them are true. And that’s without even going into M-theory and multidimensional branes.”

“There’s more than one way that a parallel universe can exist?” Wanda asked.

“Well, yes,” Lucy said. “It’s almost required by the laws of physics.” Both Lois and Wanda had almost identical looks of disbelief.

“For example, by some theories, the universe is infinite. If that is true, then in all of infinity, it is inevitable that there is an identical world just like this one with exactly the same people doing exactly the same things down to the atomic level. Humans aren’t really equipped to understand infinity, of course. Even the physicists have a hard time realizing what it really means, and we should know better. There could be an infinite number of parallel worlds just like this one except that on an atomic level, a particular atom careens off in a different direction from the other ones. These worlds are indistinguishable on a macroscopic level. Even a Superman couldn’t tell them apart. But then we get an infinite number of worlds that are the same except for one small event that you could see if you looked for it. Then an infinite number of worlds in every possible shape and configuration to the other end of the scale, until we get to parallel worlds that are unrecognizable to humanity.”

“I don’t know that you’re doing much better than Bernie,” Lois told her sister. “Why aren’t we overflowing with worlds piled on top of each other?”

“Because in this theory, the universe is infinite,” Lucy said. “These parallel worlds are impossibly distant from us and we would never be able to reach them by any conceivable method of transportation. The currently accepted number is ten to tenth to

the one hundred fifteenth meters away.”

“I think you’re right,” Lois said. “Humans aren’t equipped to understand infinity. What about other kinds of parallel worlds?”

“There’s the old quantum mechanics standby,” Lucy said. “Every time there is an event with more than one possible outcome, quantum mechanics requires that the universe split into parallel dimensions where every possibility is reality. Think of space time as limbs on an ever branching tree. Every time an uncertainty of outcome exists, the universe splits again.”

“Are you saying that if I decide to eat pizza instead of Chinese, then the entire universe branches?” Wanda asked. This was almost as unbelievable as the infinite universe thing. “A new universe is created?”

“Yes,” Lucy said. “Again, this is on a macroscopic level. The fact is that every atom in every chunk of matter in our universe creates a new universe depending on whether it randomly changes its energy state or not. The uncertainty principle requires -”

“Wait a second,” Lois interrupted. “How is this different from the infinite universe idea? Seems like you end up with an infinite number of worlds in either case.”

Lucy looked uncomfortable. “I’m not explaining this as well as I had hoped, and it’s not easy without understanding the math behind the concepts.” She shook her head. “Here, we’re assuming that we started with one finite universe that began branching at the instant of the big bang, and has continued branching since then. Even the quantum state of a hydrogen atom in a star millions of light years away causes this branching. But — and this is an important ‘but’ — no matter how large the number of universes become, it will never approach infinity because we started with a finite universe. I could show you a calculation based on the latest and best guesses about how many universes there might be, but it would be a meaningless number that none of us really understand anyway.”

“Sort of like infinity,” Wanda said.

“Yes,” Lucy said. “But less.”

“That’s two theories,” Lois said. “Are there more?”

“Yes,” Lucy said with a sigh. “The eternal inflation theory is another type of infinite universe scenario. This postulates an infinitely expanding multiverse where bubble universes constantly form in the denser concentrations of energy. A continuous stream of big bangs forming those multiple universes. This particular idea is supported by measurements of the dark energy in our universe, and the math required to accommodate string theory. Astronomers at the lunar observatory on the far side of the moon think they have detected ripples in the background radiation of the universe caused by the collision with another universe a few nanoseconds after the big bang. The last major theory is a mostly mathematical treatment that supposedly covers every conceivable alternate dimension, even those with different laws of physics.”

Charlie stood. “Is that even possible?” he asked.

“It’s even probable,” Lucy said. “There may be universes where a subtle shift in the laws of physics can cause extraordinary results. For example, there may be a universe whose physical laws make the existence of Ultrax or Superman impossible. In this hypothetical universe, the inhabitants of a heavy gravity planet like Krypton may be short and stocky and not look human at all. And if even they did look human, and they did come to Earth, they probably would not have superpowers any more than any normal Earthling.” She stopped and grinned. “Until today, I would have said we lived in that universe.”

“Given present company,” Martha said, “I don’t think any of us doubt the reality of alternate universes. Based on experiences that I and Charlie and Wanda have had, we can also add time travel, life on other worlds, and associated phenomenon like faster than light travel.”

"We've fallen into one of Grandma's comics," Cara said.

"Yeah, and we don't know who the bad guy is," Christie.

"That has us a little worried, too," Charlie said. "There seems to be someone with access to alien technology that's like nothing we've ever seen before. They have recruited human accomplices and are trying to kill us, and they don't care about any collateral damage. If they had succeeded before we could use the fusion impeller, then not only earth, but the entire solar system would have been destroyed."

Lois shook her head. "I wonder if their human goons know about that?"

"Not likely," Wanda said. "Whoever is doing this is relying on fear and xenophobia."

"What about the tech?" Lucy asked. "You said it wasn't earth built or anything like Kryptonian science you've seen."

"No," Charlie answered. "I caught a glimpse of other alien equipment that had been collected by the Kryptonians, and even that thing that was sent to kill me had its own type of technology. But the stuff we saw on the ship seemed somehow more advanced. Alien, yet there was something else about it."

"Time traveler," Jim said. He had been quiet for so long that it almost startled the other others when he spoke. They looked at him curiously. "Hey, you guys already said it's possible. If this science is alien, with a little extra something, maybe the stuff is from the future. Maybe you're dealing with an advanced, time traveling alien psychopath from the future."

"You know," Charlie said, "you might be right. That could explain how they fooled my vision powers and a lot of other things."

"Like how they've managed to stay one step ahead of us," Wanda said. "How do you fight a time traveler?"

"We beat Tempus," Charlie pointed out.

"Even that murderous cretin isn't in the same league with someone willing to destroy a solar system," Wanda said.

"The question is," Martha said, "why is this madman from the future so determined to kill you two?" She looked at them expectantly.

Wanda and Charlie glanced at each other.

"Because sometime in the future," Charlie said.

"We're going to do something that will make him, her, or it very angry," Wanda continued.

"Angry enough to not care who else is hurt as long as he can get to us," Charlie finished.

"You guys live too far out on the edge for me," Cara said, shaking her head.

"Cheer up, big sister," Christie said. "I have a feeling our own lives may be more exciting in the next few years."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Cara replied. "But we don't have murderous aliens, runaway asteroids, and evil geniuses on every street corner."

Christie smiled sweetly and said, "Yet."

Cara shook her head again.

Martha seemed amused by her granddaughters. "You two will do okay," she told them. "As far as I know, there's nothing like Kryptonite on our world. According to reliable sources, Krypton was completely vaporized when its star exploded. Yes, I know," she continued quickly, holding up her hand at Charlie. "In your universe, just the planet exploded. Another difference between our realities. But it makes me feel a little better about these tykes flying off to save the world."

"Tell me about it," Lois said. "Wanda has Superman to worry about, but I'm going to have three times as many headaches. At least you don't have any girls in tights out looking for a fight."

"Yet," Christie repeated, smiling again.

"Wanda will have her own children to worry over soon enough," Martha said. "But we have to get her back to her own universe before then unless she's going to immigrate here."

"I miss home," Wanda admitted. Charlie leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

"We'll get back, sweetheart," he told her.

"You certainly will," Martha said firmly. "Clark, answer the door for me."

They all looked at her, then at the door.

"No, I'm not senile," she said, smiling. "It's just time for our last guest to arrive." Then the door sensor chimed and a screen opened on the surface of the door.

"Dr. Klein," Lucy said. "What's he doing here?" Clark went to meet him at the door.

"He's here to help you install some special equipment in Wanda and Charlie's ship," Martha said. "He and I have been working on this for quite a while. He has developed something he thinks will help Charlie and Wanda defeat the alien stealth technology using some sort of neutrino detector."

"Well, any kind of power source they might use probably emits neutrinos, so that's possible," Lucy said, "if there was an easy way to detect neutrinos. But they aren't called the ghost particles for nothing."

"Never underestimate Bernie," Martha said.

"Somebody talking about me?" Dr. Klein asked, walking into the living room with Clark. His right hand gripped a cane tightly, and he lifted it to point at Lucy. "Listen to Martha. She's smarter than any of those geniuses you've got working down at the lab."

"So I'm learning," Lucy muttered.

"Lucy, why don't you take Jim and the girls and help Bernie install the equipment?" Martha said. It was more of a command than a suggestion. Lucy took the hint and stood.

She looked at her nieces. "Cara and Christie can supply the muscles for heavy lifting and Bernie and I will supply the brains."

"What about me?" Jim asked.

"You supply the beauty, sweetums," Lucy told him. "Or maybe fetch us sandwiches and coffee when we need them."

"I had more of a management position in mind," Jim said. "With this rowdy bunch, you will need a supervisor to keep things moving."

"Hmm," Lucy said. "You may be right. C'mon, ladies. Let's put that newly found strength to work." Bernie took the lead and Lucy walked beside him, already asking about the neutrino detector. Jim offered an elbow to each of the girls.

"I'm not sure what we're getting into out there," he told them. "But I'm depending on you to help me keep those two focused." They laughed as they followed them out.

"Bernie will explain about the new equipment later," Martha told them as the others left.

"Mom, how do you know so much detail about what's going on?" Clark asked. "How did H. G. Wells know?"

"Both questions have the same answer," Martha said. "H. G. left a very detailed letter based on memoirs I will apparently write in the next few years. He said it won't be published for a few more decades but it apparently has enough information to make me look like a wrinkly Nostradamus. I guess that means I'll have to make sure it does."

Clark walked to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "How did you do it?" he asked her. "Keeping this to yourself for so many years must have been a terrible burden."

"Not so much when your father was here," she said, smiling and staring into space as though reliving a distant memory. "But knowing this day was coming and that you and Lois and your counterparts would be needing my help has been a great motivator."

"Do we need to bring Lucy back in to explain the relationship between time travel and cause and effect?" Wanda asked. "I feel like I'm in the middle of a real life chicken and egg scenario. Which came first? This whole sequence of events or your

memoirs? Did all this ever happen without the benefit of the letter from H. G.?"

"Jonathan and I pondered that very question many times," Martha said. "Our best guess is that originally, there was no book from the future and no letter from H. G. and that things did not turn out well for either Clark and Lois, or you and Charlie, or all of you." Her eyes looked a bit shiny. "I'm not sure Clark survived his ship's explosion the first time around. From what you've said and what I've seen, I think it's a pretty good bet that the H. G.'s are not above tampering with events if the outcome doesn't suit them."

"Which brings us back to our dilemma," Charlie said. "Is Bernie installing anything that will help us get back?"

"Yes," Martha said. "But it's not quite that simple."

"Our H. G. had all sorts of dimensional hopping gadgets," Wanda said.

"So did the local version," Martha said. "But the technology that brought you here is very unlike their own. There was a lot of detail about vibrational frequencies and phase discrimination, but what it means is that we can't 'tune' in that other universe with the technology H. G. left us. It's like trying to get an FM station on an AM radio."

"Mom, that analogy goes back quite a few years," Clark said.

"Well, I could have said it's like trying to watch digital television on an analog TV, but I don't think Charlie and Wanda's universe has been through that particular pain and pleasure yet."

"Does that mean we can't go home?" Wanda asked. Charlie put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"No," Martha said. Her eyes were suddenly shiny with unshed tears. "It means that Clark has to help you get home." She grasped Clark's hand. "And I'm not sure he will survive the attempt."

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked. "Didn't H. G. say what happened?"

"He said it was dangerous," Martha said. "And that it will strain Clark's new abilities to their limit. But he didn't say how it would turn out except that Charlie and Wanda would go on their way. Then the letter ends."

"Nothing else?" Charlie asked.

"Not much," Martha answered. "Just a bit of cryptic advice. 'Listen to the twins.' That's it."

"We're not going to let Clark do something that will endanger his life," Wanda said. "No matter what this universe's H. G. Wells says." Charlie nodded his agreement.

"We have a say in this, too," Lois said.

"Right," Clark said. "You two need to get back to your world for a lot of reasons. Your baby, for one. Your universe needs you, for another. Your family and friends need you, too. Besides, we don't even know what I have to do."

"You have to help propel the ship," Martha said, lowering her eyes. "Charlie will be strapped into his harness, and you will be pushing from the outside, and the two of you have to combine your auras and strengths to reach speeds that neither of you could manage alone." He voice became lower. "Charlie and Wanda will be inside the ship and protected during the attempt. Clark will not. His own aura may shield him, but I — I'm not sure what will happen."

"We'll find another way," Charlie said firmly. "Nobody's taking a risk like that."

"H. G. warned me about free will," Martha said. "But from his viewpoint you've already lost this argument. The only way you will return home is with super-powered help. Clark is not as strong as you yet, but his powers are growing by the hour. When the time comes, it will strain his abilities and body to his limits, but he will succeed."

"I've been a competitive athlete all my life," Clark said. "I've learned that drive and attitude are just as important as ability. Too

many times I've seen evenly matched contests where the deciding factor was the will to win. I can do this. I will do this."

"You're just learning to use these abilities," Charlie argued. "I'm not sure you will be strong enough, or at least skilled enough, to reach the speed Martha is talking about. It will take so much raw power -"

"Which we have," Cara interrupted. She and Christie were standing just inside the door.

"How much have you heard?" Martha asked them.

"Everything," Christie answered, pointing at her ear. "This darned hearing is tough enough to turn off even when I want to."

"You were eavesdropping," Clark said.

"Just staying in the loop," Cara said. "What would be difficult for one super powered guy should be a cinch for three of us. We're going to help."

"No," Clark said. "I forbid it."

"Dad," Christie said, a note of warning in her voice.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Technically, you are adults, but I strongly advise against this." He turned to his mother. "What did H. G. say about them helping?"

"Nothing," Martha replied. "But he didn't tell me everything. He specifically said that there were some things I would have to learn for myself."

"It's settled, then," Cara said. "We're going to give them a boost."

"From what little I know about the procedure," Martha said, "the twins may make the difference between success and failure, and at the same time, greatly reduce the danger. We'll have to ask Bernie and Lucy's opinions."

"If they say there is any danger to Cara and Christie, then I'm going to put my foot down," Clark said.

"That may be easier if you're not floating a foot above the floor," Lois pointed out. Clark looked down and slowly settled to the carpet. "Maybe you should think about working on your control a little. How would it look if you were chewing out one of the reporters from somewhere near the ceiling?" The girls were whispering to each other and laughing. "That also goes for you two. I think I'm going to hold my breath the entire time you're out on the court this Saturday." Without specifically saying so, Lois had made the point that they were going to do this, and that life would go on - not normally, because nothing in their life would ever be normal again. But it would go on.

Clark nodded to her.

"We can't ask you to do this," Wanda said. "It's too dangerous."

"More dangerous than facing a homicidal time traveling alien?" Lois asked. "Would you hesitate to do the same for us?"

"No," Wanda said quietly, finally surrendering to the inevitable.

"Hey, what happened to our help?" Lucy called from the doorway. "Not that it matters. Bernie's equipment was pretty much plug and play once the girls moved it into position."

"Lucy," Martha said. "We have to ask you and Bernie a few questions."

They started explaining about the twins volunteering to help, but Bernie stopped her.

"I had already figured this would happen," he said. "This would have been difficult to the point of lethality if Clark had tried it alone. With three of them, the danger is minimal, and the chance of success is maximal. Is that a word? I'm sure it is. Never mind. If I hadn't been sure they were going to offer to help, I would have suggested it long before now." He turned to the girls.

"I built the rift generator based on notes left by H. G.," Bernie told them. "Implicit in the design specs and math is the assumption that at least three of you would be pushing from the outside. Our friend Wells may not have told Martha, but the math

said otherwise.”

Martha nodded as though unsurprised. “It seems that Mr. Wells doesn’t always reveal everything he knows,” she said.

“Tell me about it,” Wanda said. “In whatever universe, that man can be a pain.”

“I was going to wait until later for this,” Martha continued. “But since all three of you will be flying all over creation, you girls better get those packages I left in your rooms. Clark, yours is in the guest bedroom.”

“Martha has a bedroom for each of the girls so they always have a place to stay when they visit,” Lois explained.

“Don’t tell me it’s a —” Clark began.

“Oh, Clark, just go get it and put it on,” Martha ordered.

“You can complain later.”

A small explosion of wind ruffled their hair as Clark and the girls disappeared in a burst of speed.

“Well, they got that part right,” Wanda said just as they reappeared.

“This is so cool!” Christie said. “Come on, old lady,” she said to Cara. “Admit that this has to be the coolest thing ever.”

“Okay, you win,” Cara said, looking at her blue costume. “It’s cool.”

“It makes you look older,” Clark said. “And it hugs every curve, and that shorty cape doesn’t hide anything.”

“Dad,” Christie warned.

“Okay,” Clark said, sighing. “At least it’s not skin tight.”

“Yet,” Christie said. Clark looked at her sharply.

“But the uniforms are aerodynamic enough for high speed flying,” Martha said. “Also, you will need something to hide who you are.”

“Mom, I don’t think these costumes do a whole lot to hide our identities,” Clark said. “I’m just Clark Kent in dark clothes and an overcoat.”

“There’s a button on your lapel,” Martha said, “and one on the girls’ belts. You will have to push them firmly to activate the shadow mask technology.” She turned to Lois and Wanda. “Bruce Wayne wondered why I specified a switch with a five hundred pound pressure threshold.”

The faces of all three faded into a featureless shadow.

“Neat,” Cara said. “Wow, what was that?”

“It also alters your voice,” Martha told her.

“My genius mom,” Clark said.

“And now,” Martha said, her smile returning. “It’s time to send you two youngsters home.”

Outside, Bernie and Lucy briefed them on the use of the neutrino detector and how to scan for cloaked ships. It reminded Wanda of the gadgets she had seen in the Star Trek movies and television shows.

“The dimensional gate will activate automatically when you reach the proper velocity,” Bernie told them.

“Sort of like the DeLorean in ‘Back to the Future,’” Wanda said.

“Yes,” Bernie said. “I guess it is at that. I haven’t seen that movie in years, but I always identified with Dr. Brown -”

“Bernie,” Lucy said quietly.

“Oh, sorry,” he said. “According to the notes left by H. G. Wells, the release point is critical so that Clark and the girls don’t get caught up in the dimensional rift. That’s one reason that three of them will succeed where one might have failed. When the rainbow appears near the bow of the ship, you will have to give it one final shove, then back away quickly. If Clark did this by himself, he would have to stay with the ship longer, and increase his chance of being caught in the rift. Three of you will be able to give it that final, triple-powered push and fly away with time to spare.”

“Won’t we be in space by then?” Cara asked.

“Cool,” Christie said.

“Yes. Yes, you will,” Bernie answered. “Probably half way to the moon when you release the ship. From what Charlie has told us, the outer space environment won’t bother you, and you should be able to hold your breath for at least twenty minutes. If this takes more than five minutes, then something is not working and you better get back anyway.”

“Count on it,” Clark said.

Wanda stared at nothing, picturing the ship moving away from the earth with the girls and this world’s Clark pushing it. She touched her abdomen and was unaware that she was gently moving her hand in small circles.

“Wanda,” Martha said. “What is it?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was thinking about Clark and the girls out in space, for some strange reason.”

“They will be fine. You know yourself that lack of an atmosphere doesn’t bother them,” Martha told her.

“No,” Wanda said, shaking her head. “It’s not that.” She looked frustrated. “Have you ever had the feeling that you’ve forgotten something? It’s like an itch that not only can I not scratch it, but I don’t even know where it is.”

“I’m sure it will come to you eventually,” Martha said.

“Sometimes you have to give these things a little time.” She smiled at Wanda, and it was one of her so familiar knowing smiles. Then she frowned. “I’m starting to get senile, I think. Clark, could you fetch that box from the desk in the study?” A burst of wind, and he stood there with a sealed cardboard container.

“This one?” he asked.

“That’s the one,” Martha answered. “What took you so long?” She smiled as he kissed her on the forehead and went back to Lois. “And this is for you,” she said to Wanda. “A little something for the baby and for the expectant parents, too.”

“Okay, Lucy, let’s do one more systems check,” Bernie said. “It’s been an expected though immense pleasure to meet you, Charlie and Wanda. Have a good journey home.”

“Thanks, Bernie,” Wanda said, shaking his hand.

“We’ll mention you to our Dr. Klein when we get back,” Charlie said.

Bernie looked thoughtful for a moment. “Was I bald back then, too?” he wondered aloud. He glanced at the ship. “Yes, I think so.” Lucy took his elbow and they walked toward the ship where the others were waiting.

Clark looked at his younger counterpart and held out his hand. Smiling, he put some of his new strength into the handshake. Charlie winced, then smiled, matching his grip.

“Not bad for an old guy like me,” Clark said.

“I doubt that many people thought of you as old even before the planet passed out of the cloud,” Charlie said. He rubbed his hand. “I think you’re ready, too. Listen, I know that I didn’t cause any of this, and you would be trying to cope with these abilities even if I hadn’t come along, but I still feel like I should say I’m sorry about this.”

“I wondered how long it would take for you to apologize,” Wanda said.

Lois laughed. “They’re too much alike. I was waiting for it, too.”

Wanda took her hand. “Thanks for giving a glimpse at my possible future. I just hope my Clark and I can be as happy in our life as you two obviously are.”

Lois hugged her. “You will be,” she said. “I have no doubt.”

“Time to go, honey,” Charlie said.

They joined the others at the ship.

“Ready to hit the road?” Christie asked. She looked as though she could barely keep her feet on the ground.

“If we don’t hurry,” Cara said, “she’s going to fly out into space on her own.”

“Hey, I wanted to be an astronaut when I was a kid,” Christie

said. “And now I don’t even need a spacesuit.” She laughed.

Wanda smiled, but there was that feeling again. Something about the link between space and human-Kryptonian offspring. She wondered if Martha knew something she wasn’t telling. Let’s get home, she told herself. Then worry about vague premonitions.

“Take up your positions between the three fins,” Lucy told Clark and the twins. The stabilizing fins were equally spaced around the outside of the ship, and the three super powered Kents moved between them and floated to the underside of the Ork.

“Follow Charlie’s lead during the acceleration phase,” Lucy continued. “But the instant that the rainbow has formed, give it that final push and get back here as fast as you can. If the timing is just right, we should all be able to see the flash when the ship bursts through the dimensional rift into their universe.” She looked at Clark and Cara and Christie. “That will be less than ten seconds after you let them go, but I expect you back here before then. Use some of that super speed I’ve heard about.”

“Sure thing, Aunt Lucy,” Cara said. She looked over at her sister. “Bet you I beat her back.”

“I’ll beat both of you,” Clark said. “Neither of you could ever keep up with me.”

“You’re on,” Christie said. “I’ll be back before either of you old timers have a chance to blink.”

Cara smiled. Wanda guessed that she had set up that whole competition thing to make sure her dad and sister got back quickly.

“Thanks to all of you,” Charlie said. “You don’t know how much it means to us.”

“I think we do,” Jim said from where he had been watching events. “We’re all a family here, including you two. You know that you do anything to help family. That’s just the way it is.”

“Is our Jimmy that smart?” Wanda asked.

“He has his moments,” Clark said. “Okay, time to buckle up.” He paused one more time, and went to Martha. “Thanks, ‘Mom,’” he said, hugging her and kissing her forehead. “For everything.”

“Don’t make me cry, Clark,” she said, calling him by his real name for the first time. “Take care of Lois and that baby. And yourself,” she added.

“I will,” he promised. He lifted his wife and flew into the ship.

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Martha watched as the egg-like ship accelerated to a silver blur in a matter of seconds. The craft left a trail of tortured atmosphere in its wake until it broke into space, then she saw a multicolored hue appear high above them. A few seconds more, and Clark landed beside her, followed closely by Christie and Cara.

“At least I beat you,” Christie said to her sister. Cara shrugged, peering at the sky.

“Can you see them, Clark?” Martha asked.

“It’s amazing, but I can,” he said. “The rainbow effect is starting to envelop the ship. The ship looks like it’s elongating, stretching out.”

“It’s an illusion,” Bernie said. “Caused by the distortion of the rift.”

“It must be entering the dimensional opening. The ship is beginning to fade,” Clark said. A burst of light and color filled half the sky. “They’re gone.”

“But not forgotten,” Lois said. “Never forgotten.”

“I had a few more pages of the letter locked away in a lead box,” Martha told them. “I didn’t think it was a good idea for them to see what H. G. had written about their future. They have so much adversity and so much joy ahead of them. They don’t know it, but their greatest adventure is just beginning.”

She looked at her family standing close to her, Clark’s arm around her waist and Lois’ hand on her shoulder. Cara and

Christie smiled those infectious grins. Lucy and Jim held each other, watching with Bernie the last of the color fade from the sky.

“Just like ours,” Martha said, smiling. “Just like ours.”

THE END?

(Not really. There’s more to come.)

Author’s Note:

In case it wasn’t obvious, I’m a *Phineas and Ferb* fan.

I’m also a runner. Actually, I’m a mature runner, which means I’m probably older than most of you, and the reason we have a mature Clark Kent winning a 15K race. Oddly enough, in the last couple of years, I’ve finished first in a 15K, a 10K and a 5K. As we middle of the pack runners like to say, “You don’t have to be the fastest guy around, you just have to be the fastest guy to show up.” My winning time in the 15K was about 20 minutes slower than Clark’s. His pace was a little over 5 minutes per mile, and mine was 7:19 per mile, so there’s no danger I’ll absorb yellow sunlight and float around the room.