

The Bronze Saga #7

BRONZE-TEMPERED STEEL

A Doc Savage Novel by Mark Eidemiller and Barry Ottey

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Prov 16: 18 Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Lev 26:19 I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze.

Prov 27:17 As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

Isa 40:31 But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Jer 9:23 This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches,

Jer 17:5 This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD.

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Excerpt, ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA, Online Millennium Edition

SAVAGE, Clark, Junior. Born 1901, died?. In the early 1930's and 1940's, Clark Jr. ("Doc") Savage was thought to be an adventurer and crime fighter. However, because of the EDWARD R. MURROW expose into the so-called "Crime College" (see video, 'See It Now: TARNISHED BRONZE') and subsequent investigations (Senator ESTES KEFAUER in 1951, Senator RICHARD M. NIXON in 1952), the picture of the "Man of Bronze" became a major event in the battle for CIVIL RIGHTS in America. Savage was never brought to trial, but his holdings were liquidated by court order for compensation to the Crime College's victims. Rumors abound - especially in the tabloids - that Savage is still alive and in exile, but no proof of this has yet been found.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS [Skip to Story]

THE ORIGINAL TEAM

- Clark "Doc" Savage, Jr. (aka Clark Robeson Dent)

In 1948, following the events chronicled in *Up From Earth's Center*, he returned to the caverns of Maine – alone, unarmed, and in secret – in a determined attempt to recapture the mysterious villain Wail. Instead, he was caught off-guard, rendered unconscious, and placed into suspended animation by an enemy (for more details, read **Epilogue, *Bronze Refined As Silver***). Awakened fifty years later and finding himself in Oregon, he wandered into a downtown rescue mission, heard the message of salvation preached by Perry Liston and received Jesus Christ as his Lord

and Savior.

Taken in by Liston's church, he faced the harsh reality of the world believing Doc Savage as a criminal. Adopting the identity of 'Clark Robeson Dent', he and Liston traveled the United States to reconcile with the surviving members of his team.

He now fights the source of evil as a traveling evangelist, sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost.

- Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett "Monk" Mayfair

Monk tried desperately to keep fighting crime during and after the Senate hearings. However, after several major events changed his life – his marriage to his 'favorite secretary' Lea Aster, the birth of his daughter Caroline, and the apparent suicide of his old friend and sparring partner Ham – he turned his back on his old life of crimefighting and adventuring, and withdrew to a lakefront house near Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he remained in isolation until located by Clark and Perry. Shortly after, Clark was able to lead him to know God's peace.

Several years prior to that, convinced that Doc would one day return, Monk had purchased the land on which the Crime College stood. Later, he, Renny, and Johnny devised a plan that would eventually become the Clark Savage Institute.

He and Lea have five children - Carrie, Clark, Hamilton, Mark, and Deborah - and eleven grandchildren.

- Brigadier General Theodore Marley "Ham" Brooks

It was originally believed that Ham had committed suicide as a result of the enormous stress of the Senate hearings, his disbarment from legal practice, and a growing alcohol abuse problem. However, in *Bronze New World*, Clark and Perry discovered that Ham was actually murdered while attempting to trap the person responsible for leaking the Crime College information to Edward R. Murrow, and the scene was altered to make it appear as if Ham had committed suicide. Clark and Perry were also able to travel back in time and minister the gospel to Ham, thus securing his spiritual future.

- Ivan (John) "Renny" Renwick

In 1989, everyone believed that Renny had been killed in the collapse of the Interstate 880 freeway during the Loma Prieta earthquake. He had, however, barely escaped. But his own desire for the adventure of the past caused him to perpetuate the lie and therefore become a fugitive. He ended up in Romania, where he found a reason to settle down and get married. Later, Renny (now Ivan) and wife Amanda returned to the United States, and are now living on their farm in Oberlin, Kansas.

Since Clark's return, both he and Amanda have become Christians, and Renny has played a major part in the design and construction of the Clark Savage Institute.

- William Harper "Johnny" Littlejohn

Breaking from the team during the Senate hearings, he continued his love of archaeology and participated in several digs around the world, accepting a professorship in a small California

university, and becoming the head of the Archaeology Department at Drake College in Vermont. He has since moved to the Clark Savage Institute where he is Dean of the Archaeology Department.

- Thomas "Long Tom" Roberts

In the 1960's, while on a fact-finding trip to post-war Vietnam, Long Tom accidentally triggered a booby trap that destroyed his legs and hospitalized him. While recuperating, he was drawn to a little girl whose family had been killed. Taking compassion, he adopted her and raised her as his own daughter. They settled in Lincoln City, Oregon, and spent many years in anonymity before being reunited with Doc.

Shortly after, however, he suffered a heart attack that eventually cost him his life. On his deathbed, he was able to clear his conscience of the truth behind the loss of his legs, the death of Amy's birth-family, and, with Clark's help, was finally able to know peace with God before the end.

- Patricia "Pat" Savage

Clark's cousin and only living blood relative. In light of events chronicled in *Bronze Refined as Silver* and *More Precious Than Gold*, she turned her life from one of selfish goals to selfless goals. She has turned her island home into a refuge and home for children who have been abandoned or orphaned.

THE NEW TEAM

- Perry Liston

A former street preacher from Portland, Oregon, he found his life tied into Clark's. Now, as his friend and companion, he shares the task of evangelism with Second Chances Ministry.

- Dorothy ("Dot") Liston

Granddaughter of Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, wife of Perry Liston. Prompted to accompany Clark and Perry in the reconciliation of Clark's past, she eventually married Perry and is the third partner of Second Chances Ministry. Became a Christian through Perry in *Bronze Refined As Silver*.

- Bonnie Savage

Former mercenary and member of Jill Woodward's APEX group, wife of Clark Savage, Jr. She first encountered Clark and Perry in *More Precious Than Gold*. Became a Christian through Clark in *Bronze Avengers*. Married Clark in *Bronze New World*.

- Clark "Gumball" Mayfair

Firstborn son of Monk and Lea Mayfair. Freelance pilot. First worked with Clark and Perry in *Bronze Refined As Silver*. Has worked with them on several occasions, mostly as a pilot. Became a Christian through Monk in *The Abduction of Amy Roberts*.

- Amy Mayfair

Adopted daughter of Long Tom Roberts, wife of Clark "Gumball" Mayfair. She was at her father's bedside when he accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and made the same decision soon after. They married and now live in her family's home in Lincoln City, Oregon, where she carries on her father's electronics research.

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Prologue

15 June, 2005

Somewhere over the United States

The full moon cast a baleful glow through the clear night sky over the sprawling metropolis. Still, even its brilliant radiance failed to dispel the pocket of shadow that crouched in the lee of the HVAC enclosure atop the building which served as the headquarters of one of the world's foremost technological firms. Neither could the light dispel the malevolence which inhabited that pocket of darkness.

It did, however, manage to cast a glint off of the sweating, hairless head of the corporation's chief executive officer, as he sat at the controls of a massive device housed beneath a domed structure that – during daylight hours – appeared to the city's airborne traffic as nothing more sinister than an astronomical observatory perched on the building's rooftop. As had been the case every night for the last few weeks, the clamshells of the observatory's roof were fully retracted and the snout of its apparent telescope protruded from the opening.

The executive touched a series of buttons and switches, and the flat-screen before him flickered to life. Now, all that was left was the waiting – waiting for his prey to come into range. He moved a slider switch on the panel to his right, and the image on the screen changed as the scanner's focus widened by an order of magnitude and was overlaid with a United States map instead of the city-grid. Suddenly the blip was there, at the left-hand edge of the screen.

"Of course!" the executive thought, smiling with glee. *"He's been out of town! That would explain his absence, the last four nights."*

His quarry was moving at incredible speed, but that didn't surprise the executive in the least. He'd witnessed that speed countless times, in the past decade. Indeed, he'd anticipated it when conceiving the device he now activated with a touch of a button. He'd tracked the blip every night for nearly five weeks. With the exception of the last four annoyingly frustrating days, when it had been strangely absent from the night sky, it always seemed to follow the same pattern of movement. It would move across the city in random patterns for awhile, sometimes disappearing briefly as his quarry dropped below the lower edge of his radar scanners, surfacing eventually to continue its travels. At the end, it would streak across the city to a particular point, whereupon it would again drop below his radar and simply vanish. Tonight, the focal point of his device was aimed just a few yards shy of that particular point in space-time.

"That's odd," he thought to himself as he observed the blip's progress across the detector screen. *"He's moving a lot slower, tonight, and with no randomness at all. I wonder why. Well, no matter; it only makes it that much easier for my device to do its work!"*

He touched another button and, beneath his hands and around him, the massive device

hummed to life, gathering power from the small nuclear reactor he'd illegally constructed in the fourteenth sub-level below the building's ground floor. In the massive equipment racks which lined the periphery of the 'observatory', capacitors and accumulators sang as they approached full charge.

He glanced at the tracking screen. His quarry was just crossing the sky over Pittsburgh, moving at Mach four – an incredible fifty-one-point-two-six miles per minute. At that rate, he would be over the city in less than seven minutes! He consulted a read-out display at the lower right-hand corner of the display. The weapon's systems were nominal, charging at the expected rate. Both secondary and primary fields would be ready.

“And, of course, he'll slow down to well below Mach one, before coming in over the city,” the executive chuckled. *“He won't risk alarming the citizens, or damaging any windows, with a sonic boom.”*

He watched the tracking countdown readout, at the lower left corner of the screen, his eyes flicking back and forth as he constantly compared it with the right-hand readout, the one that displayed the time remaining before his device could be used. The seconds ticked by with an agonizing slowness, on both clocks.

“Secondary systems at full charge,” the computer-voice issued, at last, from the small speakers mounted in the headrest of his chair. “Initiate primary sequence.”

He touched another button, the smile of anticipation on his face taking on a predatory nature. Power flowed from the charged capacitors and accumulators into the massive coils in the heart of his contrivance, creating a tiny wormhole whose terminus orbited a star some thirty-plus light-years distant from Earth. Power flowed from the targeted red-giant star, back along the wormhole's path, feeding the core of his device.

He shifted the slider-switch back to its original position, and the scanner was once again overlaid with a map of the great city.

The executive lifted the safety cover over the final button, appropriately adorned with a death's-head image more appropriate to an ancient pirate flag. With a gleeful, malevolent laugh, he reached out a thumb and stabbed down on the button as if he were crushing the life out of a troublesome insect. In his warped brain, he felt it an appropriate comparison.

In response, the final stage of the device activated. Incalculable amounts of power fed back through the wormhole from the distant star, and were channeled into the primary field-core of the device. Miles distant, above the city and just yards short of his enemy's predicted point of disappearance, the weapon's primary field took on nebulous form. The executive cackled with glee as the object on the screen approached the focal point of his device. He flipped one last switch, the control-console lock-out, and let loose a laugh.

“You've interfered with my plans for the last time, blue-boy!” he exclaimed. “No more!”

The targeting computer controlled all of the device's functions, now. His victory in the decade-long battle was online and virtually secured. Nothing could stop it. Nothing could deny him his final triumph over his meddling adversary.

He stepped out of the structure to watch the fireworks, just as a thick veil of clouds – in

reality a side-effect of the forces gathering in the heavens over the vast metropolis – scudded across the sky and veiled the moon. The malevolence left its pocket of shadow, slithering across the rooftop to stroke its puppet with silent, preening fingers. The executive’s heart swelled with pride in his accomplishment, in his final ending of the long struggle with his nemesis. He held his breath, waiting as he saw the streak of red and blue that was his enemy approach the point of no return, where the nearly-invisible black maelstrom waited.

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He didn’t need to look, to know that his wife was asleep in the cradle of his arms. His sensitive ears picked up the rhythm of her sleep-breathing pattern, even above the rush of the air through which he moved.

“She must really be tired,” he smiled to himself as he cleaved the air toward their home. *“Usually, she wants to stay awake and see everything.”*

Los Angeles had been hot, muggy, and blanketed with smog, as usual. The City of Angels wasn’t even in the list of his top fifty places in the world to visit, but his latest novel was at the top of the best-seller list, and the usual circuit of talk-show appearances was pretty much unavoidable. So, for the fourth time, he’d made the flight westward – commercial air, this time, since his wife was accompanying him on assignment for work – and sat through the usual run of interviews.

“Larry King was such an abominable bore,” he thought, as he made his final course correction over Pittsburgh. *“You’d think that someone on his writing staff could at least come up with a different list of questions to ask me. He asked the exact same questions the last time I was on his show!”*

Letterman had been an even more abominable boor, making his usual banal wisecracks and – this time – including a couple comments about his guest’s lovely wife that were either off-color or simply in poor taste.

“I got the last laugh, though,” the man chuckled to himself. *“The audience thought it was either the glare I gave him, or else the heat from one of the overhead klieg lights, that made him grow red in his face and eventually loosen his collar and mop the sweat off of his forehead!”*

Both of those so-called ‘personalities’ had been buffoons. If they’d had the slightest inkling of who they *really* had, sitting there on the set with them – the real being concealed by the stylish suit and tie and the eyeglasses – they’d have become tongue-tied school children! Sometimes he wondered why he bothered, at all...

“Leno was nice enough, though,” he recalled. *“He’s the only one who’s actually read my novels before he’s had me on the show, and he always has an interesting list of questions for me. That one about whether it was more difficult to work for an editor, or a producer, was a good one. I’ve done both, and it’s basically a coin-toss. At least doing **The Tonight Show** last let me end the trip on a pleasant note.”*

Even the cancellation of their homeward airline flight due to mechanical problems with the aircraft, just before the flight attendants could prepare their passengers for take-off, hadn’t really fazed the couple.

“After all, it isn’t as though we really need to depend on commercial flights to get home,” his wife had suggested in a quiet whisper as they’d walked back out of the boarding tube, flashing him a knowing wink.

That much was all too true. Even seeing to their luggage was no major problem. He’d simply waltzed their two carry-on suitcases over to the airport’s Fed-Ex station and arranged for them to be shipped overnight and delivered to the apartment the next day. Then, they’d stepped into a corridor he’d observed to be deserted, making their exit through a door normally used by baggage handlers. Once in the shadow of the building, screened from chance observation, he doffed his street clothes to reveal the costume that bore the world’s most-recognized symbol. He wrapped his wife snugly in his cape and, extending the force-field naturally exuded by his body to cover the two of them, he’d lifted for home under his own power. He was executing his first course-change, over Las Vegas, by the time their Delta flight would have been clearing the end of the runway, had it remained on schedule.

Still, he wasn’t traveling at top speed. Whenever he took his wife flying with him, he tended to keep it to a more ‘sedate’ pace, out of concern for her. She trusted him implicitly, in just about every single thing he ever did, and she loved to ‘sight-see’ when he took her into the air, but there was just something in her earth-bound human psyche that regarded flying without a plane as a bit unnerving.

He understood it, somewhat; he’d been afraid of heights, himself, when he was a teenager back in Kansas. He still remembered, with a bit of a chuckle, those times – as his powers had begun to really emerge – waking up in the middle of the night to find himself floating in the air a few feet above his bed. After the third or fourth such occurrence, he’d told his adopted parents about it, wondering what was wrong with him.

His mother had taken him aside, dug out one of her old college psychology texts, and pointed to a section that dealt with dreams, including dreams about flying unaided. She told him not to worry; dreams of flying and fear of heights were often somehow related in the human psyche.

He’d reminded her that he wasn’t human; at least, not an Earth-born human. He’d reminded her of the object, buried beneath an old tarp and a pile of broken baskets and apple-crates in the storm cellar under the barn – the strange conveyance that had brought him to them – and which now sat in silent witness of his extra-terrestrial origins. He’d reminded her of all the things he could already do. He could drive a four-by-four fence post into the ground with one blow of his fist and not show a bruise. He could “bench-press” the John Deere tractor without breaking a sweat. He could shove his hand and arm into the chipper and come away unscathed. He could see through solid objects, and hear sounds that came from miles away. He could out-race the express train that passed by their north-forty acreage. Could he really be “human”, and yet do all those things? He’d doubted it.

His mother had simply smiled, placing a soft hand on his chest.

“Being ‘human’ has more to do with *who* you are, than *what* you are, dear,” she’d told him. “These things you can do? They’re a part of your genetics, the genetics of the humans who sent you to us. The young man I’ve watched you grow into, over the years since you came to us as a baby? He’s fully as human as anyone else on this planet. You’ve got fears and doubts and questions. We all do. It’s a part of *being* human. The comfort is that there is Someone, out there, who knows all the answers, and who will help you find them when He thinks you’re ready.”

He knew what he was experiencing, though, and he was sure that – at least in this one instance – his usually-wise parents were wrong. He even remembered the time he'd tied a rope around his ankle before falling asleep, the other end tied to the bedpost lest he float out his open window on a hot Kansas summer night. Eventually, as he learned to control that ability to make his own body defy gravity, he'd outgrown those fears.

He trusted that, in time, so would his wife.

* * *

The head of the world's largest technology corporation, standing at the railing of his rooftop aerie and watching his unsuspecting nemesis approach the critical point in his trajectory, was right in what he'd assumed. In a way, at least.

It was true, that no *thing* could stop what he'd planned from happening. However, there were forces at work, on this suddenly-moonless night; forces of which he was blissfully unaware. The fact that he knew nothing of them was due solely to his adamant refusal to subscribe to a belief in them. After all, his mother had believed, and what had it gotten her? Still, his abject refusal to believe in them didn't make them any less real. The plan that guided these forces in concert, to transform the events he had planned for this very night, had been laid down in full long before either the industrialist or the object of his hatred had been born.

It was by this plan that (unbeknownst to him) his enemy's novel had reached the top of the charts when it had. It was by this plan that the publicity tour had been scheduled, and that soft words were spoken in the ear of the normally ruthless editor of a great metropolitan newspaper. The whispered words suggested that his star reporter would be best suited handle the task of covering her husband's talk show appearances, despite any appearance of favoritism, for a special feature to be run in the paper's entertainment section. It was according to this plan that, at just the right moment in time, a connection was loosened in a piece of critical circuitry in the guidance control panel of the Delta Air Lines Boeing 757 scheduled for use on that trans-continental red-eye flight. And it was according to this plan that, only an hour earlier, the airline had received an emergency phone call from the senior flight captain scheduled to make the trip. His pregnant wife was going into premature labor, and he was taking her to the hospital. The plan's author knew full well that the replacement pilot, a junior officer with far less experience, would elect to scrub the flight rather than risk his passengers by running on one of the two older back-up systems. And the plan's author knew that the young wife would trust her husband's unique "gifts" to transport her safely home.

Thus it was, according to a plan fashioned and executed in realms unseen by normal eyes, that his enemy was thus not moving with his customary blinding speed.

Had he not been encumbered by his wife, he would have been moving so fast that even *his* abnormally keen eyesight wouldn't have seen the nexus forming in front of him before it was too late to avoid it. His normal speed would have taken him straight down the throat of the vortex and out its terminal end, which had been focused thousands of years backward in time, and on a barely livable, uninhabited planet orbiting a red giant star – the very same stellar body whose massive energies were fueling the vortex. As it was, the energy surrounding the heart of the nexus was not yet fully tuned, and emitted stray bursts on wavelengths that his eyes *could* detect. When he sensed its presence in his path, there wasn't time to fully avoid it, but there was time enough for him to deflect his path at an angle and hopefully thus incur only a fringe of the forces arrayed

against him.

Still, even that fringe was terrible in its fury. Stretched as it was, to cover two bodies instead of one, his force-field was compelled to draw massively on his deep energy resources, and that frightened him as little else could. The last time his body had been so taxed, it had almost killed him. Still, the field held, and they fell onward through the fringes of the nexus. He fought off the ragged edges of blackness as they assailed his consciousness. If he surrendered, the field would collapse back against his own skin only, and the woman he loved more than life itself would be lost to him forever!

The deflection was enough. Instead of propelling him through the churning heart of the maelstrom, the fringe energies grabbed at him, shifted him, whipped him around the periphery of the nexus like a wad of paper caught in the outer layer of a tornado, and he saw his one last chance. Drawing upon reserves of strength he'd tapped only once before in his life, he surged *with* the fringe current, like the slingshot maneuver NASA had used for the rescue of Apollo 13, and was shot out of the side of the tunnel that was the vortex, across lines of both time and space, into...

* * *

On the rooftop in the distance, the executive howled with glee, a howl echoed in the unseen by the malevolence crouched at his side. Had the man been inside his observatory, watching the readouts flash by on the computer screens, he would have seen that something was amiss. He would have seen that the other end of his wormhole was too close to the star he'd chosen as a power-source. He would have realized that the gravity-gradient of the remote-end of the wormhole was causing the star's corona to expand, briefly, before its own internal gravitational forces snapped it hideously back, beginning the process which would cause it to explode and tear its planetary system asunder. He would have seen that the energy pouring through the spatial link was too great, and that it was actually destabilizing this end of the pathway. His trap was not perfectly functioning as he had intended, destroying his adversary forever. He might have been able to boost the power, or shift the center of the vortex in order to compensate for his enemy's course-deflection. But, of course, his ego demanded that he bear witness to his final triumph with his own mortal eyes, and not those of a machine. Thus, his chance for total victory – in this round of their long conflict, at least – escaped his notice.

On a distant world orbiting a red-giant star, and thirty-plus years backward in time, a thousand million intelligent beings met their end as their world crumbled into dust in the grip of their sun's twisting, clawing gravitational vortex.

But the executive's enemy had survived!

* * *

Longitude 21° 43' North
Latitude 71° 35' West
15 June, 2005

The sun came up that morning, as it always had over the tiny dot of land surrounded by deep blue waters. Slowly, it mounted the age-old climb into the heavens, just as it had always done. Yet, not quite, for today something was different on the ocean floor below it.

The wreck had lain on the bottom for nearly five hundred years. The salt water, and the bacteria, had taken their toll long years past. Still, there were odd bits of wood here and there, still decomposing, though at a far slower rate due to the sand that had covered the bones of the craft over the centuries.

Of late, however, the storm surges from several hurricanes had crashed against the small island in a short span of weeks, wreaking immense changes in the currents immediately offshore. Recent seismic activity, nearby, had also served to vibrate the silt and sand on the bottom, loosening it and making it easier for the tides to wash outward, away from the shore. Objects that had lain buried for hundreds of years under twenty feet or more of sand and silt were now left covered only by the barest coating of sand. As the surges of current faded with the passing of the most recent storm, suspended silt once again fell gradually to the ocean floor, though farther out to sea, the coastal water becoming increasingly more transparent as the days passed.

As the ebbing tide washed another precious millimeter of sand outward to the deeps, one of the ship's deck guns – once buried standing with its maw pointed almost at the surface – no longer had a sufficient bracing to remain upright. Another of the seismic tremors that had become more frequent of late rolled across the ocean floor, further destabilizing the rusting artillery piece. Slowly, it began to topple, picking up momentum as gravity drew it downward, until it fell with a thud across a large clay block that lay amid the rotting remains of what had once been a wooden chest, then rolled away until its momentum was spent. The impact caused a slight crack to appear in the surface of the clay block, and the artifact encased within it detected the faintest signature of electromagnetic radiation – sunlight filtering down from the surface, some thirty five feet above. This, it had not felt in a long, long time, and the sensation was very welcome.

The artifact hummed, a low sub-sonic note that gently throbbed. Once, twice, three times, it pulsed in the growing light, the vibration pushing tiny ripples in the sand around it and above it. As a result, more of the silt that covered the block was gently moved to the sides. A final pulse – draining the remaining reserves the artifact had hoarded all this long, lonely time – and the crack in its surface widened, letting more of the welcome sunlight inside. For now, it was enough. The artifact basked.

* * *

One – “What dreams may come...”

*Clark Savage Institute
Arronaxe, New York
30 July, 2005*

You never know what God has in mind, until you get there.

The fact that I've chosen to begin virtually every one of my narratives with those few words doesn't make the notion any less true.

Over the last few years, I've come to understand the truthfulness of never putting God in a box. Never limit the things that God can do, or the vastness of His imagination; it's limitless, because He is infinite. The second you put - or try to put – God in a box, you're apt to find yourself being confronted by some situation which will prove just how 'confining' that box really is.

In my case, it began several years ago, when a stranger walked into the street-mission where I was preaching, a stranger who was looking for food, clothing that fit his frame, and a box of rocks on his back that desperately needed dislodging. In my wildest dreams, I would never have imagined that my boyhood 'hero', Doc Savage, had really existed, much less that I'd ever be given a chance to meet him. I had, though, and my life hadn't been the same, ever since.

I think, though, that what really crystallized the truthfulness of not putting God in a box, at least for me, was a strange series of events that began with a simple debate in a Portland park, on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

I'd just spent an enjoyable hour or so with some old friends, Mark and Karen, talking with them while they handed out pamphlets during their regular Saturday mission efforts. I was walking back across the grassy expanse to the gravel lot where I'd left my car, when I ran into this young man. He was wearing one of those tee-shirts with a stylized 'Roswell gray' alien on the front and the caption, "We Are Not Alone".

I chuckled when I saw it, and saw an opening to try and witness to him about Who was *really* out there, 'observing our Earth'. I engaged him in a conversation, and we sat down on a convenient bench and chatted for about half an hour.

As he went to make his prior appointment, I was mentally kicking myself. I'd allowed some of my own thoughts and notions to interfere with a pure and simple salvation message. I hate it when that happens. I prayed that I hadn't screwed it up too badly, that at least a seed of what God had intended had gotten through.

I like science fiction as much as the next person. I've enjoyed Star Trek, and Star Wars, Babylon 5, and even the 'Stargate' series, and have been able to find religious analogies in all of them. despite the downplaying of God and the promotion of secular humanism.

God still gets the last word, though.

Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, once gave a speech in which he railed against both religion in general and Christianity in particular. He referred to Christianity as being 'the single greatest impediment to our ever achieving anything even remotely like the United Federation of Planets', or something close to that. Only a week later, he had walked into his doctor's office for a routine visit, laid down on the examination table, and – victim of a sudden heart attack – passed from this world into the next.

I wasn't fond of Roddenberry's personal philosophy, but it saddened me to think of him suddenly finding himself standing before the Judgment Throne and having to try and account for such a tirade.

I relegated the concept of life on other planets to the same category as science fiction – emphasis on *fiction*. I pretty much believed that all UFO sightings were either flat-out hallucinations, or demonic manifestations arranged by Satan in order to trick us into looking to space aliens to help us solve all our problems, rather than placing our hope – and our faith – in God. I figured that Earth was the only planet in the universe where any sort of intelligent life could – or would – be found. After all, I reasoned, Earth was where Jesus Christ came to die for our salvation, so didn't that prove that Earth was the only important planet in the cosmos?

I should have known better. The majority of the world's scientists will, categorically and

on a whole stack of Bibles, swear that time-travel is impossible. Yet, only a short time earlier, both Clark and I had actually traveled both backward and forward in time, courtesy of a hush-hush government experiment that had been mothballed since the mid-1970's. I really, really should have known better. God doesn't take well to being put into a box. Try confining Him thus, and He'll find some way to prove to you that He's infinitely bigger than any box you can imagine.

Now, some of you might be thinking that your imagination is pretty darn big. Well, God is orders of magnitude bigger than you are, and His imagination is absolutely phenomenal.

Consider this: The Bible says, in Isaiah 46: 10, "*I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.*" Revelation 13:8 tells us that Jesus Christ is the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. What those passages boil down to is that, even before God first spoke any of the universe into being, He'd already imagined you and me and everyone else who's ever lived or ever *will* live on this planet. In reality, it was far more than 'imagination', because He was looking into the future and seeing the reality of what He purposed to create. He saw all of us in His mind's eye in the minutest detail, even – as it says in the scriptures – to the number of hairs on our heads.

To Him, every last one of us was beautiful, and He fell in love with us. He watched our lives unfold before time began, and knew that every last one of us would, at some point in our lives, sin – turn away from a relationship with Him and seek our own will rather than His – and thus fall short of His standard of perfect righteousness.

In that brief moment out of Eternity when He imagined all of this, He knew that the only way the gulf that our rejection would put between us and Him could ever be bridged was for Him to take on human form, come down here and live a perfect, sinless life, and shed His own blood as the payment for our crimes – the absolutely innocent dying on behalf of the guilty.

Let me tell you, that is *some* imagination!

Oops! Where was I, before the street-preacher in me kicked into overdrive? Oh, yeah – in my belief that Earth was the only important planet in the universe, I had put God in a box, and that meant I was bound to get a bit of come-uppance. In this instance, it was a whole lot more than just 'a bit'! It started with that off-the-wall conversation about life on other planets, and it continued with the dreams.

Usually, I'm not one to remember what I dream. Clark says it's because I don't eat right, don't get enough exercise, and don't get enough restful sleep. Sometimes he reminds me of my mother. Though, with his degree in medicine, he may have a point. Either way, dreams have been a way God has used to get our attention, and I couldn't shake the notion that *this* dream was definitely something from Him, if for no other reason than that I *could* remember it, when I awoke.

Then, too, this particular 'night vision' persisted for nearly two weeks, including every night of our drive east in *Nomad* to attend a board meeting at the Clark Savage Institute. Clark and Bonnie, now husband and wife, had just returned from their honeymoon cruise on the twenty-eighth. Despite the late hour at which the little 'Welcome Home' party – thrown by Monk, of course – had ended, the dream invaded my sleep one last time. After the twelfth straight night of its recurrence, I finally broke down and told Dot about it.

“In the beginning of the dream, I’m strapped into one of those rocket-packs of Mitch’s, and heading straight up at an incredible rate of speed. In a matter of seconds, I’m out in space, beyond the orbit of the moon. I turn, and I’m looking back at ‘Earth-rise’, over the lunar surface. As I watch, the Earth starts spinning faster and faster, until the continents themselves become a blur as they pass by. Then, suddenly, the planet begins to spin off chunks of its mass into space. Each of those chunks becomes another Earth, spinning off into the distance, while the original Earth beneath me seems not to really have lost any matter at all. This spinning-off process continues for several minutes, and then stops. I look, and what I see is a line of identical Earths, one after another, receding into the distance in a number that – somehow, without being told – I know is infinite.

“I try – gently – to press the control for the rockets again. What I want is to slowly drift back towards the original Earth, to get close enough to see what’s really happening. Instead, the rocket pack fires full-force, and I’m streaking back toward the planet like a meteor. I become terrified, figuring I’m going to hit the atmosphere at that speed and burn up like a shooting star, but suddenly there’s this *thing* in front of me, that’s really hard to describe. It’s kind of like a two-dimensional tornado. It’s got width and length – really, more of a diameter, because it’s circular – but no apparent thickness. The retros on the suit don’t work, and I tumble headlong into it, and everything goes almost black for a moment. Then I come out of it, and I’m a couple hundred feet above Lake Chaac, heading for splashdown.”

I paused, trying to catch my breath. I also wanted to try and relax. Just thinking about the images from that dream set my pulse racing.

“What happens, then?” Dot prompted me to continue.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “I always wake up just a split-second before the point in the dream where my body hits the water.”

“It sounds really strange, to me, honey,” Dot said, looking at me a bit helplessly. “I wish I could help you. What do you want to do about it?”

“I think I’m going to go check out one of the little sailboats and go out on the lake. It’s really peaceful out there, and sailing always relaxes me. Maybe I can get some ‘alone time’ with God, and see if He’ll reveal the meaning to me.” I stood, crossed the room and gave Dot a kiss, and headed out the door.

“I’ll call Clark and Bonnie, and some of the others, and we’ll be in prayer for you, babe,” Dot called out the door after me.

The house set aside for our use when we’re at CSI is only a short walk from the nearest Flea Run station, and it only took me a couple of minutes before I was at the marina. The Institute owns a small fleet of sloops that could be checked out for an afternoon, by the public, as long as they weren’t being used by the students.

As I cast off, I recalled that it was on these same boats that Clark taught me how to sail. The marina had just opened to the public, and I had been intrigued by Clark’s descriptions of how peaceful it was out on the water in the middle of the day. It didn’t take me long to fall in love with sailing as a recreational activity.

Once outside of the marina’s breakwater, I raised the mainsail and jib, letting the breeze

fill them and carry me out across the lake. In a matter of just a few minutes, the wind had me well offshore. I dropped the sails, let the boat drift, and settled myself for a time of prayer.

“Lord, you know everything there is to know about me, so you know this dream that’s been haunting me for days. I know that it wouldn’t repeat, unless what it speaks of is serious, but I confess that I don’t have the wisdom to make any sense of it at all. You sent an angel to Daniel, when he asked for help, to give him understand about the dreams he dreamed. Please, find a way to let me know what this dream is all about. I ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

I didn’t really know what to expect. So, I leaned back against the stern of the boat and waited, watching the sky and the water, and the birds soaring lazily overhead. Slowly, I found myself being lulled into a somewhat sleepy state of mind. I let my eyes close for just a moment.

Suddenly, I found myself in that white place, again – the place God had taken me to, for that ‘time out’ chat with Long Tom, while my body had hung from that cross on Caroline Island. On that occasion, it had been a bit unnerving at first. Now, though, I stood waiting to see what – or who – came next. I didn’t have to wait long.

“Hello, Perry,” said the voice from behind me.

I guess I was kind of expecting Long Tom, because he’d been the messenger God had allowed to come to me on that previous occasion. Instead, I turned to behold a dapper, waspish man, slightly graying at the temples, but still with a full head of mostly coal-black hair.

“Hello, Ham,” I greeted him with a smile. “It’s good to see you, again.”

The world at large had believed – and still did believe – that Theodore Marley “Ham” Brooks had committed suicide, after a long bout with alcoholism and despair, in the wake of the Murrow expose on Clark’s Crime College. Investigators had found his body, the gun, and the typewritten suicide note, in his study. Only a few individuals knew otherwise.

In the course of our most-recent adventure, Clark and I had been afforded the chance to travel back in time, to a point just before Ham’s death. There, we had ministered the Gospel to him, and found that God had already prepared his heart to hear. When we left Ham, that night, we were uncertain about his physical future, but we knew that his spiritual future had been set right for all eternity.

When we returned to our proper time, and found that history still hadn’t changed, we started our own investigation. Examining the available evidence with forensic techniques unknown at the time of Ham’s death, we proved – to ourselves, if not to the authorities – that Ham had been murdered by those whom he’d sought to trap.

Clark and I had learned, through our travels in time, how changing one little event could snowball and change...everything. Slowly, we accepted the reality that it had simply been Ham’s time to die. Though we were saddened that we hadn’t averted his death altogether, at least we could take comfort in the knowledge that we’d see him again in Heaven when our Earthly lives were through.

“It’s great to see you, as well,” Ham said warmly, “Thanks, again, for the right words at the right moment.”

“Seeing you here is all the thanks I’ll ever need, Ham,” I grinned at him. “Is Tom coming, too?”

“Yes,” he smiled, angling his head forward. I turned in the direction where Ham was looking and, sure enough, there was Long Tom Roberts, striding up to me. Even this second time around, it was good to see him moving on legs instead of wheels.

“Hello, Tom,” I smiled at him. “I take it you’re both here to help me?”

“You asked for an interpretation of your dream,” Tom nodded, smiling broadly. “How’s your knowledge of physics?”

“Not the greatest,” I sighed.

“Well, I’ll try to make it easy for you to grasp,” Tom promised.

“Thanks,” I told him appreciatively, steeling myself for the explanation.

“Alright. First, think about Creation. I don’t mean the *thing*, the sum total of all that God has brought into existence. I mean the *event*. What happened, according to the Word?”

“God spoke everything that is, into existence,” I answered without hesitation.

“What was there, then, before God spoke the universe into existence?”

I thought about it, for a moment. “Only God,” I told him.

“Right!” He flashed me an encouraging smile, before continuing. “The essence of what is God was all that existed. God actually had to ‘pull back’ on Himself, to create a ‘not-God’ space where something that was ‘not-God’ could exist. In that ‘not-God’ space, which He surrounds, He created the entire macrocosmic universe, of which this humble little planet called Earth is only a tiny part. His presence still pervades that ‘not-God’ space; but in a different manner.”

“Okay,” I agreed, as the picture formed itself in my mind. “That’s not all that hard to fathom.”

“Good, Perry,” Tom grinned at me. “Now, since God actually exists outside of the boundaries of that universe He created, that means that the universe that you live in, and that Ham and I used to be a part of, is a four-dimensional construction.”

“Don’t you mean three-dimensional?” I asked, a bit confused.

“Four.” He ticked the points off on his fingers. “Length, breadth, thickness, and duration, or time. You can have an object, like a box, that has a length, a width, and a height, but unless you add the concept of ‘duration’, the object won’t *continue* to exist. That duration is something that God added to the mixture, so that this ‘not-God’ space, and all that it contained, could exist in the form we comprehend with our five senses.”

“Remember what it says in the Word, Perry?” Ham interjected. “*‘He holds all things together by the word of His power!’*” Then, he cast a totally surprised glance at both of us. “Well, what do you know! I *do* understand it, now!”

Ham Brooks, quoting scripture! I knew he existed in Heaven, now, in the presence of God, but the notion of the Lawyer being saved from the penalties of The Law made me smile.

Tom smiled, too. In fact, he actually laughed, and Ham and I both laughed along with him.

“The reason that God is eternal is that He exists outside of that four-dimensional construct,” Tom said, getting back to the reason for our meeting. “Time simply doesn’t exist, there, outside of it. Or, said another way, all of what we know as recorded time is simply ‘now’, to Him. Now, if God can create all of that, He can create a lot more, as well”

After listening to Long Tom's explanation, I turned to Ham and asked, "Can you translate that?"

Tom gave me a sour look. "You've heard the analogy of a piece of string representing time, right?"

I nodded. "'String Theory,' right? One end is the beginning of time, and the other end is the end of time. We – I – see time for just the present moment, because I'm 'on' the string, but God sees all of time in one fell swoop."

"Correct. Who made the 'string'?"

"God."

"And is there any reason why God couldn't make two strings, running parallel to each other or three, or ... well, you get the idea."

"I think I'm starting to understand," I nodded slowly.

"One string represents the time of our universe. So the string next to it represents -?"

"The timeline of ... a parallel universe," I answered. "But isn't that an impossibility?"

"'*With God, all things are possible,*' Perry," Tom reminded me. "If God can handle one timeline to one universe, don't you think he could handle more ... an infinite number, for instance?"

The thought made my eyes open wide. An infinite number of universes, co-existing alongside each other in different dimensions, just like dozens of science fiction authors had conjectured over the decades. An infinite number of universes, each with its own Earth, and each Earth populated by billions of human beings. Oddly enough, now that I thought about it in those terms, it made sense. As Christians, we believe that God created the universe in order to house our planet, and our planet was created as a place to house the billions of humans He created in order to have beings with which He could have fellowship. That was all born out of His capacity for love. If God is infinite and eternal, then so is His capacity to love. Would any one world full of humans – any ten, any hundred – be enough to exhaust it? The question, of course, was purely rhetorical. The answer was as plain as the nose on my face.

"Now you understand the part of your dream about that string of Earths," Long Tom

smiled.

“Uh-huh,” I nodded. Then, “But what about the ‘falling’ part, and the flat whirlwind?”

“That’s another matter, entirely. That flat whirlwind is rather like an artifact on a certain television show that you’re fond of watching – and that’s all I’m allowed to say. Well, except for the fact that, instead of connecting two worlds in the *same* universe, this thing connects two worlds in *different* universes. You’ll understand, very soon. As for the ‘falling’ aspect of your dreams, when you have a spare moment, you might think about the notion of ‘falling’, as the scriptures mention it.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, okay; the ‘falling’ part is a kind of ‘visual’ pun. In other words, the image carries a double meaning – it has both a physical *and* a spiritual connotation. God says that’s enough to give you what you need for the moment. But, as the next little bit of your life unfolds before you, so will the rest of the meaning.”

“Thanks, Tom,” I told him gratefully. “I hope I will be able to recognize it.”

“Oh, you will, Perry,” Tom chuckled, as if at a joke he knew and I didn’t. “Trust me, you will!”

“Speaking ‘legally’, Perry,” Ham chuckled, “you might even say that it’s the most easily recognized thing of all...”

“Ham!” Tom raised his voice just a trifle.

“Sorry, Tom,” Ham smiled. “I couldn’t resist. Why should you get to have all the fun, and drop all of those riddle-clues on him?”

“It’s time to go, Ham.”

Tom turned to leave, and Ham followed, but then looked back at me.

“Oh – two other things. First, tell the rest of the group to be on their toes. There are things coming – though not necessarily in the immediate future – that will tempt all of you. Remind them to keep their focus on the Creator, and not on His Creation, and they’ll keep from stumbling. I – Tom and I – want so very much to spend eternity with all of you. The second thing is personal, for you, Perry. On your last time out, God breathed an inspiration into your mind. It seemed like an unbelievable long shot to you, but you acted on it in faith. The result is that I am here, today, having this little talk with you. Before too long, you’re going to get another of those inspirations. Act on it with as much faith as you have in you. You wouldn’t believe how much is going to be riding on it.”

“Thanks, Ham,” I told him, not a little mystified at his last cryptic warnings. Still, in this place it had to mean something important, and Ham wouldn’t have given me the warning if he hadn’t had permission from the Throne. So, I looked upward. It was as good a direction as any. “And thank You, Father!”

I looked around; both Tom and Ham had vanished, and the light in this white place was

slowly beginning to fade away.

I awoke with a start and a bit of a snort, sitting bolt upright in the little sloop. I looked at my watch. I'd been 'away' for maybe two minutes. It sure didn't feel like it had been that short a time, and my body felt so completely refreshed and renewed, it was like energy was bottled up inside me just waiting to burst forth.

I hadn't felt this good in years.

Good thing, too; I was going to need it.

* * *

The turbulence that had buffeted and torn at him had, at last, subsided. Slowly, the black tide that had threatened unconsciousness was beginning to fade. With the renewal of sensation, he realized that he was falling. It wasn't a terribly familiar sensation, at least to someone who was used to defying gravity, and it annoyed him. His brain told him that the force-field had collapsed back against him, but he could still hear the beating of his wife's heart, and that was immensely relieving. He opened his eyes to find himself – his wife's form still clutched against his chest – falling toward a body of water. He judged himself to be about two hundred feet up and, even though water can be hard when hit from altitude, he judged that it probably wouldn't be fatal. He hoped so; he had barely enough reserves of energy left to summon the force-field to protect even himself, let alone the two of them. Fortunately, there appeared to be a small sailboat close to where he judged they'd impact. Wrapping himself around his beloved as best he could, he forced his muscles to contort, to spin so that he would land on his back and thus cushion her fall with his own body, and summoned what was left of his force-field. It was all that he could do to manage it, before the water came up and hit him hard, and the blackness claimed him again.

* * *

When you've had an experience like I'd just had, you can't help but come away from it impressed with the utter majesty of the God who created you. The last time I'd had one of those experiences, I'd been hanging on a marble cross for hours, being laid into with a bull-whip. When I came away from that 'time out', I was still on the cross. When Dot and Bonnie came along, and pulled me down, I wasn't in shape to do much of anything. This time, though, I was refreshed and renewed. *They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.* I opened my mouth to let loose with one of my favorite praise songs.

The song died in my throat.

The physical aspect of falling into the middle of Lake Chaac was – to me – a pretty exact image. I knew that it was Lake Chaac because – in the dream – I'd recognized a few landmarks as I 'fell'. I looked around, and realized to my surprise that the boat was in almost exactly the right spot.

"Oh, wow," I muttered, looking upward.

It was a beautiful July Saturday, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. There also weren't any aircraft that I could see, at any altitude. Still, I couldn't escape the conviction that someone or *something* was going to be falling out of the sky and into the water close to me, at any moment. I kept sweeping my gaze back and forth across the sky, while I let the rest of my

brain attack the remaining imagery.

Falling. Okay; what's the spiritual connotation? *All have fallen, and come short of the glory of God*. That could work, but it was kind of general. It could apply to anybody, because it applied to everybody. What else? *Pride goeth before a fall*. Well, that at least narrowed the field; not quite all of us were guilty of the sin of pride. *Babylon is fallen?*

That's when I heard the strange crackling noise in the sky to my left, a sound like muted electrical sparks in a low-voltage system, or the crackling of burning logs at an evening campfire. I turned my head in the direction of the sound, and was just in time to see a strange crack forming in the sky, a bit over two hundred feet up. It was strange-looking, though; sort of two-dimensional, as if some artist had taken a brush loaded with lambent yellow paint and run a jagged line about twenty feet in length across a section of the sky, and then drawn a matching but thinner line of black down its center.

As I stared in fascination at this strange phenomenon, something emerged from its center and began a slow tumble toward the surface of the lake. It was as if just inside the center of the crack there had been a platform, and the object had just been pushed off of it. There was nothing in the sky above the crack, and it wasn't really that wide. Nothing had passed through the sky above the crack, and yet here was the object, falling out of it and into the water.

As it fell, it appeared to perform a slow roll for a little under half of a rotation, seeming almost controlled in the movement. As it rotated, now lower in the sky, I could discern that it was actually two people, one holding onto the other about the waist and chest. By the time that had become apparent, though, they were almost to the water. I wondered if they'd survive the impact without injury. Then, even as I made ready to move in and attempt a rescue, they entered the water with a huge splash. As I rode out the wave they created I watched the splashdown point anxiously and, after a couple anxious moments, saw a person— no, make that *two* people— bob to the surface about a hundred yards off my port beam.

The sloops at the Institute are all equipped with a small electric motor, for use inside the marina or out on the lake when the wind dies down. I thumbed the switch that turned on the motor and grabbed the tiller to aim the craft in the direction of the people, praying that I would reach them in time. The water in Lake Chaac isn't terribly warm, even in summer. If I didn't get to them quickly, they risked hypothermia. I closed on them rapidly, and flipped the motor into reverse to slow down.

Taking into account how they had dropped out of the sky from nowhere, I had a *lot* of questions. But for the moment I pushed them behind me; the safety of these two was my first concern. I leaned out of the boat and grasped the woman by one of her arms, pulling her close enough to get my arms around her torso and haul her aboard. A tattered shard of red cloth fell away from her and sank beneath the surface as I finished dragging her across the railing. The man was a bit more of a struggle, as he outweighed the woman significantly. Finally, though, I had them both safely on deck.

My first observation was the condition of their clothes; what little they wore was left hanging on their bodies in shreds. My second observation was how badly their bodies had been bruised. I couldn't do anything about that, at the moment. Clark was far better suited, than I, to see to any treatment of injuries. I pulled a pair of blankets from a below-deck storage cubby, and draped one over the woman, for modesty's sake. Then, digging my Bluetooth earpiece out of my shirt pocket, I fitted it into place over my ear and tapped the button on its surface.

“Call Dot,” I commanded the device.

I studied them intently while I waited for my wife to pick up the phone at the other end. They both looked like they’d been through quite an ordeal. The woman was attractive, probably in her early thirties, and was at least breathing on her own. That was a good sign.

The man was a different story. Aside from the powder-blue shreds of a long-sleeved pullover shirt made of a fabric that resembled spandex, and the vestiges of something that might have been shoes or boots, he was clad in what appeared to be a pair of crimson Speedo’s, cinched at the waist with a bright yellow belt. His body was a mass of bruises and what appeared to be scorch-marks. He wasn’t breathing, and I had to roll him onto his stomach and start my old Boy Scout lifesaving training, moving his arms and shoulders to help move water out of his lungs, before he coughed and began to breathe once again. I judged him to be about six feet four inches in height and, aside from the massive trauma, he appeared to be a nearly perfect specimen of manhood. In fact, the longer I stared at him while waiting for Dot to answer the phone, the more he reminded me of Clark. Outside of my bronze-skinned friend, I’d never seen another so-perfectly developed physique.

Finally, Dot answered my call. She’d been out in our little garden, with Clark, Bonnie, Monk, and Renny. They’d all been praying for me, and it had taken her awhile to recognize the sound of her cell-phone bleating, from where she’d left it on the kitchen counter. I told her what was going on, and asked her to meet me at the docks with one of the campus vans. She agreed, and I ended the call.

With the sails still lowered, I aimed the prow of the sloop dead-on at the silhouette of the small lighthouse at the marina and lashed the tiller in place to keep me on course. Then I thumbed the switch for the motor and locked the throttle to its maximum speed. I still needed to finish with the man, and I figured I’d need both hands, for that task.

I was just finishing wrapping one of the blankets around him, when he opened his eyes and looked at me with a bewildered stare.

“Where?” he managed to get out.

“Finger Lakes region, New York,” I told him. “A place called Arronaxe.”

That garnered a confused look from him, and then he spoke again.

“ – wife?”

“If you mean the woman who was with you, she’s alive and breathing. Who are you?”

His mouth worked silently for a moment.

“Sssu...” I thought it was just a sound born of the pain he must be feeling, from all of the bruises. Then, “No. Cal-....Clarchhh Kennn...”

“Clark Kent?” I asked him, wondering if I’d heard him right.

He managed a brief nod, and then the blue eyes glazed over and closed. A quick feel of

his jugular and carotid assured me that there was still a pulse, but he was slipping, fast. I sent up a quick prayer that I'd get them both to shore in time. The Clark that I knew had been a skilled physician in his former life. Even if a lot of what he'd mastered had been eclipsed by the many medical advances made in the years he'd lain in that suspended animation chamber, I felt that his skill would give these folks a fighting chance until we could get them either to the infirmary on campus or to the small hospital in Arronaxe.

"Clark Kent, eh?" I repeated the name with a twinge of sadness in my voice. "You're worse off than I thought, my friend!"

I wouldn't realize the irony of those words, though, for a few hours.

* * *

I arrived at the marina to find that my friends had appropriated one of the cargo-van versions of the ElectroCab, to transport the couple. Monk was at the wheel, and Clark rode shotgun. Renny clambered out of the rear doors as soon as the vehicle came to a stop. Dot and Bonnie were exiting our 'personal' electro-car in an adjacent parking slot.

Clark took a brief look at both of them, and confirmed my earlier prognosis. "The woman's in fair shape, considering you say these two fell out of nowhere and into the lake, and considering the bruising she's sustained. The man, however, is not nearly as well off. Let's get them to the infirmary!"

Using blankets as temporary stretchers, Clark, Monk, Renny, and I managed to get the pair loaded into the back of the van. It took all of us to get the man aboard; he was a lot heavier than he looked. Clark and I squeezed into the back with our 'patients' and Dot made ready to close the doors behind us.

"Meet you at the infirmary, hon," she smiled, and slammed the panels shut.

"Infirmary, Monk," Clark called to the front. "Hit it! And don't spare the horses!"

"Gotcha, Doc!" the simian chemist yelled back in his squeaky voice. I smiled. It didn't happen often, but there were occasions where Monk heard Clark's strident 'command voice', and his mind slid effortlessly into a mode where the bronze man was still 'Doc Savage', and not 'Clark Robeson Dent'. I was just a tad envious of the years these men had spent together, and even more thankful that God had allowed me to become a part of their circle.

Since the marina was actually a part of the Institute's campus, the infirmary wasn't far away, and we made the trip in something under three minutes at modest speed. However, even at that, I chafed at the speed of the electrically-powered vehicle. We found the small medical facility deserted and locked. A note on the door explained that the paramedics normally on duty there had been summoned to respond to a call just outside of the little valley.

It didn't really matter, though. Most of us who were either on the staff or the board at CSI had 'special' key-codes that would open any door on campus, so we were able to gain entrance without problem.

We rushed the woman into a room just off the actual emergency room. After attaching the monitors, we left her to Dot and Bonnie, who had laid hands on her and were praying for

healing as we left the room to concentrate on the man. Him, we placed onto the infirmary's prototype diagnostic table. Clark dismissed us from the room, explaining that the table's sensitive diagnostic sensors might become confused with so many people around. As the others headed out to watch through the observation room next door, I walked over to the table and laid my hands on the unknown man's chest, asking for God to be present in the room and to exert His own brand of healing in this time of need. Then, I turned to follow the others.

"Perry," Clark called softly, "I'd like you to stay. I may need an extra pair of hands. Go ahead and wait just inside the doors, and you should be far enough away not to interfere with the sensors."

"Okay," I agreed, grabbing a stool and dragging it over next to the exit.

Though the patent application for the diagnostic table bore Amy Roberts Mayfair's name as primary designer, and Roberts Electronics, Inc., as the developer, Clark had had a big hand in its creation. Its inception had been as a result of his fascination with the medical technology of *Star Trek* and the simple question, 'Why not?'

As I watched Clark intently at work, I remembered how he had divided his time over the last few years between reading the Word and voraciously devouring practically every modern medical textbook in existence, trying to catch up with the fifty-year 'break' in his education. Then there were the hours of training on every piece of equipment that the infirmary – or Arronaxe's main hospital – had to offer.

Now, all of that study and training was paying off in spades. I sat quietly and watched as he moved expertly from panel to panel, intently gleaning everything he could from their displays.

Then, he suddenly stopped, and I witnessed something that startled me.

He was trilling.

It was an unconscious habit of Clark's, this strange trilling sound that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time. He'd tried desperately to break himself of the habit, as it was a facet of his former identity that could serve to put his secret at risk. Still, there had been times over the last few years when circumstances had caused him to slip. We'd all witnessed it, at one time or another. It was something he did as a result of stress or extreme concentration, often when a set of puzzling facts was presented to him. And, as I glanced back at the observation room, I could see that it had brought us all to our feet with concern.

"What is it, Clark?" I finally asked him.

He turned, first looking at me, and then at the crew in the observation room.

"I don't think we want to put this fellow into the regular hospital," he announced calmly.

"Why not?" I asked.

"He's not from around here."

"What do you mean? He's not from one of the nearby towns? He's not from America? What?"

"I mean, he's not from this planet, Perry," Clark stated.

It took me several seconds to crank my lower jaw back up off the floor. If anybody else in the world had told me what Clark just had, I'd have thought my leg was being pulled, but I knew that Clark wouldn't make a joke like that.

"What makes you think that, Clark?" I asked him.

"Several things, Perry," he sighed. "You know how strong Hugo Danner is. I saw you get him to lift one of those helicopters, on the *Bernhardt*, to prove it to Dot."

"Guilty as charged," I grinned, blushing slightly. "But this certainly isn't Hugo. He doesn't look a thing like him."

Clark smiled. "No. This man isn't Hugo, or even of a nature truly similar to him. He's different, in a number of ways. For one thing, his skin is of a level of density I've never seen. When I tried to take a blood sample from this fellow, I had to exert a good deal more force than should have been required, with the needle. There's something else, too; come over here and take a closer look at his skin."

I crossed to the side of the table, to get a better look at what he was pointing out.

"When we brought him in here, his body was virtually covered with scorch marks, of a sort normally associated with atmospheric friction. And, do you remember how badly he was bruised?"

"Yeah. He looked pretty battered, alright!"

"What about now?"

I looked down. There were clearer patches in the bruising. Even as I watched, one area of the bruising began to fade. It was like the special effects they used to depict the healing ability of Hugh Jackman's 'Wolverine' character, in the 'X-Men' films. Not quite as fast, but still evident in its progress, to even an untrained eye.

"They're disappearing!" I whispered, my eyes widening in amazement.

"Exactly. Hugo had similar abilities; he had a healing factor that pulled him back from the brink of death, when he had been struck by a lightning bolt."

"I remember. But he still would've died if the missionaries hadn't found him and nursed him back to health ... physically and spiritually." I added with a grin.

I looked back through the window of the observation room, to where the others were intently watching this unfold, as Clark showed us the rest of his evidence on the big fifty-inch main monitor screen. The CAT scan showed internal organs that weren't in exactly the same place as they should have been, if our unidentified guest were a normal human. It also revealed the presence of at least one organ that didn't even *exist* in normal human physiology.

Further, the man's musculature was far more advanced than anything Clark had ever

encountered. He showed us a comparison between the stranger's muscle tissue, and his own, and the difference was clear. He compared it to the way the ancient Japanese swords were fashioned: the metal flattened and folded over and over again, layer upon layer, until the blades had an incredible degree of tensile strength. Our stranger's muscle tissue was like that, and so was his bone structure. Clark theorized that this would account for the man's weight – a little over three hundred and fifty pounds, on a body that looked like it weighed about two-twenty-five – and something else.

"Now, I can't say how our friend's musculature compares to Hugo's, but do you recall some of the other capabilities Hugo exhibited, when we first met him in Africa?"

"Do I ever! He jumped a couple of miles in one leap! And he tossed a jeep like you or I would toss a basketball!"

"And he pulled Gumball's fully-loaded Osprey back from the edge of that cliff, I don't know how many yards, like it was no effort at all!" Renny added, through the intercom from the observation room.

Clark nodded. "This man can probably do the same. Perhaps more."

Monk called from the observation room, "Perry, are you really sure about what you saw? I mean, if this guy's so powerful, could he have been tryin' to jump over the lake and came up short?"

I shook my head. "They fell out of the sky." Then I proceeded to describe – again – what I had seen in the air above the lake, and how our guests had fallen out of it.

"A rift," mused Clark aloud. "A doorway from ... another dimension?"

"It's strictly science-fiction, on the surface, but it makes sense when no other explanation does," agreed Renny. "And it took 'em by surprise."

"What makes you say that?" asked Monk.

"They weren't dressed for it. Look at how little either one of 'em was wearing, when Perry pulled 'em into the boat. If they'd known that they'd be experiencing what they did, they'd have worn some sort of protective clothing. Logic says that either it wasn't available to 'em, or they weren't expecting what happened to them. Either way, whatever street clothes they were wearing got shredded by what they encountered."

"It's very possible," agreed Clark. "But that makes the assumption that they suffered the physical damage as a result of passing through the rift. What if the damage occurred *before* they entered the rift?"

"What makes you think that?" That was Monk, again.

"The nature of the injuries, Monk," Clark responded. "The woman sustained far less physical trauma than did this man. One would normally assume that two individuals passing through such a portal would sustain equal trauma, if it was the portal that caused it."

I looked at Clark, and cast a hand in the direction of the stranger. "Is he going to make

it?"

"Yes. He's healing even as we speak. But, for now, he's going to have to rely on whatever causes those amazing healing activities in his body, to carry the load. On the surface, he appears human, but we have the other evidence that shows that this is not the case. Until I can finish the analysis on his blood, and on the tissue samples, we can't even administer an IV of simple glucose and saline solution. We have no idea what it would do to him. For now, all we can do is make him comfortable and wait for him to come out of it on his own. I've set some alarms to trigger, if his condition changes appreciably in either direction. While we wait for him to come around, we might as well go and check out the woman."

We went into the other room. I took Dot and Bonnie aside and told them what Clark had discovered, during his examination of the man, and his overall conclusions. Bonnie accepted it, solely on the strength of the fact that it had been Clark who'd performed the exam.

"I trust his opinion," she said, "and I've gotten to know him very well, over the last couple years. He doesn't jump to conclusions like that on idle speculation."

Dot found it difficult to believe, yet accepted it. "After what we've done and seen, these last few years," she smiled thinly at me, "It shouldn't surprise me. Nothing should, really."

We transferred the woman to a gurney and wheeled her back to the emergency room, placing her on a second diagnostic bed. Clark began his examination of her.

"She's completely human," Clark concluded, after nearly forty minutes of the same rigorous scrutiny to which he'd subjected her companion. "The damage was less on her than it was on him. It's almost as though -"

"- he had been protecting her?" Dot finished the thought.

"Yeah," I agreed. "When I actually saw them fall, it happened so fast that I didn't really have time to sort out what was going on. I mean, I wasn't even sure that it was *people* falling, until just about the moment they hit the water. Looking back, I think he" I jerked a thumb in the direction of the other bed, "had her clutched to his chest, like he'd been carrying her. And I noticed that they did a sort of half-roll, as they fell. The roll stopped with him on his back, on the bottom."

"Like he was trying to make certain that it was his body that hit the water first?" Clark suggested.

I nodded. "We need to sit down talk about this whole thing; it's just too weird!"

"Let's go to the staff lounge," suggested Clark. "It's not being used."

We took the woman back to the room we'd commandeered for her, and Clark set up an IV of glucose, saline, and electrolytes, to aid in her recovery. Then, we all adjourned to the lounge, where we sat around a long conference table and reviewed our findings. A pair of monitors on one wall kept both of our "patients" in view.

"His neural paths are wrong," Clark informed us. "They're set up in some sort of double parallel fashion. It's like his neural system is capable of transferring signals to and from the

various parts of his body at a far faster rate of speed."

"He's a lot like Hugo," Renny commented. "He's more than a man."

"Maybe we'd be wrong in calling our stranger in there a 'man', at all," offered Clark. "When you boil it all down to its basics, he's really some sort of 'superman'."

I guess I'd subconsciously been adding things up ever since I pulled the couple into the boat, but the bottom-line conclusion just hadn't gotten to my conscious mind yet. Clark's last comment forced the evidence of my eyes and ears to gel. My throat went dry, my stomach started practicing my old Boy Scout knots and, for a few moments, I couldn't muster the ability to speak. But the look on my face was enough, at least for my wife.

"You okay, babe?" Dot asked, noticing my reaction.

"Yeah," I squeaked. "Clark?"

"Yes?"

I took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and told them what I was thinking.

"This guy came to, for a few seconds, right after I pulled him into the sloop. He asked me where he was, and I gave him a general answer. Then, I asked him his name."

"And?" prompted Renny, leaning forward to look down the table at me.

"And I could swear he tried to tell me that his name was Clark Kent!"

"You mean, like the character in the comic books and TV and movies?" Monk asked, a stunned expression on his face. "That ain't possible!"

"It would seem rather unlikely, Perry," Clark added.

"That's what I thought, too, when I heard him say it." I paused. "But, Clark, do you remember when we first met, and I asked you your name? How I told you that, before that moment, I'd always believed that Doc Savage was nothing more than a figment of Lester Dent's imagination. I learned differently."

Clark studied me thoughtfully, for a moment, his fingers gently rubbing his chin.

"It wasn't Dent's imagination," he nodded. "Dent was a biographer, to us, much like Dr. Watson was, to Sherlock Holmes in Doyle's novels. I met Dent in 1933. He had heard, from an old soldier, about an escape from the German prison-camp called 'Loki', and had tracked the various references down to me. Since the incident was still classified by military intelligence, we couldn't relate the story to him. But, meanwhile, the press had been making big news out of our little group's involvement in some other cases. Dent later visited us and asked to publish retellings of some of our adventures. The first one was the story that began with my father's death."

"'Man of Bronze'. I've read it." I told him. "I've read all the adventures."

"Well, the events actually occurred in '32, but Dent's version didn't see publication until '33. It wasn't until 1935 that Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster came up with their 'Superman' character. They claimed they were influenced by Hugo Danner, and by me, adding traits from mythical and Biblical heroes like Achilles and Samson. Their 'Superman' didn't make it into print until 1938; it took them that long to sell the character to a publishing house."

"Clark, forgive me, but you're preaching to the choir. I grew up with Superman. I know the back-story, as well as all the legends surrounding his creation."

"So ... is it possible that the guy in the other room is ... that he's really..." Monk couldn't say it.

"Superman?" Clark shrugged. "I don't know. If I were a secularly-based man, I might suggest that he could be one of the first to show the next stages of human evolution, like the characters in those 'X-Men' films Perry enjoys. Since I don't believe in evolution, and he is so different from us, the more logical conclusion is that he is a visitor from another planet. With his bone-structure, musculature, and healing ability, he is admittedly a sort of 'superman'. Whether or not he's *the* Superman is only conjecture, at this point in time. We'll know more when he regains consciousness, and can answer some questions."

Chapter Two – "Strange visitor from another planet..."

Arronaxe, New York
30 July, 2005

The paramedics had returned from their emergency call and looked over the patients. Clark explained to them his findings on the man, and asked them to keep things quiet until the man could be questioned. While they tended to the woman, Clark called in an expert to help us understand how any of this could be possible.

Dr. Mike Renfield was the dean of the Physics department at CSI. He joined us in the staff lounge, making his stocky frame comfortable in one of the chairs, and sipped a Pepsi while we explained our story so far. He sat patiently, soaking it all in and not saying anything, other than to ask for an occasional clarification from one or the other of us, until Clark and I had laid it all out for him.

"I would tend to agree with your hypothesis, gentlemen," Mike finally said, nodding. "As strange as it might sound, you may indeed have an extraterrestrial in the other room."

"But the woman he was with checks out as fully human, Mike," Monk objected. "Who is she? She ain't no mutant space alien!"

"Well, let's look at the evidence, Andrew," Mike suggested. Raising a hand, he ticked the points off on his fingers. "Point one: you have a man, in the next room, whose physiology is not that of normal human beings from this planet. This is a physical reality and, as such, is incontrovertible."

"I'm with you, so far, Mike," Monk nodded. "He's there on the bed, in the next room, and we all saw that his insides ain't exactly 'normal', so we can't deny it."

“Excellent, Andrew,” Mike smiled. “Now then. Point two: he appeared out of thin air. More properly, if Perry’s eye-witness description is accurate, out of what could very well be a sort of rift, or portal, leading to another dimension.”

“Alright,” Monk said, rubbing the stubble on his chin. “Perry says he fell out of a hole in the sky. Perry’s statements are pretty reliable. So you think this hole in the sky is a gateway to another dimension?”

“It was a portal to, or from, somewhere, Andrew,” Mike explained. “Every hole has two sides to it. From where Perry was, in the boat, he couldn’t see the other side.”

Monk nodded, but didn’t comment further, so Mike continued.

“Point three: you have Perry’s report of his brief conversation with the man, before he lapsed into his present coma. Can you run through that part, again, Perry?”

I thought for a moment.

“Like I said,” I answered, “the first thing he said was ‘Where? Wife?’ I gave him a short answer, as to the where, and told him that the woman we found him with was okay. He seemed vastly relieved, at that, and then I asked him who he was.”

“And his reply?” Mike prompted. “The exact words he used, if you can recall them.”

“ ‘Sssu... No. Cal--...Clarchhh Kennn...’ ” I repeated them, trying to mimic the sounds and the pauses between them as best I could.

Mike’s smile went from ‘minor’ to ‘major’.

“That’s exactly how it should have gone, if your hypothesis is correct!” he exclaimed.

“Wanna explain that, for the folks in the cheap seats, Mike?” Monk asked him.

“Surely, Andrew,” Mike nodded. “For the moment, let’s allow the assumption that the hypothesis which Clark and Perry have presented is absolute truth – that our guest is, in fact, the very Superman we’re familiar with as a fictional character. Whatever propelled him into our world, and left his body in the state Clark described, had to be a very powerful force, indeed, to inflict such trauma on him.”

“I’m okay, with that,” Monk smiled. “But whatever it was, I sure as blazes wouldn’t want to deal with it. Anything that could leave Superman in the shape this guy was in, when we found him...”

“I agree wholeheartedly, Andrew,” Mike chuckled. “Now, pretend you’re him, for just a moment. Under normal circumstances, you’re invulnerable; virtually nothing can harm you. Yet, you’ve been hit with something that sent you reeling, that has you struggling to maintain even a few seconds of consciousness. You’re extremely groggy, a condition in which the normal mental processes take a bit of extra time to function.”

“I’ll second that,” Monk grinned. “I’ve been hit hard a whole lot of times. A couple of

times, it took me a while to even remember who I was!”

“Exactly. You don’t know where you are. Are you among friends, or in the hands of an enemy? Someone asks you for your name. The first thing that comes to your mind is the name that most people know you by: Superman. But, just in time, your mental censors cut in, and you realize that it might not be safe to give that one. What’s next? The name you were given at birth. In his case, ‘Kal-El’. That might not be safe, either, since you’ve given your history in at least one major newspaper interview, and that included giving out the ‘Kal-El’ name, so it could be directly connected with Superman. So you fall back on the name under which you were raised, ‘Clark Kent’.”

He paused, to sip at his Pepsi.

“If we were dealing with a mental patient, who existed with a delusion of being this person, he would most probably have responded to Perry’s question by identifying himself as either Superman or Clark Kent, but not with all three names, and in the order he uttered them.”

He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers beneath his chin.

“With those bits of evidence to support it, if what you suspect is actually true, my guess is that – when she regains consciousness and we can question her – she’s going to tell us that her name is Lois Lane.”

"Lois Kent," I nonchalantly corrected. "They finally got married."

“But that don't explain how, does it?” Monk continued, ignoring my comment. “I mean, Superman’s been a comic character for seventy-plus years! How do we have his adventures in our world, if he comes from an alternate universe?”

“Good question, Andrew,” Mike laughed. “May I suggest divine inspiration?”

“Whattaya mean, divine inspiration? Doesn’t that only apply to pastors, for topics for their sermons, and to lay folks, for the ability to understand what the Word is saying to them?”

“Not at all,” Mike disagreed. “You’re thinking in the theatrical sense, where God, or an angel, appears to the one person who can stop the terrible thing from happening. It’s too ‘Hollywood’. And, most of the time, that’s not what inspiration consists of. More often than not, it’s just that notion that seems to come to you from out of nowhere, but ‘arrives’ inside you, when you witness a very touching moment, that urges you to write it down and share it with others. I imagine that a lot of novels – at least the ones that make a moral point, or convey a universal truth that can change lives for the better, were written by people into whom God whispered the tiniest suggestion.”

"Are you saying that God somehow provided Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster with the inspiration for Superman?" That question came from Renny.

"How many people have stated that a vivid dream was their inspiration for a movie or a book?"

"I'll buy that," nodded Monk.

“God could very easily have given Siegel and Schuster a dream about the *real* Superman of an alternate Earth. The amount of detail could have been immense, since even the most detailed dreams – the ones that seem to encompass days, weeks, or even years of activity – take only a moment or two of real-time for the brain to experience.

“But, what about the time difference, Mike?” Renny asked. “Perry says that Superman has been around, in one medium or another – comics, movies, television – for nearly seventy years. The guy in the other room doesn’t look like he’s much out of his twenties, and the woman doesn’t, either!”

“If we’re considering divine inspiration, time isn’t really a factor, Renny. We also have to include prophecy. Have you ever read the twenty-second Psalm?”

“I’m sure I’ve read it,” Renny nodded slightly, “because I’ve finally managed to read the Bible from cover to cover. But I couldn’t tell you what that one says, chapter and verse, like I can with some of the other scriptures.”

“‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ the psalmist begins,” Clark said. I looked over at him. His eyes were closed, with a small tear forming at the corner of each. I understand that; I can’t read that one, myself, without emotion.

“It’s a Psalm written by King David, over five hundred years before Christ was born. Yet, in its verses, it captures exact words uttered by Christ during his crucifixion – the verse I just quoted. Later, in verse sixteen, it says ‘...*a band of evil men have encircled me, they have pierced my hands and feet.*’ In verse eighteen, ‘*They divide my garments among them, and cast lots for my clothing.*’...” Clark’s voice faltered.

“I think that the point Mike was trying to show you, Renny,” I picked up the thread, “is this: King David lived between 1005 and 970 BC. The Roman Empire didn’t really come into existence until 510 BC. It was the Romans who invented crucifixion as form of execution. Yet, in this psalm, David accurately portrays the suffering of Christ on the cross, complete with the details of the soldiers gambling for His clothing! The only way He could do that would be if God revealed it to him. If He can do that sort of thing nine hundred years in advance, then fifty or sixty some years is a walk in the park, for Him.”

“Precisely, Perry.” Mike concurred in a soft voice. “Thank you. And you, too, Clark.”

“You’re welcome, Mike,” Clark replied quietly. I could tell that something was up.

“What is it, Clark?” I asked him.

“Thinking about the scriptures reminded me of a verse I read, just this morning,” he finally said, opening his eyes and looking at me, and yet through me.

“Which one?”

“I’ll tell you later, Perry,” he said. “It’s not relevant to our current discussion.”

“Alright,” I nodded. Then, addressing Mike, “You were about to say, before we got off on that minor detour?”

“I was discussing some of the logical points in favor of his being whom we thought,” Mike recapped the discussion. “Now, as far as our friend in the next room is concerned, has anyone really studied his face?”

I looked around, noting shrugged shoulders and shaking heads.

"Follow me." Mike stood, and walked slowly toward the door leading into the main hallway, with us right behind him. In the trauma bay, our unknown guest lay on the diagnostic bed with his head now propped up on a pair of pillows.

“So none of you has really studied his facial features, eh?” Mike repeated his question. “He doesn’t look the slightest bit familiar to any of you?” Then, taking his wire-rimmed glasses from their perch on his nose, he slid them gently onto the face of our visitor.

“How about now?” he asked.

We studied the face. A glimmer of recognition fluttered just into reach at the back of my mind.

“Still nothing?” Mike looked at us with the slightest trace of humor twinkling in his eyes, as if he were enjoying a private joke at our expense.

“How about now?” He removed his glasses from our visitor, and took a lock of the man’s hair, gently pulling it out across his forehead and letting it fall. It lay there in a curling shape, like the letter ‘s’, just like in the comic books and the Chris Reeve films.

"Holy cow," I muttered.

Renny glanced over at me. "That's my line!"

“Nah,” Monk waved a hand. “He don’t really look nothin’ like the pictures in the comics.”

"Let's find out," I said, and walked over to one of the computer terminals that I knew was connected to both the Internet and the big monitor. Finding one of my favorite Superman websites, I pulled up a page containing nothing but the facial portraits of Kal El of Krypton, as drawn by each of the many artists who’d ever worked on the comics, and displayed them on the big screen behind the head of the diagnostic bed.

“Superman's been drawn by dozens of different artists over the last six decades.” I explained. “The earliest artists really never had their best work show, because the printing presses of the day couldn’t produce truly accurate renderings of their work in color. The later artists all tended to concentrate on certain of his features, like the jaw-line, or the shape of his cheekbones and nose, for one reason or another. But let’s pretend that you could’ve taken a photo of this man, in the familiar costume, and then show a thirty second glimpse of the photo to every one of those artists, asking them to then draw the image they had seen. They’d have all drawn our guest, here, the same way they drew their own unique portrayals of Superman.”

Monk and the others looked back and forth from the images to the figure on the table. Slowly, I saw the recognition begin to dawn on most of their faces.

"Oh, man," muttered Monk, rubbing his forehead. "This is too much for my old brain. A superhero, out of the comics? Alive?"

"There was a time when I thought that you were a work of fiction, Monk," I reminded him. "And, there's something else. Before their arrival, while I was in that 'white place' with Long Tom and Ham, Ham said something rather puzzling."

"Like what?"

"Well, if I can quote him correctly, he said 'Speaking 'legally', Perry, you might even say that it's the most easily recognized thing of all...'"

"What's that got to do with this?" Renny asked.

"Well, the thought just occurred to me," I mused, "That 'S' symbol on Superman's costume is – in our world – both copyrighted and trade-marked. Shaquille O'Neal has it tattooed on his left arm, and kids draw it on notebook covers. But, if you want to put it on a shirt and sell the shirt, that – *legally speaking* – requires contracts and royalty payments. And I read somewhere, some time back that – according to a survey taken by some group or other – it is the most-recognized symbol in the world."

"...the most easily recognized thing of all..." Monk murmured, nodding his head in comprehension."

"Well, we've certainly got a lot of things to consider," Clark suggested. "Some of them are still questions to which only our patient may know the answer. For now, let's let our stranger recover."

We'd gotten so deep into our philosophical discussion with Mike that we'd forgotten to keep watch on our patients via the room's monitors. As we stepped into the hallway, we were met by the woman. She was wrapped in a knee-length terrycloth robe – infirmary issue; there was at least one on a garment hook in every room – and her expression was one of confusion mixed with grim determination.

"Excuse me," she said, "but can somebody please tell me where I am, and where I can find my husband?"

I was closest. I approached her, stopping just out of arm's reach. "You're in the infirmary on the campus of the Clark Savage Institute. That's located slightly north and east of the Finger Lakes region of New York. Now, could you tell us your full name, please?"

"The name is Kent," she said, squaring off opposite me and placing her hands defiantly on her hips. "Lois Joanne Lane Kent. Why?"

By the sheer grace of God, I somehow managed to overcome my shock and continue.

"And your husband's name?"

"Clark Joseph Kent," she answered, growing more agitated. "Where is he?"

"Great Caesar's Ghost," I said under my breath, and just barely caught the shocked glance

she shot at me. Okay, so that wasn't my line, either. Under the circumstances, though, *someone* had to say it, and I was the only person there whose name was Perry.

"Why are you asking me these questions?" she demanded. "Where's Clark?"

"He's alright, for the moment. Let's go into the lounge, and we'll explain."

I guided her into the lounge, and we sat at the big table again. She looked at all of us with a very curious expression on her face.

"My name's Perry Liston, and I was the one who found you and your husband. You'd fallen into a lake a short distance from here. You were both unconscious. I fished you out, wrapped you both with blankets, and we rushed you to this infirmary. Your husband is in the trauma bay just down the hall from where you were. He's okay, but still unconscious."

At the mention of her husband's comatose state, Lois blanched with sudden terror. Her prior determined demeanor bit the dust, replaced with a sudden flood of tears. At first, it puzzled me, but then the only practical explanation surfaced. Mike Renfield's theory meshed pretty well with what Long Tom had told me, earlier that afternoon. If we were really playing host to *the* Superman – even one from an alternate universe – the *last* thing that Lois Lane Kent would be expecting to hear was that her husband had suffered so much as a hangnail! Come to think of it, it was really the last thing I'd expect to hear, as well.

"Take me to him! Please!" she begged. "I have to see him!"

"Look, Mrs. Kent," I tried to calm her down a bit, "We could really use a few minutes to sit and talk with you. Hopefully, we can figure out at least some of what happened..."

"Not until I see my husband!" she spat out vehemently, sniffing back the remnant of her tears.

"Mrs. Kent," Clark spoke this time, in a strong but calming tone. "We've done everything we can for your husband, under the circumstances. His body seems to be mending, but I must tell you that there are certain ... anomalies present that make it difficult for us to proceed with treatment in any major degree. Unless ..." but he was talking to her back, now; she had suddenly spun on her heel and stalked off. She came to a halt several paces down the hall, where she leaned against a wall, pounding it with her fists.

"Oh, God, help me," she sobbed quietly, "I don't know what to do!"

I was just about to follow her down the hall, when a hand on my shoulder stopped me. I looked to my right, and saw Dot and Bonnie, passing me, heading for where Lois stood sobbing.

"Yes, Heavenly Father," Dot was speaking, praying with her eyes open as she walked. "Please find a way to let Lois know that she's among friends, who only want to help her in this time of need."

"Amen, Lord," Bonnie added. "Open her heart and let her see that nobody here is going to harm either her or her husband ... and that she doesn't have to be afraid to speak the truth."

The words from Matthew 18:20 came rushing to the surface from the depths of my heart:

'For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.' Then James 5:16:
'...The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.'

I dropped to my knees there and then, joining silently in prayer with my wife and Clark's that God's will be made known in this time and place, so that we might do it speedily. I never looked back, but I heard enough rustling of clothing and soft whispers behind me to know that the others were doing likewise.

Sometimes, when I get really deeply involved in prayer, I lose track of the passage of time. This was one of those times, since I had so much to pray about. The present crisis with Lois was only the tip of the iceberg. To be honest, I still hadn't – at least in my own mind – taken sufficient time to thank God for having sent the explanation of my dream, and for His wondrous planning and timing.

I was still praying when I felt a gentle touch on my cheek. Opening my eyes, I looked up to find Dot smiling down at me. Her other hand was wrapped around Lois' back in a gesture of both support and – apparently – new-found friendship. Glancing to my right, I noticed that Bonnie had Lois' nine-o'clock similarly guarded and supported.

"Dot tells me you need to ask some important questions," Lois spoke to me. "I'll answer all of them, but – please? May I see my husband, first?"

Slowly, I stood to my feet, looking around to find the others rising as well. Then, leading the way, I moved toward the door into the trauma bay.

As we entered the room, Lois glanced around briefly, taking in everything in the chamber, including the display of art still showing on the main monitor. Everything else was forgotten, however, when her eyes focused on the diagnostic bed.

She blanched again, at the sight of her husband's injured form, but she doubled her pace until she was at his side and planting a kiss on his forehead.

"Thank God you're still alive, darling," she breathed into his ear. Then, looking at us, "What are his vitals?"

"His blood pressure is one-sixty over one-ten, and body temperature is currently one-oh-six," Clark told her after consulting the diagnostic bed's read-out panel. "I haven't the faintest idea what to do to bring either one back under control."

"You wouldn't," Lois smiled wanly at him. "But the vitals are 'normal' for him, if he's really sustained a great deal of trauma. His body is working overtime at repairing the damage. You see, he... he's ..."

"...from another planet?" Monk suggested with a grin. "A place called 'Krypton'?"

Lois took one last look at us, shrugged her shoulders, and nodded. She looked down at her husband.

"Yes," she sighed.

"We've come to that conclusion already, Mrs. Kent," Clark quietly informed her. "We've

had a chance to examine him. His CAT-scan disclosed the fact that his internal organs are a bit different from human normal.”

“You got a CAT-scan of him?” she asked, her eyes going wide in astonishment. “Whatever that was, it must’ve really hit him hard ... but then, he was holding me at the time ... yes, of course ... he extended his field to *protect* me ... oh, that poor dear!”

"Excuse me?" Clark inquired.

“It’s kind of hard to put it in simple terms,” she sighed, giving him a brief apologetic smile. “One thing, though: keeping him in the dark, like this, isn’t doing him any good.”

“It’s kinda hard to explain anything to an unconscious man, ma'am,” Monk grumbled.

“Oh, *duh!*” I exclaimed, smacking my forehead with the palm of my hand, then looking at my watch. “Clark, we’ve got to get him outside! It’s only about two thirty! There’s plenty of good sunlight left! The roof! Let’s get him up to the roof garden!”

Clark looked at me as though I’d lost my mind. I couldn’t really blame him.

“I’ll explain on the way!” I suggested. “For now, just trust me!”

Acting together, Monk, Renny, Clark and I got Lois’ husband transferred to a gurney and wheeled him down the hall to the elevator. As we waited for the cage, I tried to give them the short version from what I knew.

“His body’s like a solar battery! His skin distills vast amounts of energy from the light of Earth’s yellow sun, and stores it up inside his body!”

“So you’re saying that he needs exposure to sunlight in order to begin re-charging?” Clark asked.

I nodded. “Yes!”

“He’s correct,” Lois confirmed what I’d said. Then she looked anxiously at me. “But how did you *know?*”

I looked at her. “It’s a *long* story. Let’s just get him up there first, then we’ll explain!”

The elevator arrived and the doors opened. It was just big enough for the gurney, Lois, Dot, Bonnie, and me; the rest of the group was already charging up the three flights of stairs. Bonnie punched the button for the Roof Garden. Moments later, we were all together on the roof of the building. Clark and I positioned the gurney for maximum exposure to sunlight and folded the blanket back to expose all of the skin that wasn’t covered by those red Speedos – actually, all that remained of that costume of his. We gathered a batch of the folding lawn chairs from around the roof. Putting them into a rough circle next to the gurney where we wouldn’t block the light, we sat down to begin our ‘vigil’.

“Now, will someone please tell me what’s going on?” barked Lois.

I moved in closer. “Your husband is Superman.”

She nodded dumbly, her eyes wide and her mouth open slightly in astonishment.

“How...?” The word was a hoarse, astonished whisper.

Our eyes met, and I smiled. "Mrs. Kent ... we're on your side."

She sighed. "It's Lois, please." She looked down at her feet; they were bare, and there were a few small bruises from earlier. "This is all too strange – and, believe me, *we've* seen strange."

I chuckled. "So have we."

Bonnie moved in and gave Lois a hug. Dot did the same from the opposite side. It was the perfect thing for the moment.

"Perry, I don't know that much about Superman," asked Bonnie. "Can you guys fill me in?"

"Yeah – me, too!" added Renny. "I was more into pulp novels back then, but I remember the radio show. And the TV show, in the 50's. 'Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound'."

“Radio? Television?” Lois’s mystified expression deepened.

"Let me tackle this," I requested, looking at Lois. "If I'm wrong, please correct me."

"Go ahead," she intoned with a shrug.

“Well, he was born on Krypton, a planet orbiting a red giant star some thirty-six light years from Earth, where he was given the name, ‘Kal-El’, by his parents, Jor-El and Lara. Jor-El was one of the great scientists of his day. Through his research into a series of major events, both seismic and solar, that would dwarf anything we’ve seen here on Earth, he concluded that Krypton was literally being shaken apart by gravitational stresses coming from their sun. It was unclear whether to him which would occur first, but one of two events was going to occur. Either the gravity waves would rip the planet apart, or the sun would collapse upon itself and then explode into a nova. Either way, Krypton was doomed, and the time-frame was a matter of months, if not weeks or days.

“The rest of the scientific community scoffed at the notion, but Jor-El was certain. He had already designed a form of star-drive engine. Now, he set to building a ship propelled by that engine. He didn’t have either the time or the materials to build one big enough to save himself, Lara, and the child, so he decided that the child, at least, would survive. He built a tiny spacecraft equipped with the star-drive, and used it to launch his son into space just seconds ahead of the explosion of the planet’s red sun.

“Through long-range observation, Jor-El knew that there was life on Earth, humanoid life that, to all outward appearances, was so much like the humans of Krypton that he knew his son could survive and blend in, so that was where he aimed the ship. He knew that the trip would be a long one, even at the speed the ship could reach, but that – due to relativistic effects – far less time than that would seem to pass, for the child inside.

“The spaceship crash-landed on Earth, in a corn field outside of Smallville, Kansas, where he was found by Jonathan and Martha Kent. The Kents were on their way home, in their truck, from visiting relatives on the other side of the state, when they saw the little ship crash. The one sad part of the Kents’ marriage was that Martha was unable to bear children. Since one look at the spaceship convinced both of them that the infant wasn’t from Earth, they figured that nobody would be looking for him, and so they took him home to raise him as their own son. They passed him off, to the neighbors, as the offspring of relatives who had died in an accident. They hid the tiny ship in their storm shelter under an old tarp. They gave him the first name ‘Clark’, which was Martha’s maiden name, and ‘Joseph’, after Jonathan’s father.”

I paused, taking a sip of lemonade and looking at Lois.

“How old is he?”

“Thirty four,” she responded. “Mom and Dad Kent figure that he was a little less than a year old when they found him, and he’s been here for about thirty three years.”

“Krypton was a high-gravity world.” I continued. “Picture a planet about the size of Jupiter, but whose mass is solid, rather than gaseous. The high gravity accounts for the basic muscular density that Clark was marveling at. That part of him is genetic, but I suspect that the solar energy thing amplifies it immensely. Their bodies also generate a sort of ‘aura’, or ‘force field’ that extends a couple millimeters above the skin. If I remember right, on Krypton this served to protect them from their sun’s harsher radiation, and was apparently taxed to the limit to do just that. But when he came to earth, with a far lesser gravity and a yellow sun, he began to develop ‘powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men’. His body also began to store up the energy that his skin absorbed from our yellow sun.

“The force field that had barely served to protect his parents from their sun’s radiation didn’t have to perform that task, here. Instead, boosted by the massive quantities of energy his body distilled from our milder form of sunlight, it became a shield that virtually nothing can penetrate. Under normal conditions, he’s invulnerable. Obviously, based on the extent of his initial injuries, whatever hit them took them by surprise, and pushed his energy reserve to the point of exhaustion.”

I looked at Lois briefly. "How am I doing?"

"You're batting a thousand, so far" she admitted. "But would you mind telling me how you know all of this?"

“Bear with me for just a bit longer, Lois,” I asked her with a smile. “The two of you were flying somewhere when this happened, weren’t you?”

She nodded, wincing as she started feeling the pain from her bruises. “Yes. His latest novel is at the top of the best-seller list. We were out in Los Angeles, where he was making the usual rounds of the late-night talk shows. I went along to cover it all for the Planet. Our flight home out of LAX got cancelled at the last minute and, instead of waiting for the first flight the next morning, I sweet-talked Clark into just flying the two of us back to Metropolis. Normally, I like to stay awake when he takes me flying ...” her eyes glazed over, slightly, and she smiled, as she remembered something. “You have to fly with him to understand it.”

“When he’s recovered, and if he’s willing, I’d love to, but I think I have a pretty fair idea,” I smiled at her, remembering my flight from Florida to Caroline Island with Mitch’s experimental rocket-pack strapped to my back. “Go on.”

“Well, like I said, I usually love to stay awake whenever he takes me flying, but I was literally beat. We’re due to celebrate our anniversary in a couple days —”

“June nineteenth, isn’t it?” I asked, interrupting.

“That’s right!” she confirmed, amazement evident in her voice and expression. “How did you know?”

“Do you have ‘comic books’ where you come from, Lois?” I asked her.

“Do you mean the ‘comics’ section of the newspaper?”

Well, that was a logical response, coming from a newspaper reporter. Still, it gave me an idea.

“Who are some of the characters, in your ‘comics’?”

“Well, there’s one about a kid called Dennis the Menace, and another about a dog named Marmaduke, and one about a police detective named Dick Tracy...” she shrugged, pausing for a moment to think of others.

“We have them here, too,” I nodded. “But, this Dick Tracy strip – you have to read it every day, for a couple months, to go from the start of one of his adventures to its conclusion, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, picture a little ‘magazine’, maybe thirty or so pages long, that chronicles one of those adventures from beginning to end,” I suggested. “Every month, you go to the corner newsstand and pick up the latest issue, and read a whole adventure.”

“That’s a pretty neat idea!” she nodded, smiling.

“Well, that’s what we have, in this world,” I grinned. “We’ve got the newspaper strips, including Dick Tracy. But we’ve got hundreds of those little monthly magazines that depict the adventures of inspiring heroes who battle all manner of evil in the world. Most of these heroes, through some strange occurrence, have gained powers or abilities that normal humans only dream of having, and use these powers to fight crime and evil.”

“Wow!” Lois whistled.

“One of the very first such ‘magazines’ ever published, in our world, contained a story about your husband, Superman,” I continued. “Of all the ‘comic book’ heroes in our world, he’s the one who’s been around the longest, and he’s the most beloved of them all, as well.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Not at all,” I told her. “Superman has been around for decades. There’s been one radio program, four television series, and four major movies about him, in our world. He’s even made the cover of *Time*, one of our major news magazines!”

“So...” Lois mused, “Our anniversary?”

“It’s part of what we know, about the two of you, in our world. Those of us who follow your husband’s exploits devotedly had been waiting for a wedding between the two of you, for decades! It was rather a red-letter day, for us. I mean, even though you’re fictional characters, in our world, there were plenty of radio and television stations who mentioned the item in their morning and evening newscasts, on that date.”

“I see...” she sighed. “Now where was I? Oh, yes. Since we already knew we were headed for Los Angeles, he’d promised me a shopping spree on Rodeo Drive as part of my present. We’d spent all day shopping, and then there was the interview on *The Tonight Show*. That was on the heels of two previous late nights, doing Larry King, and Letterman, so I was really tired. After he wrapped me up in his cape and we headed home, I don’t think I lasted more than a few minutes before I was fast asleep.

“When I did wake up, it was because we were tumbling, being shaken around like we were in a blender. I didn’t know what it was, but it frightened me. Clark usually avoids rough weather like the plague, whenever I’m flying with him, and he can spot such weather patterns *miles* away, with his telescopic vision. Whatever could blind-side him, and then knock us around like that, must’ve been something pretty serious. Anyway, somewhere in the midst of that, I blacked out. When I came to, I was downstairs in your clinic. While I was trying to figure out where my clothes were, I turned on the television to see if it could shed any light on what happened.

“That was my first clue that something was *really* wrong. WGBS is carried as part of the basic package on every cable and satellite system in the country, and yet I couldn’t find it. That’s when I found the robe, and figured I’d better find someone in charge and see what was going on. The rest, you know.”

She took a deep breath. The pain was starting to take its toll on her. But she bravely looked over at the gurney where her Clark was basking in the sunlight, still unconscious.

She looked back at me. Her face was tired, but her eyes were very much alive. “Now can you tell me how you seem to know so much about the world’s most closely-guarded secret? And what was that bit about us being fictional characters?”

“I think I know, now,” I replied, smiling at her. “My guess is that you and your husband have somehow been thrown into a universe that exists parallel to the one you know. This Earth is a lot like the one that you came from, but with some differences.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” I mused, trying to figure out where to start, “Can you tell me where, in your world, Metropolis is located?”

“It’s in the lower south-east corner of New York,” she stated. “Right on the coast.”

“Is there a huge statue, out on a little island, that you can see from the city?” I asked her.

“You mean, the Statue of Liberty?” she raised an eyebrow. “Sure.”

“That would be one of the major differences,” I smiled. “While there is a place called ‘Metropolis’ in this world, it’s a sleepy little town in Illinois, with a total population of about seven thousand. The city located on the site of Metropolis, in our world, is called New York City. And there isn’t any ‘Smallville’, in Kansas. The difference that concerns us most directly at the moment, though, is the fact that – in *our* universe – Superman has been a *fictional* hero for nearly seventy years.”

“That’s a *lot* longer than I’ve been alive,” came a strange male voice from the direction of the gurney. Our heads all spun at the sound, and we saw that our patient’s eyes were open.

“Darling! You’re awake!” Lois shrieked, as she jumped up to stand at the side of the gurney. Taking her husband’s hand in hers, she leaned over and gave him a brief kiss. Then, “How do you feel, honey?”

“Battered and bruised,” he said, slowly sitting up. “But I’m healing. I can feel it. I am a bit thirsty, though.” He smiled.

Bonnie got up and went to fetch a cup of water from the roof garden’s tiny enclosed kitchenette and comfort-station.

“I might as well say it,” he addressed us after he’d moistened his throat, “I’ve actually been awake for several minutes, but I thought it...prudent...to pretend otherwise, while I got a sense of where I was, and with whom.”

He smiled again, and looked at his wife.

“Which one of these folks was just relating that capsule version of my life?” he asked her.

“That would be me,” I said, my hand raised slightly. “Perry Liston. I’m the one who fished you and Lois out of the lake.”

I took the couple steps to the gurney, and we shook hands briefly. I felt an emotional ‘rush’, as our hands clasped, and was momentarily stuck with awe at actually meeting the famous ‘Man of Steel’. I tried to say something befitting the occasion of the handshake, but was speechless. It was only after our hands separated, that I was able to think straight.

“I guess you really should get to know everyone,” I suggested to both of our guests and, starting with my wife, I went around the group making the introductions. By his position in the circle, our Clark was last in line.

“And this is Clark Dent,” I finished.

“Clark Dent and Clark Kent,” Bonnie giggled. “Now, that’s *some* pair!”

“If Monk’s firstborn were here,” I added, “you’d have three of a kind!”

“That beats a pair, any day!” Monk laughed.

While this little side-bar was going on, Clark Kent was staring intently at our Clark with those piercing blue eyes.

“S funny,” Kent mused. “When I first saw you, I thought of someone else, but then dismissed the notion because he’s just a character in a series of stories I read when I was growing up, back in Smallville.”

“What stories?” I asked him, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

“It was a series of paperback adventure novels, all centering around a character named Clark Savage, Junior.” Kent explained, “Known to the world at large as ‘Doc Savage’. It’s really strange...”

“Paperback novels?” I asked. “Not pulp magazines?”

“Well, Dad told me that the books were reprints of stories originally published in the pulp magazines of the ‘thirties and ‘forties,” Kent stroked his chin with a thumb and forefinger, “but he’d never actually seen any of those. Why?”

“Doesn’t matter, really,” I shrugged. “Just another difference between our worlds. But, you were starting to say something else, and I interrupted.

“Well, I was just thinking that it was really strange...” he cocked his head to one side, taking another long look at Clark. “But, that’s impossible.”

“What is?” Our Clark asked, moving closer. “What’s strange? What’s impossible?”

“The descriptions of Doc Savage...and the paintings on the paperback covers...you really look a lot like him.” He paused, and breathlessly added, “The resemblance is utterly remarkable.”

“It would appear, ladies and gentlemen,” Mike stepped into the conversation, “that we have a most interesting set of circumstances at work, here.”

“How so, Mike?” Renny asked.

“Clark Kent, alias Superman, is a fictional hero here in our world. Further, while he actually *does* exist, in our reality, in both fashions, our Clark is apparently also recognized as a fictional hero in their world.”

“Is he inferring...?” Kent asked our Clark.

“Actually, yes,” Clark admitted. It didn’t show through his bronzed skin, but the expression on his face was a good clue that he was blushing a bit. “I was born Clark Savage, Junior. Near the end of the career that was captured in Lester Dent’s retellings, I was ambushed by one of my enemies and put into suspended animation for several decades. Thus, I appear to look a bit younger than my surviving associates. You may recall being introduced to Andrew Mayfair, and to Ivan Renwick. You’ll no doubt remember them more readily, from the tales, as ‘Monk’ and ‘Renny’.

Lois had already done her fair share of gaping in astonishment, for the day. Now, it was her husband's turn. He tuned, letting his legs dangle from the edge of the gurney, and sat there with an awestruck expression on his face, as his gaze moved from Clark to Monk, to Renny, and back again.

"And Johnny, and Long Tom, and Ham?" he asked, hesitantly. "And your cousin, Pat?"

"Johnny is the dean of both the Antiquities and Earth Studies Departments, here at the Institute," Clark answered. "He's been away, the past couple weeks, visiting a friend on a dig in the mid-East. Pat owns and lives on a small, private island – Caroline Island – in the western Mediterranean, where she operates a rather large orphanage for third-world children. I'm sorry to say that neither Ham nor Tom are with us, any more. Ham was murdered, back in 1953. We lost Tom to a sudden heart attack, in 2000."

"I'm...sorry to hear that, Clark," he said softly, a sad expression stealing over his features.

"Are you alright, darling?" Lois asked him quickly.

"Yes, dear," he chided gently, a soft smile beginning to tug at the corners of his mouth. The blue eyes began to brighten. "I'm still adjusting to the strangeness of this situation. It's truly remarkable, you know. I was just experiencing a feeling of sorrow for the loss of two individuals whom – only an hour ago – I would have sworn were nothing but words on paper."

He turned back to Clark.

"I'm a novelist, as well as having been both newspaper reporter and television news anchor for many years. As Lois told you, my fourth novel just hit the top of the best-seller list. So I know all about imaginary characters. It's amazing, to meet people that you once thought existed only in an author's mind, and between the covers of a book."

He paused for a moment, sipping at his cup of water.

"I'm honored to actually have shaken hands with you, Clark," he said softly. "You'd have no way of knowing it, of course, but it was reading those books in my dad's collection that formed part of the inspiration that led to my...career."

"Now it's my turn to be honored," Clark told him, smiling, "if your career is anything like Perry has described to me on other occasions. I'll have to admit that I rarely picked up the sort of magazine that carried your adventures. When I did, it was more so to keep in touch with what was going on in my old era's contemporary society. Most of what I really know about you comes from spending time with Perry."

"Folks," I jumped into the conversation, "I hate to interrupt such a unique moment, but it's beginning to occur to me that we're going to develop a slight communications problem, pretty soon."

"How so?" Dot asked.

"Well, there's Clark, and then there's Clark," I smiled, looking from one man to the other. "It's obvious that these folks are going to be our guests for awhile. First off, Clark Kent needs to recuperate and get his full strength back. Once that's out of the way, we still have the problem of

just figuring out which of an infinite possible number of alternate universes he and Lois stepped out of, let alone how we'll manage to send them home. While they're here, it would be nice if we could refer to one of the Clarks by another name."

"Why don't you call me 'Kal'?" Kent suggested. "It's the name I was born with and, so long as you don't write it out, it could easily be mistaken for the familiar form of 'Calvin'."

"Kal it is!" I agreed readily, and the rest all nodded assent.

"And, if we are as widely known, in your world, as your own knowledge of us would make it seem," he added, "perhaps it would be wise to use a different last name, as well."

"How about 'Clark'?" Mike suggested.

"That will do as well as any other," he agreed, "since we're now on a first-name basis with you."

"Done," I confirmed.

Kal slid off the gurney, and stood on the paving of the roof.

"Do you need a hand, honey?" Lois asked, moving quickly to support him if needed.

"A trifle shaky," he admitted with a wry grin, "but that's vanishing fairly quickly. I won't be leaping any tall buildings for awhile, but I think I can manage to walk."

"That's good!" Clark exclaimed. "The sooner we get the two of you out of the infirmary, the better."

"We can put them up in one of the guest cottages," Dot suggested. She was referring to the few small dwellings, fully furnished, that the Institute maintained for visiting professors, guest lecturers, and other visiting VIP types. "There's a vacant one next to our place. That would be best. Then, there's going to be someone they know, whom they can trust, just next door if they need anything."

Bonnie glanced at her watch. "It's a little late in the day to do anything about it, now, but first thing in the morning, I'll get busy on getting ID packets together for each of them."

"We might want to get Mitch involved in this, at least in a limited fashion," I added.

"Why?" Dot asked. "Don't we want to keep the number of folks who know about this to the absolute minimum?"

"We do," I agreed. "But, our guests could be here for six days, or six weeks, or six months...the longer they stay in our world, the more likely it is that having their new identities backstopped in a few of the appropriate state and federal databases would be helpful."

"He's right, Dot," Bonnie confirmed. "Mitch has the connections to get it done and keep it from being noticed at all. Plus, we've already put our lives in his hands on several occasions. I say he's worth the trust."

“And, when the both of you have had a couple of days to rest, I’d like the opportunity to chat with you, in depth, about the world you come from,” Mike requested. “It’s an interesting set of circumstances, from what you’ve related thus far. Some individuals in our world appear to have analogs in this other universe, while others do not. The spiritual aspect of that, alone, is astonishing.”

“And I’ll stop in, sometime tomorrow morning, if you don’t mind,” Clark informed them, “to bring you something to wear other than hospital robes. You look close enough to my size, Kal, that my clothing should fit.”

“And you and I are close enough in size that I ought to be able to find something in my closet, for you to wear, Lois.” Dot chimed in. “Then, once we get you outfitted that you can at least show your faces in a couple of the shops in town, then we’ll take you shopping for a larger wardrobe.”

“You folks are all being so awfully kind,” Lois offered slowly, “but we really don’t want you to go putting yourselves out, financially, on our account.”

I saw the look on Lois’ face, and noted that Kal was wearing a similar expression, so I figured it was time to step in and eliminate the ‘finance’ argument. I walked over to Kal and put my arm over his shoulder; since he was six-foot four, it was a bit of a reach.

“Before you voice any additional objections to us spending money on clothes for the two of you, or anything else for that matter, I want you to stop and think for a minute.”

“About what?” he asked.

“About a little country called Hidalgo, and a place known as the Valley of the Vanished.”

I stepped away, watching his face. He may still have been a bit battered and bruised on the outside, but that mind of his was firing on all cylinders. He looked at me and just smiled.

“Trust me, folks,” I chuckled, “when there’s a discussion about money, around this place, we might use terms like ‘unjustified expense’, but ‘we can’t afford it’ isn’t even in the vocabulary list!”

“It’s really alright, honey,” he informed Lois. “We’ll go shopping, tomorrow or the next day.”

“I’d also like to bring you back here, at some point,” Clark resumed, “and do a bit of a follow-up exam on you, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Lois smiled. “He’ll probably grumble a bit. He always does, when I have him visit Dr. Klein for a check-up, but I’ll make sure he behaves.”

“Dr. Klein is my personal physician,” Kal explained. “He’s one of only a couple individuals in my world, outside of Lois and my folks, who know the truth about me.”

“I make him go at least once every three months,” Lois added. “After what he did to me, what I went through after his battle with ‘Doomsday’, I’m making darned sure of his health, on a regular basis.”

“Blazes!” Monk exclaimed, after seeing the look of stern determination that crossed Lois’ face during her comment. “What the heck did you do to her, son?”

Kal actually blushed, and took that moment to begin a serious study of the Saltillo paving tiles beneath his feet. I figured he needed a friend.

“I’ll fill you in, later, Monk,” I suggested.

“You do that, Perry,” he nodded. “I can’t wait to hear *this* story!”

In the west, the sun was getting lower, and we were still standing on the infirmary’s roof.

“We’re soon going to be losing the best daylight,” I suggested. “And it’s approaching time for supper. How about let’s get these folks settled into their new quarters, and see about putting together a meal?”

“Make that a ‘Welcome to the Neighborhood’ feast!” Dot corrected me. “Does anyone know where we can rustle up a fatted calf, on short notice?”

And so it was that Kal and Lois Clark became at least temporary residents of Arronaxe.

Three: “The Singing Stone”

Arronaxe, New York
30 July, 2005

I guess I was the one at fault.

The ‘feast’, as Dot had referred to it, had been a grand occasion, indeed. While we hadn’t been able to locate her ‘fatted calf’ on short notice, we’d still been able to come up with a sufficient number of steaks for Monk and me to throw on the gas grill while Dot and Bonnie, with an insistent assist from Lois, prepared baked potatoes, corn on the cob, Caesar salad, and buttermilk biscuits. Bonnie also prepared a large vat of what the southerners refer to as ‘sweet tea’, to wash it all down with.

While Monk kept a watchful eye on the steaks, Clark and I took the cargo van and drove over to the Institute’s dining hall and borrowed two of the long folding tables and a stack of chairs, as the picnic table out back of our house wouldn’t seat the assemblage. Returning to the house, we got the tables and chairs all arranged, and then ringed the yard with Tiki torches, strictly for atmosphere. All of the yard areas around Arronaxe come equipped with a prototype Roberts Electronics device that works a lot like those electronic pet fences, except where the pet fences guarantee to keep your dog in *your* yard, this device keeps mosquitoes and other biting insects *out*.

As we sat down to eat, Clark led us in asking a blessing on us, our new guests, and the food that was set before us in great heaps. Then, everyone tucked in and began filling their plates. Everyone but me, that is. Acting on a sudden inspiration, I slipped away to our living room, put a soundtrack CD into the player, and flipped the switch that shunted the music to the camouflaged

speakers out in the yard.

“That sounds like a John Williams composition,” Kal commented around a mouthful of steak, as the initial fanfare gave way to the main-title theme from the Chris Reeve film, “The similarity of some of the motifs and passages to the scores from the *Star Wars* films and the *Indiana Jones* trilogy is rather unmistakable. But if it is, it’s one I’m not familiar with, and I took a listen to practically everything he ever composed, in preparation for an interview I did with him when he was in town to play guest-conductor with the Metropolis Symphony Orchestra.”

“I’m not surprised,” Clark smiled across the table at him. “It would figure that the people of your world wouldn’t bother to make a movie about you, when they probably have archive footage of you in action, plus any interviews you’ve granted. “

Kal responded with a questioning look, so I figured I’d clarify Clark’s statement a bit.

“It’s the soundtrack to a film made in our world, about you,” I told him. “It was the first in a series of four movies, and chronicled your escape from Krypton’s destruction, your arrival on Earth, and the start of your careers – as Superman, and as a reporter at the Daily Planet – and how you and Lois first met.”

“That’s a night I’ll never forget,” Lois chuckled. “As long as I live, I’ll never forget the first words he ever spoke, to me! I’d just come in, via chopper, to the helipad on the roof of the Planet building, when a sudden wind gust dislodged one of the thick cables leading to our satellite-dish array. The cable caught one of the skids on the chopper, and tugged at it, throwing it off-balance. The other skid hooked the guard-rail on the edge of the roof, and the chopper canted onto an angle, hanging there.”

She paused, taking a sip of tea, and I waited, hoping the rest of the tale continued as I suspected it would. Yeah, I was a bit guilty of waiting to pounce on the opening, if it came, but put yourself in my place. How many shots like this does a guy get, in a lifetime?

“Anyway,” she picked up the narrative, “I had been in the air for several hours, coming back from an overseas assignment, and the chopper was waiting for me when I arrived at Metropolis International. I was getting pretty antsy to have a cigarette...”

Lois looked around the table at the rest of us, blushing at her admission. Dot and I just looked at her and smiled. *Smallville* was regular viewing at Casa Liston, so Lois’s vice – and the reasons behind it – weren’t really a surprise.

“Go on,” Dot prompted, laying a gentle hand on Lois’s wrist from her seat across the table.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “I’ve had this off-and-on thing with smoking, ever since I was a rebellious fifteen-year-old and my cigar-chomping dad told me that if he ever caught me smoking, he’d kill me. Anyway, I hadn’t obeyed the ‘keep your seatbelt fastened until the engine has stopped’ warning. I was already out of the belt, with my door unlatched, when the chopper canted over the edge. Somehow, I managed to grab hold of the belt by its buckle, as I was thrown out of the cockpit.

“Well, there I was, hanging there by the belt-buckle, with the chopper starting to topple over the edge of the roof. ‘You’ve written your last story, girl,’ I told myself as I looked up,

waiting for the chopper to finally finish sliding over the edge. My hands were sweating, and I slowly lost my grip on the seat belt. I fell, screaming my lungs out. Then, all of a sudden, I feel a pair of arms wrap around me. I look in front of me, and there's this muscle-bound Adonis of a man, with the most gorgeous blue eyes -" she looked over at her husband, who fidgeted nervously in his chair and blushed uncomfortably, "- hanging in mid-air, with me in his arms.

" 'Easy, miss,' " he tells me. 'I've got you.' His voice was so calm, like there really wasn't a thing wrong in the world, no need to worry about that two-ton copter that's about to fall on both of us. And me? The star reporter? The girl with the gifted vocabulary? What can I think of, to say, at that moment?"

She paused, raising her glass of tea to her lips, and I sensed that the moment was right.

"My guess would be, 'You've got me? Who's got *you*?' " I suggested, grinning.

Lois nearly choked as she vented tea through her nostrils in astonishment.

"How did you know that?" she asked, when she could manage speaking once more.

"I think we're going to have to retire to the media room after dinner, babe," Dot winked at me.

"Yeah," I agreed. "If they're not too tired, it's probably something they'll enjoy seeing."

I looked back at Lois and Kal. "It's one of the dialog lines from the film I mentioned. The film appears to have documented the entire incident."

"And apparently censored it, as well," Kal remarked with a wry grin, obviously getting in a little good-natured kidding of his wife, in return for her 'Adonis' comment. "If your quote was accurate, per the dialogue, then they edited something out of her actual reply - a reference to a rather warm and uncomfortable region, reputedly inhabited by the unsaved dead of your Christian religion."

"Clark's - Kal's not a believer," Lois looked at us, the saddened expression on her face an equal match for the note that we could hear in her voice. "We were married in a church, because I said that's the only place such an event would occur, and his parents would have objected to a non-church wedding, as well. They raised him as a believer, but - somewhere along the way - he lost his faith."

"Let's worry about that another time, Lois," Dot suggested, having noticed Kal's slightly irritated look at the mention of his religious choice.

Monk adroitly turned the conversation to other directions by asking questions about the politics and geography of Lois' and Kal's version of Earth, and we spent the rest of the meal in amiable and quite interesting discussion. Afterward, the dishes and clean-up dealt with, we moved the gathering to our fairly large home-theatre room, where we screened *Superman: The Movie* in surround-sound on the 110-inch projection screen.

"I can't believe how accurately some of the things were depicted," Kal commented, as we walked them across the lawn to the door of their guest quarters after the last of the credits had rolled up the screen.

“Yes,” Lois added. “I know they had to play with the words to get them to rhyme, but that whole ‘Can You Read My Mind’ sequence pretty well captured the feelings that were running through me, that first time he took me flying!”

“The amount of interconnection between our two worlds is a fascinating topic,” Clark agreed. “One that I’m sure we’d all enjoy exploring, for as long as you’re our guests and are comfortable with answering our questions. For now, though, you two had best get a good night’s sleep. Bonnie and I will drop by with some clothing for you, in the morning, and I’ll want to do that follow-up exam.”

“Actually, after that meal, I’m starting to feel pretty good,” Kal insisted.

“Me, too,” Lois nodded in agreement. “We could stay up awhile longer, if you still want to talk.”

“You may feel like it,” Bonnie grinned at them, but if Kal really *has* read all the stories, he ought to realize that my husband wasn’t just making a suggestion. It was ‘doctor’s orders’.”

“Alright,” Kal held up his hands in mock surrender. “But, Clark, can you do me a favor? Can you make some of the clothing a pair of denims, or something else that can handle some rugged use? If I wake up feeling half as good as I do now, I’ll want to get some breakfast and then – I think – take a hike up into the woods and get a bit of exercise. See how my body is doing, in its repair work.”

“Sure thing, Kal,” Clark nodded. “And, if you don’t mind, Perry and I will walk along with you. I’ll enjoy the walk, and I’ve been trying to get Perry to start a regular regimen of exercise.”

“That’s right,” Kal chuckled. “Two hours a day, rain or shine, no matter where in the world you happen to be. Even if it’s in some cell, as a captive.”

Now it was Clark’s turn to give an embarrassed grin.

“Clark wasn’t never anybody’s captive,” Monk laughed. “He just pretended to be, until the villains had him just where he wanted them!”

It took both our guests – and even Bonnie, who still wasn’t fully accustomed to Monk’s quirky sense of humor – a second’s thought to get the play on words, and then we all joined in the laughter.

“There’s just one thing, before we head next door...” Lois ventured.

“What’s that, honey?” Kal asked.

“There’s something in that movie that has me puzzled. That whole scene with the earthquake, and me being trapped in the car. I remember part of it, but only that you were there to pull me out. I don’t remember dying.”

“You...you wouldn’t,” Kal told her softly. The expression on his face was somber, even through the slight blush.

“Why not?”

“Because, in one manner of looking at it, it never really happened. I mean, when I first arrived on the scene, I was too late, and you were already dead. I think that it was at that moment that I first realized what I really felt for you – that I was in love with you, had been, really, for some time. I couldn’t stand the thought of having lost you forever. So I used my powers to break through the time barrier, coming back to the scene just enough earlier in time to pull you out of the car before you could suffocate.”

“And that bit with Jor-El?”

“That was me, remembering his instructions not to interfere in the events in the world around me, in such a way.”

“And you disobeyed?”

“I had two very strong motivations,” Kal told her, and I heard a trace of steel creep into his voice. “First, there was what I felt for you.”

“And the other?”

“That was Jonathan Kent’s influence,” Kal shrugged those broad shoulders of his. “I can’t remember how many times, over my teenage years, I’d lament that my powers made it difficult for me to lead a ‘normal’ life.”

“What do you mean, ‘normal’?” Monk interrupted, chuckling. “With what you could do, I’d think that ‘normal’ wouldn’t have even been in your vocabulary!”

“It wasn’t, really, Monk,” Kal admitted. “Like that scene in the movie. I had to be content with being one of the trainers for the football team, rather than the quarterback or one of the running backs.”

“True,” Monk conceded. “With your powers, nobody on the other team could’ve stopped you, on the way to a touchdown. It wouldn’t have been very fair...”

“And so Pa reminded me, time and again,” Kal chuckled. “Then he’d remind me that powers like mine were a gift that should be used to help all mankind. Maybe it was a bit of a rationalization, but Lois *was* part of ‘mankind’, and she *was* in need of help if she was to survive. So I went back in time and helped her.”

“It seems really strange; to think that I actually died, back then, in one version of history.” Lois leaned into him and murmured into his ear. “Dad Kent was very wise, to tell you that your powers were intended to make a difference in people’s lives, for the better. I’m glad that you listened more to him, than you did to Jor-El, darling. Very glad!”

And, then, it was time. We went out the back door and across the lawn. Monk and I had pulled a few of the boards out of the privacy fence between our yard and that of the guest house, to facilitate our guests not having to traipse across the front lawn in hospital bathrobes. We slipped through the hole in the fence and escorted our guests to the door of their temporary home in our world. We’d already taken them inside, before dinner, to show them the layout and where the spare bath linen was stored. It was time, now, to bid them goodnight. Kal and Lois went

inside, and the rest of us said our goodbyes and parted until morning.

As we turned to head across the lawn, back to my place, Clark turned to me, a definite smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"It's fascinating, how God lets the simplest of things come back around to us, in His time, isn't it, Perry?" he asked me.

"The way God works is always fascinating, to me," I answered, "but you obviously have somewhere you're heading, in that respect, so what gives?"

"Well, do you remember that morning, back in 'ninety- nine, the morning after you and I first met?"

"How could I forget those times, brother?"

"We were sitting at the breakfast table, you and I, and Jack Heady overheard me mention my old associates, and it finally crystallized the truth of my identity in his mind. Then, the three of us started to look at how that secret was going to be concealed from the rest of the world. One of the things I needed was a new name..." he let the sentence hang, unfinished. I knew what he was getting at.

I let my memory drift back to the events and the conversation of that morning. We'd decided that "Clark" was fine, for a first name. Then we had looked for a last name, and settled on that of his biographer, Lester Dent.

Clark Dent. The three of us had all laughed at the unintentional pun, and then I'd made that wise-crack about "faster than a speeding bullet..."

"You're right, Clark," I smiled. Then, a sobering thought occurred to me. "The really fascinating part of it is the fact that He knew, even on that morning, what you and I would be dealing with, today!"

"Amen, brother," Clark nodded. "That's a comfort, though, because it means He already knows how we're going to solve this mystery."

It was just something more to make me realize just how truly awesome is the God I'd given my life to.

"By the way, Clark," I said, "You never did tell me what it was, about the scripture you read this morning, that had you thinking."

"It was Leviticus 26:19. *'I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze.'* It hit me right about the time we were beginning to really consider the possibility that we had Superman visiting us."

I pondered the passage for a moment, and then the connection hit me.

"Iron is the basic ingredient in steel," I nodded. "Superman has always been known as 'The Man of Steel'."

“I remember,” Clark nodded. “That was one of the things I did know, about the comic book character. And, back in the day, the press always called me ‘The Man of Bronze’.”

“‘The Man of Bronze’ and ‘The Man of Steel’, together in one place,” I mused. “Who’d have thought it?”

“Something else,” Clark turned and looked at me. “Metallurgically speaking, bronze can actually be stronger than steel, if the bronze is formulated correctly. Or if the steel isn’t properly tempered.”

I raised an eyebrow, at the reference to ‘tempering’, and my bronze-skinned brother continued.

“The conversation, at dinner, gave us the knowledge that – at one time – our strange visitor from another planet *believed* in God, but that he’s fallen away from the faith.”

“Falling, again,” I mused. “My recurring dream...”

“Just so,” Clark nodded. “And, when you turn away from faith in God, faith in something else has to assume its place. Usually, it’s faith in oneself – a form of pride. Certainly, a man with his powers, and without the notion of God to help keep him humble, would develop a degree of pride. If the things you’ve told me of him, and what the film depicted, are any gauge, then – before whatever incident transported him here – he had the sort of power that would enable him to set himself above all of humanity, almost like a god, on his world.”

“There’s your scripture, Clark,” I pointed “ ‘stubborn pride’ “

“Indeed,” he nodded, somberly. “Proverbs 16: 18 tells us that *‘Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.’*”

“Well, he’s been sent here for a reason,” I conceded. “The notion of falling, from the dream, is supposed to have both a physical meaning and a spiritual one. We already know the physical meaning. He fell out of the sky, exactly like I was doing, in that dream. And he’s fallen from faith. And he just might have been guilty of harboring the sort of pride that goes before a fall. Obviously, with you having read that particular passage just today, you’re as tied to this thing as I am.”

“Then, with God’s help, we’ll figure it out together, Perry,” Clark smiled, putting a hand on my shoulder.

Not long afterward, Dot and I crawled into bed together, but neither of us was really ready to drift right off to sleep.

“I think it’s going to be great, having Lois and Kal as next-door neighbors,” Dot smiled as she snuggled up next to me, “No matter how long it is before you guys figure out how to send them home.”

I nodded my head in assent. I was already trying to think of a way to borrow one of Mitch’s rocket packs, again, and go flying with Superman, once he’d regained his full powers.

If I’d had any inkling of the things that were brewing, all the things that were going to

wind up being set off by the simple fact that we had the Last Son of Krypton as a new neighbor and friend, I think I'd have passed on it all. All I can do, looking back on it, is praise God that I don't have the gift of knowing the future!

* * *

Tegucigalpa, Honduras
30 July, 2005
02:17, local time

Elena Inez Garcia de Ybarra quietly closed the door of her room in the old house. It was so good to be home, again. School was wonderful, and she had made many new friends during the year, but it was good to be among the comfort of her own things – all of them – once again. The food in the dining halls at school, was excellent, well-prepared, and always the portions were more than she could eat. Still, she had missed her mother's cooking: the fried plantains, fish with garlic, black bean soup with rice. Some of her classmates had lifted their noses at the thought of such meals, when she'd mentioned them in conversation; 'peasant food', one had even dared to term it. Yet it was the food upon which she had been raised, and it had fuelled her body excellently for all the years of her life, and all its activities, whether those had been her classes at school, or running errands and learning the business in her uncle's cigar factory.

It was so good to be home again, even if for a brief time. She had missed the sounds in the streets of Tegucigalpa, the smell of the flowers in the little courtyard at the center of the family home, the aromas of strong coffee and sweet cigar smoke amidst the relaxed atmosphere of quiet after-dinner conversation. These last few years, Tia Linda and Tio Estebán had begun to treat her much as they did any other adult, including her in these conversations rather than dismissing her from the table as one would a *niño*, and this had been a source of great pleasure to her. She had missed waking up and walking out onto the balcony off her room, the one that overlooked the courtyard garden, and sitting at the little wrought iron table with a cup of coffee, letting the smells and sounds of the new day soak into her spirit while she spent time with her Maker to prepare for the rigors of the day. And, almost most of all, she had missed the sight of palm trees; they simply did not grow – unless kept indoors – in the northern New York valley where her school was located, and who has truly the room to grow a forty-foot king palm tree indoors?

She had been both glad and sad, to leave school at the end of the year. Sad, because she would miss her many new-found friends over the long summer months, and glad to be returning to the sights and sounds and smells that she had missed for all her months away. She had dreaded coming home, too, because she was certain that it would mean another argument with Uncle Estebán about whether there was as good a future in running around the world tracking down lost antiquities as there was in managing a big business, like the cigar factory he owned, and would one day be forced to either sell or pass on to a relative.

"But, Uncle," she had offered, the last time such an argument had occurred – the day before she had to fly to America for the start of classes, "you have Ramon to take over the factory when you are ready to retire!"

"Ramon?" her uncle had snapped in response. "Ramon is a wastrel. He spends his days looking for nothing but pleasure. He seeks the easy road to happiness, and spends money like it was so much water, without a single thought for where it all comes from! If I give the business to Ramon, he will either run it into the ground through neglect, or he will sell it to some bigger

company only to get more money to spend foolishly! And what would the bigger company do? They will take the tobaccos, and the label I have worked so hard to make into a great name, and move them to another city, another country, where cheaper labor will turn out inferior cigars and the Ybarra brand becomes a laughingstock! And what will all my workers do?"

She had offered him a compromise, let her go to school, and she would ask for a double major: both business and archaeology. After all, double majors were not unheard of, and this would serve them both. It would train her for the quests her heart desired, and still leave her capable of managing the business if it became necessary in the years to come.

It had not been offer enough, apparently. With a last muttered comment of "Ungrateful child!" he had stormed off to his study, and spent the rest of the evening there. Nor had he been there at the airport to see her off, when she boarded the huge airliner the next morning for her flight to America.

Still, she had missed him. She had been orphaned when her parents' car ran over the edge of a cliff on a rain-slicked mountain road when she was only four years old. Tio Estebán and Tia Linda were all the parents she had really ever known. Her mother's sister and her husband had adopted her into their household and raised her as if she were their own daughter. Sensing her bright intelligence, Tio Estebán had begun training her to take over the business from the time she was ten, bringing her to work with him most of the days when she was not at school.

In truth, she had learned the lessons well. It was a source of personal satisfaction, to her, that there was not a task in the factory that she could not perform as well as the seasoned workers. Nor was there any aspect of the management end of the business that she did not know. In the summer just before she graduated from her secondary schooling, she had twice flown to America to negotiate deals with some of the larger wholesale firms. With the right outfit, and a bit of make-up applied properly, she could look several years older than her true age. The American representatives had accepted her as an adult, and a shrewd hand at bargaining. The contracts she had obtained gave the family enterprise a far greater exposure in the American marketplace. Tio Estebán had been both pleased and proud, and had thrown a big fiesta in her honor upon her return.

But it wasn't where her heart lay. That one summer vacation trip, to Mexico and the ruins at Chichen Itza, had opened her eyes to a whole new world – that of lost cities, lost peoples, and lost treasures. Watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on video had only strengthened the desire within her. Only, her uncle could not – or would not – see that the focus of her life had changed.

Throughout her years away at school, she had longed for home and yet been loathe to return, dreading the confrontation she was sure would come sooner or later – the one that had come each of the past two years, upon her annual return from college.

Oddly enough it had been Tio Estebán, and not Tia Linda, who had met her at the end of the concourse at the airport and driven her home, when she arrived in Tegucigalpa this time. On the drive to their house, he had kept up a steady flow of happy conversation with her, asking her all the questions that – he told her – he had felt were too long for their weekly e-mails, about her year in America, and her time at school.

He had wondered about the snow – surely, it snows, if one is that far north of the equator? And she had laughed, telling him just how *much* it had snowed, that winter, in the little valley called Arronaxe.

“But they have a marvelous underground transportation system, Tio Estebán,” she told him. “For some strange reason, they call it ‘The Flea Run’, and it covers literally all of the valley. The longest distance I ever had to walk in the snow was, perhaps, three times the length of the rolling floor, at the factory! Then, I was below ground, in the comfort of a seat on a nice, warm train. And, on campus itself, all of the buildings are connected by underground corridors as well as above-ground sidewalks. In winter, I never had to go outdoors to move from one building to another! We only went outdoors in the snow if we wanted to play in it.”

Elena’s summer vacation had begun, thus, more pleasantly than she had anticipated. The confrontation she had expected to have with her uncle had never materialized, and she had slipped easily into the routine of days spent at the cigar factory, assisting Tio Estebán, and evenings relaxing with the couple who had been all the mother and father she had really ever known.

Today had been no different from the days before it: time spent at the factory and problems to be solved in running the family business. When they had arrived at the house that evening, she found the table set for guests and caught the scents of all her favorite dishes being prepared in the kitchen. What a feast the meal had been, with other aunts and uncles and cousins – and, of course, her grandfather – all stopping in at intervals to greet her and wish her well. With all of the things she’d had to deal with, during the day, she had completely forgotten that it was her twenty-first birthday. Today, by all the standards of cultures at home and abroad, she was fully an adult.

This was her third, and last, trip to her room, after the wonderful evening had wound down to a quiet ending. Smiling, she deposited the last of the presents given by her relatives on the long bench across from her bed. Kicking off her shoes, she slipped out of the clothing she’d donned that morning and into the soft silk kimono that her uncle had brought back for her from a business trip to Japan.

She returned to the bench, and selected one of the presents, one of the new ‘one-cup’ coffee makers, and took it into her bathroom. She had e-mailed Tia Linda once, saying that she missed her late-night cups of coffee, especially while studying, but that the coffee machine in the day-room in her dormitory dispensed a beverage that, while free, was the most abhorrent sort of concoction imaginable.

“It can only be termed ‘coffee’ because it is brown and tastes like neither tea nor chocolate!” she had written disparagingly.

The little unit, which she was to take back to school with her, was her aunt’s solution to that problem. For the summer, she would make use of it at home. Drawing a cup of water from the tap, she filled the unit and placed a coffee-pod in it to brew. In less than a minute, she had a steaming mug of rich Honduran coffee, to which she added the requisite cream and sugar. Then, raising the cup to her lips, she sipped appreciatively and rolled her eyes in delight at the thought of being able to enjoy such a heavenly taste on those cold New York winter nights.

Back in her bedroom, she padded across the tiled floor to her reading chair and curled her legs beneath her for comfort as she sat. Placing the mug on the table next to the stand, she reached for the small box of cigars that had been a gift from Manuela, the senior-most roller at her uncle’s factory. It was, she had been told by the elderly woman, the very first box prepared, of a new line of small cigars her uncle was going to market, and it had been named *Doña Elena*,

after her. Elena smiled wistfully, as she pulled one of the small cigars from the box and lit it, recalling the initial confrontation between her, and her roommate at the Institute, over the notion of smoking.

They had been getting acquainted, the first night in their room, and had been showing each other the photographs they had brought to school with them. Gwen's had been in a bound album, and Elena's had been on a compact disc, displayed on her laptop. When the image on her screen had shifted to a photo taken at a party in honor of Tio Estebán's fiftieth birthday, a photo that depicted Elena, Tia Linda, and old Manuela, and the parish priest, Father Enrique, in the midst of an animated conversation, Gwen had been aghast.

"What the heck is that, in your hand?" she had gasped, pointing at the screen. In the photo, of course, all four individuals had one of Tio Estebán's creations in hand.

"It's a cigar," Elena had admitted, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She had read, in magazine articles, the disdain with which many *Norte Americanos* regarded smokers. Still, she had not expected such obvious prejudice on the part of her roommate, especially when considering the fact that the girl came from Miami!

Gwen's astonishment and disappointment grew, upon learning that her Latin roommate had been actively consuming her uncle's product since her sixteenth birthday, when she was "apprenticed" to Juan Garmendia, the master blender at her uncle's factory.

"How could you possibly do such a thing? Gwen had demanded. "It's so sinful!"

"How else can one tell if the cigar has a pleasing taste?" Elena had asked her, in return. "They must taste good, to the consumers, or they will not buy them from us! And, if smoking a cigar is such a sin, why does my parish priest – a man of the cloth – smoke them?"

The resulting discussion grew into a heated debate that lasted until after two o'clock in the morning, and had only been resolved after a lengthy consultation of the scriptures and an agreement to let the Word of God be the arbiter of their debate.

Christ had said that it was what came out of one's mouth – and not what went into it – that defiled a person. In Acts, God had spoken to Paul, in a dream, with regard to what was truly 'clean' and 'unclean'. And Paul had admonished the churches at Corinth and Rome not to judge the cultural activities of other peoples in light of their own, or of their own limited understanding of scriptural truths. The verses in Romans 14, commenting on people either eating or not eating meat, or drinking or not drinking wine, could be viewed as covering the notion of smoking, as well, since there was no specific commandment against the practice.

Gwen had apologized for her judgmental attitude, and Elena had promised not to smoke a cigar in front of her roommate. Of course, since she hadn't brought any cigars to school with her, that was not likely to happen anyway.

In the course of the ensuing year, the two girls had become the best of friends, despite – or perhaps *because* of their initial night of arguing. For three years, now, they had been roommates. Now, they were more like adopted sisters.

Elena smiled at the memory of that first night. Briefly, she thought of calling Gwen, at her Miami home, to see how *her* summer was progressing. Gwen's father was an investment

banker at one of the largest banks in Miami, and her mother was a surgeon, so the family was not lacking for money. No doubt Gwen was spending her days relaxing in the sun beside the family's pool, or driving her little British sports car to the famous beach, and hearing of such would make Elena just a touch jealous, but it would be good to hear her voice once more.

She decided that she would make the call in the morning; it was far too late, now, in Miami. For the moment, she had one other present to inspect. She eyed the rather large box that sat on her side table. Filled with anticipation, she took it into her lap.

It was the most precious gift of all those she had received for her birthday. It had been a gift from her grandfather, who had told her with much solemnity that it had been handed down from generation to generation in the family, for nearly half a millennia.

"I hear you want to become a great archaeologist," he had chuckled then, "like the 'Indiana Jones' of the American cinema, and search for lost treasures. This might as well come to you, then, granddaughter. Perhaps you can make sense of it, where others have not."

She had opened the package briefly to inspect it, and then hugged her grandfather so fiercely that she feared she had cracked one of his ribs, elated beyond belief that at least one of her relatives other than her mother believed in *her* dream. After apologizing profusely, she had scurried upstairs to place the gift out of harm's way,

"I don't want the *niños* getting their hands on it by accident," she had explained, pointing a finger at her three youngest cousins, all about six or seven years of age, presently occupied in terrorizing one of the family's cats.

Now, with the night winding to a close, she opened the box again, and took out the object that lay within it. Peeling away the oilskin wrapping, she sat staring at the old book, with its worn and heavily cracked leather binding. So old!

She opened the cover and began to read.

'*Conquista de Oro, Memorias de un Soldado con Hernando Cortes*' The Golden Conquest, Memories of a Soldier with Hernando Cortes. The words were written in a flowing script, with fading ink and a quill pen. The flourished signature below the title proclaimed that the account was written by one Fernando Lopez de Avila.

Turning the pages, she gently thumbed through the book. It was an old soldier's tale, the account of the conquest of the Aztec civilization by the Spanish conquistadores under Hernando Cortes. True to the nature of the customs and culture of those days, the book contained both handwritten text and also many well-rendered drawings of the strange and wonderful things that de Avila had seen on his trek through the lands of the Aztec people.

Returning to the opening pages of the journal, she began to read, finding her interest growing stronger with each page turned. Fernando Lopez de Avila was a well-educated man, and a gifted writer, a skilled teller of stories. The struggle of the Spanish conquistadores came alive for her, in the pages as she read them, more alive than in any of the dry texts or stodgy lectures she'd ever encountered on the subject, and she found herself unable to put the narrative down for any other reason than a pair of trips to the bathroom to either make more coffee, or make room for more.

At about the middle of the book, de Avila began a section of narrative that concerned a special assignment which came to him directly from Cortes, himself.

On a morning in May of 1519, de Avila had been summoned to the building where Cortes had taken quarters. Ushered into the building by one of the guards, he found Cortes waiting for him. With the commander was his interpreter, who was the daughter of the Aztec king, Montezuma, and another Aztec. The latter was obviously a captive, kneeling on the floor, bound with chains.

The commander had explained to him that the captive had sought to buy his life with the location of a treasure of great worth. The object was called '*La Piedra el Cantar*' – 'The Singing Stone', and was located in a small shrine located some four days' travel from the Spanish encampment, on the eastern slope of a mountain called Popocateptl by the natives. It was Cortes' order that de Avila take a small squad of soldiers and go to the shrine, retrieve the stone, and return.

Several pages followed, all filled with descriptions of the journey, across rugged terrain and through thick jungles that taxed the strength of the most muscular of the squad as they hacked away at it with their swords. Eventually, they reached a tiny village shrouded with a strange fog. Five of the squad were dispatched to go into the hamlet and reconnoiter. Another five were sent in, some four hours later, when it became apparent that the first group was not returning.

This second group had not returned, either, by nightfall, and de Avila and his two remaining soldiers spent an anxious night in the undergrowth outside the village. They slept in shifts, as best they could, a sleep that was interrupted in the small hours of the early morning by a torrential downpour that scudded in from the ocean to the east.

When, at last, the sun had risen over the village, they found that the strange fog had vanished, and de Avila warily chose one of the remaining soldiers to venture into the hamlet. Thankfully, this one reported an hour later, informing his captain that he had found a number of the village's inhabitants, as well as the other soldiers. All were dead. Mysteriously dead, with no sign of why or how.

The record went on to detail the laborious task that it had been, for de Avila and the two soldiers to gather all of the bodies and place them in a pile on the eastern edge of the village. They gathered masses of dead wood from the surrounding jungle, fashioning a bier, and placed the bodies upon it. Offering up prayers to God for the spirits of the departed – the villagers as well as their fallen comrades – de Avila at last cast a torch upon the pyre, setting it ablaze. The prevailing winds carried the smoke and the stench away from the village, eastward.

The work of seeing to the mass funeral had consumed most of the morning, and so it was nearly midday when de Avila and his two remaining troops at last made their way to the large round structure that lay in the center of the tiny hamlet. They ascended a short run of broad steps carved of gold-flecked quartz, pushed through two doors which de Avila described as being twice a man's height and twice his width, and which were made of the same stone, remarkably balanced on pivot-points, and entered a great circular chamber some thirty paces across. The soldiers made their way around the room's perimeter while de Avila – according to the text – drew a rendering of its appearance and floor plan, yet Elena could find no sketch in the nearby pages that matched the text description.

"Thirty paces..." Elena mused. "At an average of five feet per pace, based on the old

Roman standard, that would make the room about a hundred and fifty feet in diameter! Pretty large, for a shrine in such a small hamlet, by Aztec standards.”

One of Elena’s greatest joys, in her three years at the Institute, had been her classes in archaeology, geology, and ancient cultures. In fact, her primary reason for having chosen to attend the Institute was the fact that the noted archaeologist, Doctor William Harper Littlejohn, was the dean of that school and one of its principal instructors. She recalled one of his early lectures, in the Introduction to Ancient Civilizations course, in which he had noted that the larger shrines and temples of those civilizations had all been in major population centers. Such a structure as this one, so far from the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, would have precluded much in the way of pilgrimages.

The description of the chamber continued, de Avila noting that there were no windows to provide light to the room, neither were there any sconces for lamps or torches. Instead, light for the room came from twelve apertures, each one a measure which translated into approximately two-thirds of a meter in diameter, in the ceiling. Light entered through those holes, giving a low level of illumination to the room. Beneath each aperture was a disc of polished gold, slightly bowl-shaped according to de Avila’s notes, and measuring the same diameter as the apertures above them, leaning on edge and facing the center of the room. Also beneath each of the openings in the roof was a hole in the polished stone floor, drains to make certain that the tropical rains left the room as easily as the roof holes allowed them to enter.

The walls of the room were covered, according to de Avila’s notes, with the typical form of decoration he had noted in the temples and other structures in the larger native population centers. Vastly different, however, were the characters which adorned a large crystalline object that sat upon a low pedestal in the exact center of the room. Elena’s ancestor had attempted to sketch the crystal and to duplicate the few characters which he found inscribed in its face in a brief space between paragraphs of his narrative.

kal el za krypton

In the time it took de Avila to describe the room in his text, and to draw it, wherever the sketch had vanished to, the sun had climbed to its zenith in the sky, directly above the shrine. As de Avila watched, the room began to brighten noticeably, and then...

“As I stood in amazement, I beheld columns of light streaming through the apertures overhead, which were reflected by the golden mirrors. As the shafts of light left the mirrors, their girth narrowed until they were but tiny points of light that fell upon circles of gold inset into the crystal, on its pedestal in the center of the chamber. The crystal began to glow and fade, as if it gave forth its own light in the tempo of a beating heart. Brighter and brighter it grew, until the glow became continuous and the very room itself was hidden from my sight by the brilliance of its radiance, and then the strangest thing of all began to occur. It was a thing so strange and unknown as to make me doubt my sanity, save for the fact that the experience was confirmed afterward by my two companions.

The radiance faded, yet seemed to separate and fashion itself into images of a great city, the likes of what I have never seen or even dreamed. That I was seeing the city of Heaven, the New Jerusalem, I was certain, for the buildings appeared to be made of crystal and, in their majesty, reached toward the very clouds, attaining the height of mountains. I beheld strange conveyances that floated through the sky with the ease of a boat upon calm waters. All the while,

a voice spoke in a language that I could not comprehend, calm and yet with what I could not help but think was a note of sadness and mourning, though why either man or god would mourn such a beautiful city I could not fathom. I turned and, using the touch of my fingers on the surface of the chamber's wall as a guide, for I could not see it, began to walk along the perimeter of the chamber. As I moved, so did the view of the sights I beheld, as if I was actually circling the great city in one of the strange flying craft.

The vision continued to display, in all its splendor, for some minutes, and then began to fade. When its brilliance had faded sufficiently, I noticed that the columns of light were no longer present in the room. My companions and I looked at each other in amazement for many minutes after this grand vision had disappeared, and then we asked each other – almost in disbelief – if we had all seen the same images.

We spent the rest of the day exploring the shrine's lower levels, as well as the rest of the small hamlet beyond the shrine. We slept, that night, in one of the small huts nearby, and returned to the shrine upon the next day, as midday approached. As had occurred the day before, when the sun was at its highest point in the sky, the light flowed into the chamber and the visions began anew. I spent the rest of the day in drawing anew the floor of the shrine, taking care to make precise measurements of all of its dimensions and the placement of the mirrors, in the hope that the shrine's purpose could be produced at another location, if the great crystal was present.

On the third morning, I wrapped the great crystal in a piece of native cloth that I had found in one of the huts, and placed that into a pouch that I had also found, and which was provided with a strap that enabled it to hang from my shoulder. We left the village, purposing to make our way back to the Aztec capital where our commander awaited our return.

Elena read on, unheeding of the late hour. She saw that, on their first day of the homeward march, both of de Avila's two remaining soldiers were lost when they chanced to step upon the cover of thin twigs and loose leaves that had been laid across a pit-trap for one of the great cats that prowled the jungles. The soldiers' weight was too much for the covering, and they had fallen through, their bodies impaled on long pointed stakes that were embedded at the pit's bottom.

Alone, with no others of his party left to tell the tale of their journey, the sin of greed apparently began to lay siege to de Avila's mind, eventually persuading him to return the short distance to the village and rest again before continuing homeward. In the village, he went to the hut which had been the home and workshop of the local potter. The son of a potter, de Avila had been familiar with all of the primitive equipment in the hut. He contrived to overlay the great crystal with a coating of clay, which he left dry and then fired in the nearby kiln. This he did fully three times, until a strong shell of clay had been built to cover the crystal and it was safe inside. The outer shell, de Avila painted with the primitive glazes he had found in the hut, in the semblance of other Aztec art that he had seen in his time in this new world. When it was finished, he had what he would eventually pass off as nothing more than a decorated brick from the wall of a native hut, adorned with an image his eyes found pleasant. If he survived this time in the new world, he would take the artifact back to Cuba, and eventually to his home in Seville.

Upon his return to Cortes' encampment, he related the bulk of his tale of the journey truthfully, omitting only references to the crystal or the visions he had seen. Thus, Cortes was led to believe that, if such a singing stone had existed, perhaps it had been stolen, or moved for safe-keeping. With the people of the village all dead, none could be questioned as to the location of the stone's hiding place. The native who had offered hint of the stone in exchange for his life was

subsequently beheaded, and de Avila tucked the brick away in his trunk, awaiting an eventual return to civilization.

That was not to be, however. The soldiers finally departed for Cuba when Captain Panfilo Narvaez was sent from the Governor, there, to order Cortes' return from Mexico. As the 'Esperanza', the ship which carried de Avila and his belongings, crossed the Caribbean bound for what would one day become Havana, a great storm bore down on the convoy. The three Aztec captives the ship carried began to wail that it was sent by their wind-god, Hurakan, to punish the Spaniards for their war against the Aztecs. Regardless of the nature of the storm's origins, the ship's captain was wise enough to know that it would be a furious tempest. He ordered the crew to drop anchor off the shore of a tiny dot of land, and the crew and passengers made their way to shore to seek a safe place to endure the storm's ferocity. This, they found in a deep series of caverns that led from an opening along the shoreline, well into the tiny island's bowels. There, they survived the storm, but when it was over and they emerged from the caves, the ship was gone, only the tip of its mast standing above the waves to mark the location of its sinking. Disheartened, the small group survived four more months of existence on the tiny island, until another passing Spanish ship noted the smoke from their campfires, and rescued them.

As the rescue ship collected the last of the survivors, de Avila casually asked the ship's navigator what their position might be, and that worthy told him: 21° 45' North latitude, 71° 35' West longitude. Fernando recorded the information in his journal, hoping to one day return to the tiny island and attempt to salvage his trunk from the sunken ship. Unfortunately, once he had returned to Seville, he found that he could not raise sufficient funds for such an expedition without revealing the nature of what he sought. Such revelation would surely have resulted in the seizure of the crystal by the royal family, and at length de Avila decided that he would rather let it remain hidden below the waves, if it could not belong to him alone.

And so the tale of the stone that sang, and that produced astonishing visions of the city of Heaven, passed into obscurity, mentioned only in the diaries of Fernando Lopez de Avila.

Elena closed the book, took a final puff from the remnant of her second cigar of the night, and laid it in the ashtray at her side. Closing her eyes, she sought to imagine what such visions as her ancestor had seen must have looked like. The hour was late, and she was more tired than she knew, both from her day at the factory and the celebration held in honor of her birthday. She drifted off to sleep, still sitting upright in her reading chair, the book still in her lap.

Chapter Four: "Buccaneers, Inc."

*An undisclosed location in the Caribbean
1 August, 2005*

Rutger Johann Müller looked out of the observation window of his office at the activity in the cavern below. Off to one side of the massive open space, a work crew was nearly finished with the task of re-painting a two-masted ketch, having already slightly modified her above-deck cabin lines. The boat was destined for use by a Columbian drug cartel, making runs between their transfer points in the Caribbean and ports along the American gulf coast.

At the dry-dock area behind the ketch, the huge overhead crane was just settling a sixty-foot motor yacht into place on a set of cradles. The ship was a fair prize, indeed, being additional

profit from a contract hit on a wealthy – but scrupulous – industrialist whose personal ethics had stood in the way of selling one of his subsidiaries to a ruthless opponent. When the blood spatters had been sponged away, and the few stray bullet-holes patched, the ship would be repainted and re-outfitted, serial numbers altered and ready for sale on the black market. Müeller already had three clients ready to bid on her in a closed auction. He figured that the yacht would fetch at least a quarter-million Euro-dollars in the sale, since its original retail price had been eight or ten times that amount.

In the main slip, work was underway replenishing the supplies for *Donner* – ‘Thunder’, in English – one of the two vintage German U-boats that the organization used. *Donner’s* counterpart – christened ‘*Blitzen*’, or ‘Lightning’ – was currently on assignment in the Atlantic, off the coast of Grand Bahama Island.

Müeller’s great-uncle, Karl, had served the Reich at this very base, from mid-1943 until May of 1945, when Germany surrendered to the Allied forces. Upon hearing of Germany’s capitulation and the suicide of his Fuehrer, the elder Müeller had ordered the base shut down. The personnel boarded a third submarine and made their way southward, into Argentina, where a great many former Nazis had taken refuge. The records regarding the base and its construction had never been transferred from the navel base at Bremerhaven, and were destroyed during a British air raid in the final days of the war. Thus, the Allies had never learned of its existence, despite its rather close proximity to America’s Florida peninsula. The facility, and its two remaining submarines, had languished in disuse for decades, until Rutger managed to locate its underwater entrance from references in his uncle’s diaries. It made a perfect location for the headquarters of his enterprise.

Müeller had dubbed the organization ‘Buccaneers, Inc.’ principally because that’s what he envisioned himself as being: a modern-day pirate, pillaging the oceans at will. The current demand for ‘clean’ vessels in which illicit narcotics could be smuggled into American ports, both by the Mafia and the Columbian cartels, had made both the American and foreign owners of pleasure yachts wary of hiring anyone without a sterling pedigree as a member of the crew. Thus, it had become increasingly more difficult to get two or three operatives signed aboard rich prizes, ready to take over and do away with the owners and the loyal crew-members once the vessels were far enough out to sea. The refitted U-boats were perfect, as an alternative. Locate a tempting target with upward-looking sonar, surface alongside it and threaten it with the three-inch deck guns, and the decadent owners surrendered like frightened children. The American navy and Coast Guard, unable to imagine that modern-day pirates might have access to submersible craft, were at a loss to hunt his men down.

In international circles, he was known as ‘Blackbeard’, the Internet alias he used whenever he conducted business by that medium; a shadowy figure always remaining safely anonymous in the background. But, over the last seven years – since getting the sub-pen fully operational – he had attained the status of a kingpin among those whose illicit activities involved ocean-going transportation. He was *the* go-to-individual, if you needed a ‘clean’ boat for use at a good – meaning cheap – price.

He did have some scruples, though. One needed to maintain *some* standards. He had once been offered a fully functional Soviet *Alfa* class fast-attack submarine, by one of the renegade hard-line communists who had not yet been purged from duty in the Russian navy. Müeller had refused the offer, flatly. The ‘K-19’ incident was an established fact of history, for all its fictionalization in the Harrison Ford film, and it had established the great lack of concern for crew-safety evinced by the Soviet Union’s submarine builders. There were occasions when he

went out aboard one of the subs, and he had no desire to see his own hair – or that of any of his crewmen – suddenly begin to fall out for any reason other than normal aging.

Müeller also refused to do business with the Arab world, for far too much of such activity was intricately tied to terrorist operations. He had lost a fiancée and two dear cousins when the Twin Towers had fallen, back in September of 2001. As far as he was concerned, the sooner the world's nations realized their mistakes in coddling the cursed practitioners of Islam and turned the Arab nations into radioactive parking lots, the better it would be, for all of humanity.

He glanced at his watch, noted the time, and lifted his full mug of coffee from his desk just in time to keep the blast-vibrations from the slip-enlargement operation from sloshing any of the mug's contents onto the papers that crowded his desktop. He'd refused the offered Soviet nuclear submarine, and the renegade admiral had understood his reasoning.

"It was a thought," Anatoly Bulganin smiled, "but I can see your reasons. I would not sail in one of those death traps, either. Still, for the same price, I have two of our older diesel-powered boats that can be had."

Müeller had agreed on the spot. Two such boats would double the size of his pirate fleet, and greatly extend the range of his operations. The Soviet boats – their NATO designation was "Foxtrot" class – were larger, with fuel tanks far more capacious than his World War II vintage U-boats, and with a far better range of electronic sensing devices, as well. It was too bad that the admiral wouldn't agree to re-labeling all of the controls in English, but he *had* provided complete blueprints and operational manuals. And had promised the aid of a greedy lieutenant commander with sub experience, to translate things for him. Once that had been accomplished, any of his workers equipped with a Dymo label gun and a copy of the plans could see to the re-labeling. And, judging from progress reports, the enlargement of the slips and the underwater entry tunnel would be completed well before he had to take delivery on the Russian subs in two days.

The blasting completed for another few hours, while the divers and dredge cleared the rubble out of the way, he replaced his mug on its coaster and turned his attention to the stack of papers in his in-box. Of great interest was a report from his chief of operations in Moscow, noting the successful diversion of a shipment of several KH-55 'Granat' missiles, modified for submarine launch, en route to the Gadzhiyevo Naval Base. The operative noted, in the report, that – while the missiles thus obtained were without warheads – diagrams were available to enable the organization's craftsmen to fit either custom-built warheads, or Soviet black-market warheads, to them. It was also a fairly well substantiated rumor that a number of compact medium-yield nuclear devices were available from renegade Soviet sources, for the right amounts of hard cash.

Müeller clicked a function key on his computer, and the flat-panel monitor showed a display of the world's time zones, noting the current time in each. He should be able to raise the British chief while that scoundrel was still at his 'office'. He picked up the telephone and dialed a number, a glorious scheme forming in the back of his mind.

* * *

Tegucigalpa, Honduras
1 August, 2005

Elena shifted in her sleep and was awakened suddenly by a loud, thumping sound. Eyes coming open at once, she looked around, confused for a moment as to where she was. Then, the

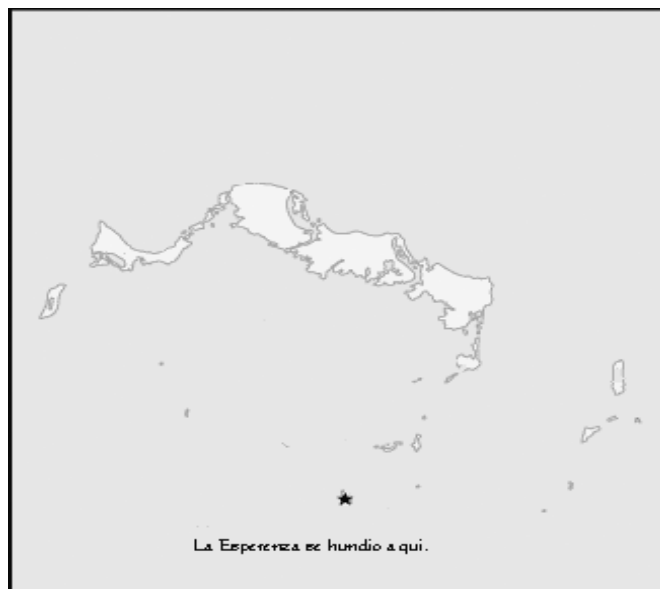
memories came to her. She was home, in her room, and she'd been sitting in her favorite chair, reading her ancestor's journal of his life with Hernando Cortes. She must have fallen asleep in the early morning hours. Sitting up, she uncurled her legs and began to stretch.

The book! Her ancestor's journal! Where was it? It had been in her lap while she read from its pages, but it was not there, now! At once, her mind leaped to the thumping sound that had awakened her, and she looked to the floor at her feet. Her heart sank within her, at the sight.

The book had fallen from her lap as she shifted positions in her sleep. It must have landed on one of its corners, on the floor. The ancient binding, leather over thin slats of wood, had finally given way and had split upon impact. Elena felt miserable as she looked at the disaster. The diary had been handed down through the generations in her family for nearly five hundred years and, on its first night in her possession as its latest guardian, she had destroyed it. What would her grandfather think of her, if he learned of it? And to think that she had taken it to her room, immediately upon receipt of it, lest the *niños* get hold of it and damage it! Was she little better than a child, herself?

Rising from the chair, she knelt and began to pick up the binding and the loose pages. She was fortunate, in that the pages had not scattered, and were still in their proper sequence, for her ancestor had not thought to number them in order. Finally, she had the stack of pages roughly shuffled together and laying atop the front cover. As she reached for the back of the book, however, she noticed that its cloth inner lining had torn loose, and spied something beneath it, something that looked like a sheet of folded paper. Tugging at it, gently, she slid it out from between the cover and the lining, and carefully unfolded it.

It was a map. In crude fashion, it depicted a cluster of islands which bore no names. A legend at the bottom of the chart read, '*La Esperanza se hundio aqui.*' 'The Esperanza sank here.' A short line extended from a point above the legend to a tiny five-pointed star drawn upon the map, which obviously indicated the site of the sinking of the ship upon which her ancestor had sailed to Cuba with his treasure.



As Elena sat on the floor, staring at the map and wondering if the wreck had ever been

discovered by modern-day treasure-hunters, she was startled by her aunt's voice from the doorway of her room.

"Ah! You are awake, dear! Come downstairs and have some coffee with me, won't you?"

"I'll be down in a few minutes, Tia Linda," she replied. "I want to take a shower and freshen up, first."

"Very well, dear," her aunt replied. "But don't be long. I want some time to visit with you, before you go about your day. We had so little time to talk, with the party last night. Oh – you've had a telephone call from Gwen, in America, already this morning, and your uncle wants me to remind you that you still have your duties at the factory. And Manuela told me, last night, that she has been asking your uncle to have you stop in and see her, for the last several days."

Elena smiled. Dear old Manuela. She was now the master roller for *Tabaclera Ybarra*, her uncle's company. Manuela had learned the art in La Habana, itself, under the harsh supervision of Castro's bullies. Elena still felt chills along her spine whenever she recalled Manuela's tale of how she had fled the island with five others of her family, on a makeshift boat, in the dark of a moonless night so many years ago. Elena had spent the summer of her sixteenth year working with Manuela, learning the art of rolling as another step toward Tio Estebán's desired goal that she eventually assume control of the family company. She would enjoy spending a few pleasant hours with the older woman. First, though, there were other things.

"You said Gwen called for me, Tia Linda?" she asked her aunt.

"Si," Tia Linda replied. "She sounded as though the matter was both important, and most urgent, and that is the reason I came to wake you. Otherwise, I would have let you sleep awhile longer."

"Let me call her, and find out what she wants, and then I'll shower and join you for coffee. There is some left, isn't there?"

Her aunt smiled. "Consuela has instructions that, as long as you are home, there should always be fresh coffee available for you. I'll see you downstairs in a little while."

As she heard her aunt's footsteps descending the tiled staircase, Elena opened the book again, and found the pages that had fascinated her the most, during her reading. They had come loose from the binding, and she gathered them together and crossed the room to her computer desk.

"Johnny will want to see these, I'm sure!" she thought.

After three years of studying under the noted professor, two of those acting as one of his Teaching Assistants, she had grown comfortable calling him by the nickname he preferred when in private or among close friends. She knew enough of his penchant for unearthing lost artifacts to know that this story would intrigue him immensely. It took some minutes for her to scan the faded pages and produce legible images from them, but at last she had it done. Combining the image files into one zipped document, she opened her e-mail program and addressed a short message to her college archaeology professor.

"Johnny,

I hope that your summer is going well, and that you are enjoying your time in the mid-east. Have you unearthed anything of significance, at the dig? If not – and, perhaps even if you have – I think you will find the attached images intriguing.

I have just come into possession of a most curious document. It is the journal of one of my ancestors, a soldier who served under Cortes against the Aztecs, and the volume has been in my family for five hundred years.

Among the incidents he relates, is a very strange tale dealing with an artifact known as ‘The Singing Stone’ – ‘La Piedra el Cantar’, in Spanish. I have imaged the pages containing the tale, and you will find them in the attached file. I was wondering if, in your travels or research, you have ever heard such a tale, or of such an artifact, from any other source. The tale, itself, sounds so much like an old soldier’s tall-tale that I do not know whether to believe it. Yet, concealed within the binding of the journal, my ancestor hid a map that notes the site where his ship sank, supposedly with the stone still on board. A scan of the map is also included in the file.

I apologize if this message arrives at an inconvenient time, but I did not want to wait until I return for classes, to ask you if you had ever heard of this legend.

*Warmest Regards,
Elena”.*

She was nearly finished with her message when the telephone rang again, and her aunt called up the stairs that it was for her. It was her roommate, from college.

“Elena!” Gwen exclaimed over the connection. “How is your summer going?”

“*Muy bueno*,” Elena replied, “It’s been wonderful, spending the time with my family and friends. So far, Tio Estebán hasn’t brought up the subject of my taking up the reins of the company, which is a most pleasant change. So, what’s up, with you? Why the call?”

“Well,” Gwen explained, “You remember I told you that my church youth group was sponsoring a summer mission trip to some island in the Caribbean, for the youth to go and do work on fixing up people’s homes and stuff? We’re going to one of the islands in the Turks-Caicos group.”

Naturally curious, Elena turned back to her computer. Dropping the e-mail program to the task bar, she opened her Web browser, starting a search for a map that would show the islands.

“Yes, I remember,” Elena chuckled. “You’ve gone on such trips, before. But you hardly classify as a ‘youth’, any longer.”

“That’s true enough,” Gwen laughed in agreement. “And, happy twenty-first birthday, by the way! I was gonna call, last night, but Mom had another one of her ‘you-can’t-get-out-of-it’ formal dinner things, and Dad and I were on the ‘required attendee’ list. By the time we got home, I figured it was too late to call you.”

“You forgot the time-difference, *me amiga*,” Elena countered. “We’re two hours behind you. The party didn’t end until after midnight, and I didn’t get to sleep until the wee hours of the morning.”

“Oh. Sorry,” Gwen stammered.

“It’s alright,” Elena reassured her friend. “So, what’s up?”

“Well,” Gwen drew a deep breath and launched into her explanation, “You’re right. I don’t classify as a ‘youth’, any more. But our church wanted a couple of people my age, who’ve been on these trips before, to go along and assist – sort of like some extra chaperones to ride herd on the younger ones.”

“That ought to keep you out of trouble,” Elena replied with a grin, while she waited for the program to return some valid links. The list appeared, and she clicked the first entry. Not for the first time, she was grateful that the family’s finances afforded them a connection to the Internet that did not need to be shared with the telephone line. “I recall telling you how envious I was, that you were getting to do such a thing. Our local parishes, down here, have no such programs for their youth.”

“I remember. That’s why I called,” Gwen explained. “How would you like to go along on the trip?”

As the measure of her roommate’s invitation hit her fully, a map of the trip’s destination slowly began to resolve itself on Elena’s monitor.

“How can I?” Elena responded. “You told me that the trip was fully booked.”

“One of the other girls in the group was out riding her motorcycle on a wooded trail, and had an accident,” Gwen answered. “She’s alright, but she broke her leg. That leaves an open spot on the team, that’s already paid for by the church, and nobody else has volunteered. Wanna go?”

By this time, the map had finally solidified on Elena’s screen, and she let out a little gasp of surprise. The islands of the Turks-Caicos group matched, in every major particular, the roughly-sketched map that her ancestor had hidden away in the bindings of his journal!

“How long is the trip?” Elena asked.

“It’s scheduled to last for two weeks,” Gwen answered.

“Will we have any sort of free time, to do any sightseeing?” Elena asked, a rough plan forming in her mind.

“We have three ‘free days’ scheduled, for activities like swimming at one of the beaches, or bicycling around the island,” Gwen laughed. “I was there, two summers back, on another mission trip, so I can show you some of the sights. But the main focus is the mission work.”

“When would I have to leave?” Elena inquired.

“Tomorrow,” Gwen suggested. “That will give you a day to stay at my house, in Miami, and rest a bit. We leave for the trip on August third.”

“Oh,” Elena answered, saddened. “I’m sure that my aunt and uncle would let me go, but how can I get an airline ticket to Miami, that fast?”

“It’s already reserved, girlfriend,” Gwen laughed. “I talked to my dad,” Elena recalled that her roommate’s father was an investment banker with a large Miami firm, “He enjoyed having you visit with us, over Christmas, and he said that – since we seem to be as close as sisters – he’d pay for your ticket to Miami and back, with three weeks in between flights. That gives you and me a week to spend here, on my turf, after the mission trip is over. Maybe we can drive up to Orlando for a couple days, and do some of the theme parks! Anyway, the ticket is already reserved, and you can pick it up at the airline’s main desk at the terminal in Teg...”

“Té-gu-ci-gál-pa,” Elena pronounced it slowly for her, giggling. Despite their years of sharing a dorm room, the American girl had never fully mastered the art of properly pronouncing the name of her roommate’s home city.

“Yeah,” Gwen responded. “That place. So you’ll come?”

“Provisionally, yes. If I don’t call you back, it means that I’ve gotten permission, and picked up the ticket, alright?”

“Great! Call me anyway, though, just so everything’s certain. Well, I’ve gotta run. Mom’s got a day off, and she wants to go play a round of tennis, before the sun gets too hot! Oh – if you want to bring something from your uncle’s factory, go ahead. I know of a couple spots on the beach, near where we’ll be staying, where you can...relax...in private.”

“That’s very kind of you, Gwen,” Elena replied, smiling softly. “Especially in view of the way we started our first year together.”

“I thought we cleared the air on that, a long time ago!” Gwen sounded hurt. “I talked with my pastor, when I got home that summer, and he totally agreed with what you and I had concluded. I told you that! Oh, darn! Wish I could talk longer, but Mom’s hollering up the stairs at me. She’s getting impatient. I really gotta go. See you tomorrow, right?”

“I think so,” Elena agreed. “*Adios*, for now!”

Cutting the connection, Elena placed the phone back in its charging cradle and smiled. With a bit of luck – and if the local marinas and charter captains in the Caicos accepted her American Express gold card – she would be able to rent a boat and the gear necessary to do a little wreck diving and locate her ancestor’s treasure. She printed out a copy of the Turks-Caicos map and spent a moment copying the location of the star from the map de Avila had sketched. It appeared that the ship lay off the southern coast of the southernmost of two tiny islands collectively known as the Seal Cays.

Closing her web browser, she set off down the stairs to discuss the possibility of the trip to the Caicos with her aunt. She found her, sitting at a small table in the corner of the kitchen, sipping coffee and reading the morning’s newspaper.

“Good morning, dear,” her aunt looked up as she entered the room.

“And to you, Tia Linda,” Elena returned, leaning down to kiss her aunt on the cheek. Then, stepping over to the counter, she poured herself a large mug of coffee, adding the proper amounts of both creamer and sugar. Returning to the table, she sat down across from her aunt. Sipping her coffee briefly, she reached for a banana from the fruit basket that sat on one side of

the table, near a window that looked out onto the tiled courtyard. Peeling it, she began to eat.

“Fruit for breakfast, Elena?” Tia Linda smiled.

“*Si*,” Elena replied. “Bananas, at least.”

“Don’t they have bananas, in America?”

“Of course they do,” Elena giggled. “But they can’t grow them, there. They have to import them from outside the country. Here,” she waved her hand at the window, “you can just walk out into the courtyard and pick a bunch off of one of our banana trees. In America, you would pay at least half of an American dollar for less than half a kilo of them. So there never seems to be a large supply of them, in the dining hall. If you’re not one of the first people in line, you wind up having to select from apples, pears, and oranges.”

She devoured the fruit quickly, and turned her attention to her coffee.

“Can we talk, for a little while, Tia Linda?”

“Of course, darling,” her aunt smiled. Putting down the paper, she stood and stretched out the kink in her back, then walked over to the counter and refilled her own coffee cup.

“Did you not sleep well?” she asked, as she returned to the table.

“I suppose,” Elena answered, shrugging. Then, at her aunt’s questioning glance, “I fell asleep in my chair, reading the journal that Grandfather gave me.”

“I see,” Tia Linda chuckled. “That couldn’t have been too comfortable.”

She sipped her coffee, giving her daughter a few moments to eat another piece of fruit.

“I haven’t really had the time alone with you, to ask. Did you have a pleasant ride from the airport, with Tio Estebán?”

“Yes,” Elena answered. “I was surprised to see that it was he, instead of you, who came to meet me and drive me home. I was even more surprised when he didn’t mention the factory even once, on the trip.”

“I think it’s your uncle’s way of apologizing to you for all of the pushing he’s done, over the last couple years, to try and get you to go into the business with him.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I’ve had plenty of time to talk with him about it, with you off at school. I decided that the argument you two had, this last time, was the last one I wanted to hear. You know that your uncle’s father was a fisherman, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Elena replied.

“Well, his father expected him to become a fisherman, too, and take over running the boat when he grew too old to do so. Only, your uncle was prone to motion sickness. It was bad

enough that the motion of the boat on the waves made him ill; the smell of the fish in the hold only added to it.”

“So, how did he go from fisherman to *tabaquero*?”

“There was one of your uncle’s friends, whose father was the foreman at a cigar factory. In the cold months, when the big fish moved to other waters, the catches were small and didn’t bring in as much money. Things always seem to keep costing more...”

“They call it ‘inflation’, in America,” Elena commented.

“That sounds like an appropriate name for it,” Tia Linda smiled. “But, because more money was needed, your uncle went to work in the cigar factory, for some hours each week. He started out simply, carrying bales of tobacco out to the rolling floor and bundles of cigars back to the aging rooms. Eventually, he was asked to learn how to roll. By this time, he had discovered that he truly enjoyed such work, and began to dream of one day owning a factory of his own.

“Eventually, he had to tell his father of his dream. Papi didn’t think very much of it, and they argued bitterly about it. Finally, Papi told your uncle that he could either be content with fishing, the family tradition, or move out on his own. Tio Esteban chose the latter, of course. The two didn’t speak for almost ten years.

“By then, your uncle was running his own factory. He had grown very successful, in the way of the small businessman. Even Papi was finally forced to see that your uncle had a certain flair for the work he loved. He came to your uncle, with his hat in his hand, and apologized for the hateful things he had said. They forgave each other, but the damage was done. Ten years had been wasted, and Papi lived only two more years after they had mended their differences.”

“That’s so sad, Tia Linda,” Elena said quietly.

“*Es verdad!* Truly, it was a sad thing, and it was this that I finally made your uncle remember. I told him that – if he did not wish to put up such a wall between himself and you – he would do well to let you follow your heart and do the sort of work that you love. Even if it is flying all around the world to dig up old bones and bits of pottery.”

She laughed, as she voiced that last thought, and Elena laughed with her.

“I love both, Tia Linda,” Elena confessed. “And there are plenty of ‘old bones and bits of pottery’ to be dug up, right here in Honduras. Also, there is teaching others to love the digging and the learning. My secret hope,” she leaned forward across the table, “is to do both. I should be able to teach, in the university here, once I have learned enough elsewhere, and I can dig in the hills around the city. The ancient civilizations lived all throughout this region. Being close to home, I can still have a hand in the business, with – perhaps – a ‘general manager’ to see to the day-to-day operations, but still be available when executive decisions need to be made.”

“That is an admirable goal, dear,” her aunt said, a broad smile on her face, “and I hope that you can achieve it all.”

She sipped her coffee, and they sat in silence for a moment.

“What did Gwen want?” she asked Elena.

Quickly, Elena gave her aunt a capsule version of the mission-trip planned by the youth of Gwen's church, and the vacant spot on the team.

"May I go, Tia Linda?" she asked, at the end of her explanation.

"Of course, dear," her aunt agreed. "Only, do not think that it will all be 'fun'. You will be very tired, at the end of a day filled with carrying lumber and swinging a hammer."

"I anticipate that," Elena said. "Still, to do such work for those who can not do it for themselves, or who cannot afford to have it done – that is truly showing the love of Christ. I may be weary by the end of the day, but I am certain that He will grant me peaceful sleep, with renewed strength in the morning."

"Then, go and get cleaned up and dressed, dear. We'll have to go to the airport, so that you can pick up your ticket, if you're leaving tomorrow."

Elena rose from the table, came around and gave her aunt a long embrace, and hurried off to her room.

"Thank you, Tia Linda," she cried happily as she took the stairs two at a time.

Entering her bedroom, she noticed that her computer was still on, and realized that she had never dispatched her e-mail to Professor Littlejohn. She typed her full name at the bottom of her message, and attached the zipped document containing the images of her ancestor's journal pages and map. Clicking her mouse on the proper icon, she sent the file on its way across the Internet.

It is difficult for the human mind to imagine that the twitch of a single muscle could alter the destinies of an entire world, let alone two worlds. It is even more difficult for a human mind to imagine that such an action could be part of a great plan fashioned millennia in the past. Elena Inez Garcia y Ybarra had no idea, just then, of the chain of events that the simple movement of her index finger had set irretrievably into motion. The result of her action, though, would change billions of lives.

Chapter Five: "Welcome to the Neighborhood..."

Arronaxe, New York
1 August, 2005

Despite the late hour at which Dot and I finally got off to sleep, she was up by seven to start the coffee, and pulled me out of the sack half an hour later. Thus, we were both showered and dressed when the knock came at the kitchen door. Dot was busy at the stove with an unusually large assortment of items, considering our typical breakfast, so I went to see who else was up and about at this hour. It turned out to be our new neighbors, Kal and Lois. Both were still clad only in the infirmarium-issue bathrobes they'd been wearing the previous day.

"We're sorry to come calling so early," Lois apologized as I let them in and offered them seats at the kitchen table, "but we're both early risers – you get that way, in the news business, you know – and when we went to see what was available in our kitchen, we found it as bare as

old mother Hubbard's cupboard."

"You're just in time," Dot smiled at them. "We don't really keep much in the way of foodstuffs in the guest houses. The houses aren't used that often, to begin with, and even less when school has let out for the summer break, so we worry about spoilage. We really didn't have time to do any stocking of it, yesterday, so I figured you folks would be checking in, sooner or later. How about a nice plate of eggs, sausage, and hotcakes?"

"It'll feel almost like we're spending the weekend in Kansas, with my folks," Kal chuckled. "That's just about what my mom would make, for us."

"So what did I miss, on the menu?" Dot asked, a bit embarrassed.

"The only thing I can think of would be a big pot of coffee," Lois replied. "The caffeine doesn't have the slightest effect on him, of course – or, at least, it never has – but he got quite used to the taste, growing up in Smallville."

"Mom always had a big pot ready for us, in the morning, when Dad and I got in from chores," Kal added, "Too, there were always the cappuccinos and lattes at the Talon..."

"Well, you're in luck there, too. Coffee-maker's on the counter, over there," Dot waved a hand. "Creamer and sugar are in the containers next to it, and the mugs are in the cupboard above it. Help yourself, by all means! First food will be up in a couple of minutes."

Kal got up and went to the counter. He rummaged through the collection of mugs in the cupboard before selecting two. Moments later, he returned with two mugs of coffee, and set one in front of his wife. I grinned, and suppressed a chuckle, as I noted his choice of mugs. The one he placed before his wife bore that trademark "S" in the asymmetrical pentagon, while the one he raised to his own lips was black, with a yellow oval enclosing a black image with scalloped edges.

"It would appear that we're not the only folks from our world, that are known here, darling," Lois smiled at her husband.

"Yes," he grinned. "I'll have to remember to say something to Bruce, if and when we find our way back home."

"Bruce who?" Dot wanted to know, as she began setting some silverware on the table.

"I'll find you another one of those mugs," I suggested, unable to resist the urge, "and you can take it back to him as a souvenir. Then you can sit back and watch him go batty, trying to figure it out!"

Kal almost duplicated Lois' feat with the iced tea, from the previous evening, and the three of us all had a good laugh for a couple minutes, while Dot stood there, mystified.

"Somebody wanna clue me in, here?" she finally glared at me.

"Look at the symbol on Kal's mug," I told her.

She stared at it for a second, and then made the connection. "There's a Batman, in your world, too?"

“Yes, there is,” Kal nodded. “As a matter of fact, he’s our landlord. Or, rather, his alter ego, Bruce Wayne, owns the building Lois and I live in.”

As he set the mug down, I noticed a tell-tale bit of toilet tissue on his neck.

“Shaving cut, Kal?” I asked, pointing at it. “That’s not a good sign,”

“True,” Kal agreed. “Apparently, it’s going to take a little more sun-bathing, to get that back to where it should be. I guess, for the moment, I’m going to have to be a bit more careful with sharp objects.”

“Aren’t you worried about it?” Dot asked.

“Not at the moment,” he shrugged. “There have been other times when I’ve had to deal with things, without my powers. At least once, as a teenager, back in Smallville, and any time I’ve visited a world that orbits a red sun. Of course, I only have one true prior experience to go on, where my powers vanished because my energy reserves were tapped to such a deep level, and that one had me out of the running for a few weeks. If I don’t start getting back to normal in another few days, after doing plenty of basking in the sun, then I’ll start to worry.”

“‘Out of the running, for a few weeks’ doesn’t really do justice to that time in your life,” I suggested.

”That’s an understatement, if ever I heard one!” Lois added vehemently.

Kal blushed, and took another sip of his coffee in an attempt to cover up.

Dot came back over from the stove, just then, with a huge bowl of scrambled eggs and a plate stacked high with hotcakes. A second trip brought plates of sausage and toast. On her third trip, she carried only her mug of coffee, and sat down.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Dig in, folks!” she invited.

“I had assumed – based on what I’ve observed of you folks thus far – that one of you would want to ask a blessing on the food,” Kal explained. “Just because I don’t believe doesn’t mean I can’t be polite.”

Again, I was tempted to ask him how he had gone from belief to unbelief, but I got the sense that it wasn’t the right moment. Dot offered a prayer, and then we dug into the food.

“I noticed that you mentioned visiting your folks, on weekends, Kal,” I commented, between bites of food. “Do I take it, then, that they are both still alive?”

“The term, ‘alive,’ doesn’t quite do justice, when you’re talking about Clark’s – Kal’s, I mean, parents,” Lois smiled, a chuckle in her voice. “Mom and Dad Kent are two of the most wonderful people you’d ever want to meet! They’re so kind and gracious, and fun-loving, yet really wise and thoughtful, too.”

“They’d have to be, to raise the sort of son that Kal turned out to be, in your world,” I agreed.

“What do you mean, Perry?” Kal asked me, cocking his head in my direction.

“I mean, just think about all of the other adults that you knew, when you were growing up in Smallville,” I explained. “Imagine what a different sort of man you’d have become, if you’d been found by, say, Lionel Luthor, rather than by Jonathan and Martha Kent. What would Superman be like, today, if that had happened?”

“I don’t want to think about that,” Kal stated flatly, a shiver noticeably coursing through his body. “I saw enough of what he did to his own son, Lex.”

“I know,” I said, lowering my voice somewhat in sympathy. “You and Lex – Clark and Lex, that is – were good friends, once upon a time. It’s not fun, watching a good friend go bad. Especially the way it’s played itself out in your life.”

“That’s true enough,” Kal shrugged.

“You did everything you could, to keep him straight, Kal,” I told him. “The seeds that are bearing fruit now were sown into him long before you came into his life. As powerful as you are, you can’t weed out bad seed that’s been rooting that long. That takes a higher power than anything you’ve ever had, even on your best days.”

“I still can’t get over it!” Lois, noticing her husband’s discomfort, sought to change the subject. “You folks seem to know so many of the smallest details about our lives.”

“Why were you asking about my parents, Perry?” Kal asked. “Is that something you don’t know?”

“Well, you watched the movie with us, last night. The scene where ‘Pa Kent’ died...”

“About the only detail they got wrong,” Kal replied, spearing another couple links of sausage from the serving platter. “I wondered, about that, but I was too engrossed in the rest of the story – amazed by how much they seemed to have captured, actually – to ask you about it, at the time.”

“Well, there have been various versions of your ‘origin story’, over the years,” I began to explain. “In one version, prevalent in the comic books and that film, your adopted father passed away when you were in your late teens. In another, a television series that focused more on the relationship triangle between you as Clark, you as Superman, and Lois, both of the elder Kents are still alive.”

“That’s apparently the version you want to pay attention to,” Lois chuckled. “They’ve got that part of the story correct!”

She went silent, then, and her face took on a sad and wistful look.

“Something wrong, honey?” Dot asked.

“I just wondered if I’d ever see them again,” Lois answered quietly. “You see so many stereotyped images of the ‘mother-in-law’, in movies and television, you know. Like, no matter how hard you try, you can’t prove to her that you’re good enough to be married to her son?”

“Seen it all too often,” Dot grinned

“And looked at the shoe on the other foot, too,” I added, and they all looked at me with questioning stares.

“You contemplate looking at becoming Monk Mayfair’s grandson-in-law, sometime,” I grinned.

“Well, it was never that way, with Mom Kent,” Lois laughed. “Do you know, when Kal finally told them that he’d asked me to marry him – and that I knew all about what I was getting myself into – do you know what her response was?”

“I’ve got to admit, that’s one that I’m not aware of,” I confessed.

“She looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘It’s about time the two of you finally figured out that you were meant for each other!’ “

“Really?” Dot asked.

“Yeah!” Lois laughed. “And his dad just sat there at the kitchen table and nodded. ‘Yep,’ he said. ‘Martha’s been sayin’ that since you were both teenagers, and you came to visit your cousin Chloe – and discovered that you couldn’t stand Clark! Said you both needed to do a bit of growin’ up but, when you did, you were gonna fall for each other like a ton of bricks down a well!’ “

By the time Lois and Kal had concluded that part of their tale, breakfast was over. As he had, the night before, Kal had demolished three plates full to our one apiece.

“I hope you don’t think I’m making a pig of myself,” he explained to us, as we watched him polish off the third helping of pancakes.

“Actually, after watching you eat last night, and then just now, I was figuring that your body simply demanded all that extra mass, in order to offset whatever it had to cannibalize to handle the repair-work from yesterday,” I told him.

“And, as far as the food is concerned,” Dot added, “Don’t worry about how much you eat. Like we said, last night: about the only thing you won’t hear us say, where money is concerned, is ‘We can’t afford it.’”

Whatever reply either Kal or Lois would have made in response to Dot’s statement got lost when another knock sounded at the door.

“Come on in, Clark,” I called.

“Good morning, Perry, Dot,” Clark said, as he strode into the kitchen, carrying a large plastic bag. Bonnie was right behind him. She headed straight for the coffee maker, and poured herself a mug. Normally one to eschew caffeinated beverages, Clark followed and poured a mug for himself. I suspected that it was more to help our visitors continue to ease into their new surroundings, than anything else. They both joined us at the table, and Clark began filling plates for both himself and his wife.

“I gather, from some of the comments that Perry made, and the way you were introduced to us, yesterday, that you’re living here under an alias?” Kal asked.

“Yes,” Clark responded. “It’s a long story, and I’ll give you the details later on. The condensed version is that, about the time my enemy trapped me in that suspended animation chamber, he also leaked details of my ‘Crime College’ to the press. Seems that, in my ‘wisdom’, in starting the facility and perfecting that surgical technique, I had put aside due process, civil rights, and free will, for what I believed to be a greater good. I wasn’t available for arrest and trial, but both the press and Congress convicted me in absentia. There’s a good chance that, if it was learned that I was still alive, I’d be arrested and tried all over again. And, this time, it would be in a real court.”

“Well, if you were asleep in that chamber for nearly fifty years, you’ve really already served your sentence, in a manner of speaking,” Lois suggested.

“But part of the ‘sentence’, for a criminal, implies that he will be awake during the daytime, for the length of his prison term, in order to reflect on the error of his ways. It would most probably be said that I wasn’t afforded that opportunity, and so it wasn’t really a fitting punishment.”

“Hence the new identity,” Kal concluded. “Probably a wise choice, all things considered. Have you have run into any problems, keeping your real identity a secret? I mean, with people maybe looking at you, and recognizing you from your archived photos?”

“Not really,” Clark answered. “I tried to keep out of the spotlight, pretty much, back in the day, so there aren’t that many photos of me that are still around. It helps, a great deal, that fifty years have passed. Most folks figure that Clark Savage, Junior, is either dead, or a ninety-something recluse, hiding out in some obscure rest-home.”

Clark paused, pouring himself a huge glass of orange juice from the pitcher at the center of the table, and taking a long sip.

“All things considered,” he continued, “few people, if any, would connect me with the individual known as ‘Doc Savage’. I appreciate your question, though, coming from an individual who has had his own share of dealing with that situation. Though, to be honest, I never did quite understand how a simple pair of glasses would keep people from guessing...”

“It’s more than just the glasses, Clark,” Kal smiled. “There’s a lot that goes into it. Part of it is simple drama, learning how to assume a character and stay in it. I remember enough instances where you did that, in those books of my dad’s, to know that you’re familiar with that part. Too, there’s a thing I do – stressing of certain muscles – that compresses the cartilage between my vertebrae, and in the knees. That takes a couple inches off of my apparent height, when I’m not actively being Superman, and you’d be surprised what the loss of those two or three inches does, as far as changing one’s appearance.”

“That’s fascinating,” Clark nodded. “But doesn’t it present you with any sort of strain?”

“Not really,” Kal answered, taking a sip of his coffee. “I’ve done it so long that it’s basically a reflex action. I don’t even consciously think of it.”

“You should have seen the look on my face,” Lois added, “the first time he did that, in front of me. It was in reverse, and he was changing from Clark Kent to Superman! I almost fainted! He just seemed to grow suddenly bigger, right in front of my eyes!”

“Back to the thing about your ‘College’, for just a moment, Clark,” Kal asked. “Whatever became of it, in the wake of the scandal?”

“Look around you, Kal,” I suggested. “Better still, when we go for that hike, Clark and I can point it out to you. This valley is where the ‘College’ was located.”

“And now you’ve built a different sort of ‘college’, to replace the old one,” Lois said softly. “How fitting, especially with what the new facility is based upon.”

“And that is...?” Kal asked.

“Oh – that’s right. I never showed you the brochure that I found in the guest house, this morning, when I went rummaging for food,” she told him. “Basically, it’s that the one really certain way to go out into society and lead a truly productive life requires two things. First, establish your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Know Him for Who and What He is, in your life, and understand your relationship to Him. Second, understand that the world, and everything in it, belongs to God and should be treated with the proper love, care, and respect. If you keep both of those notions foremost in everything you do and say, it’s pretty hard to stray from the straight and narrow.”

“I couldn’t have put it any better, myself, Lois,” Clark told her.

“So,” Bonnie asked, noticing Kal’s discomfort at the track our conversation was following, “Are you folks ready to go shopping?”

“I would be,” Lois giggled “but I haven’t a thing to wear!”

“You do, now, honey,” Dot said. “Perry, can you go grab that bag in the other room?”

I left the room for a few seconds and returned with a paper shopping bag filled with two or three days’ worth of outfits, and handed it to Lois. Meanwhile, Clark was making a hand-off to Kal of the bag he’d been carrying when he arrived.

“It’s the best we could do, on short notice,” he offered, and Dot and I nodded our assent. “But at least it will give you two both something to wear to the store while you shop for a more substantial wardrobe.”

“We appreciate it, Clark, Bonnie,” Lois told them gratefully.

“It’s nothing,” Bonnie laughed. “The good Lord’s charged us with helping those in need, so what else could we do? It’s lucky for us that Clark and Dot are pretty close to your sizes, when it comes to clothes!” She paused, giggling a bit. “I don’t think that there are too many men in Arronaxe, outside of my husband, who could match your shoulders, Kal!”

“Well, we’re grateful,” Kal replied sincerely, blushing a bit. “And if you give us half an hour or so, now that we’ve finished this excellent breakfast, we’ll be showered and dressed, and ready to go shopping.”

“Actually, I’ve been thinking,” Lois offered. “Kal said that he wanted to go for a hike, this morning, to kind of stretch his legs and work out some of the kinks from that buffeting he took. And I want him back here, laying out in the sun, from about eleven to four, while it’s at its peak. Why don’t we let the boys go do their ‘nature walk’ thing, up in the hills, and we girls get the shopping done. I know all his sizes, and the kinds of clothes he likes, so he really doesn’t need to go along.”

We kicked the matter around for about thirty seconds. Both Clark and I are loving husbands, and we really don’t mind going shopping for clothes with our wives, when needed. I’ve even been known to hold Dot’s purse, while she’s in the fitting room, regardless of the fact that it doesn’t go with my outfit. However, the hike was as good an excuse as we’d ever get. The ladies would go do the necessary shopping, and we’d go take a hike for a couple hours, and then get Kal back to the house to do some serious sunbathing.

Before we left, I added just a few items to the list of things I wanted Dot to pick up, for our guests.

* * *

“...and over there, at the southern tip of the lake, where you see the large cluster of buildings? That’s where the actual structure for the ‘College’ once stood. The buildings that are there, now, are the main administrative centers for the Institute, and also for the Clark Savage Foundation. The latter is a charity which works to aid other legitimate charities in any way it can.” I finished.

We were about halfway up the mountain wall on the western side of Arronaxe, looking down into the valley from one of my favorite vantage points. In fact, it was on this very spot where the original set of ‘planning meetings’ were held, when the valley was basically an empty area, several years earlier. Years before that, Monk had bought up the entire plot of real estate, marking it as private property, in order to salvage some vestige of what had been Doc’s holdings. We’d all decided that it needed to be put to some productive use, in order to effect some sort of restitution for the damage it had caused in the years when Clark had used the small facility for surgically altering the minds of criminals.

“Truly remarkable,” Kal remarked, awed by the change in the valley, as depicted by the six-year-old photos of it, and the vista he took in with his eyes from the clearing on the mountainside. “Where did you get the name, ‘Arronaxe’?”

“It was my mother’s name,” Clark told him.

Neither Kal nor I had anything to offer, at that point, so we remained silent.

Kal looked at me, and at the long, winding trail we had hiked along to get to the vantage point.

“I don’t know about you, but I feel like sitting and resting, for a few minutes,” he said to me.

“Fair enough,” I agreed. “Clark?”

“Actually, Perry, I delayed the physical portion of my exercises this morning, figuring I could do it up here, and that Kal could work out with me, if he wanted.”

“I’ve read about your idea of exercises,” Kal laughed. “If I was feeling one hundred percent, I just might feel ready to take you up on that. As it is, I’m still finding it annoying just to feel tired. That’s something that I’ve only felt after going a week or more of strenuous activity – like helping clean up after a tsunami or an earthquake – without any sleep! I think I’ll take a rain-check, if you don’t mind.”

“Not a problem,” Clark smiled, moving off some yards away to begin his regimen of physical exercise.

Kal sat gazing out at the valley below us, watching a couple sailboats cruise along the lake in the light morning breeze. I bowed my head and asked a quick blessing from the Father, on what I was about to try and do.

“Uh, Kal?”

“Yes, Perry?”

“Can I ask you a bit of a personal question?”

“Like what?”

“Well, I just want to try and understand something that I’ve noticed, really,” I explained. “I’m not looking to be judgmental or anything.”

“You’ve done so much for me and Lois, already, Perry,” he smiled. “The least I can do is try and give you honest answers. I think I know what you’re curious about.”

“Try me.”

“You want to know why I don’t believe.”

“I want to try and understand it, is all, Kal,” I nodded. “I mean, you were raised in central Kansas, which – at least in my world – is one of the major ‘Bible belts’. From what I read in the early tales of your life – in the comics – your folks were decent, God-fearing people, and that’s how they raised you.”

“That much is certainly true,” he verified. “And I have to say that it saddened my parents deeply, when I walked away from their faith. I guess you’re looking for the reasons that led me to that decision, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I answered him. “If you don’t want to tell me, it’s up to you. But I believe in God with all my heart, and I’m just trying to understand why you don’t.”

“Well, I guess the questions began when I started into my teen years,” he began. “The afternoon when Dad told me the truth about who – and what – I really was. He took me down into the old storm cellar, and had me move a bunch of stuff that was all piled into one corner. At the bottom of the pile, there was this object covered by a moldy old canvas tarp.”

“The spaceship that brought you to Earth?”

“Right. That was the afternoon when Dad told me the truth behind my origins. I knew that I had been found in the aftermath of the meteor shower, and that nobody had stepped forward looking for a missing toddler, and so the Kents adopted me and raised me as their own. But, as I grew up, I began to realize that there were ways in which I was vastly different from everyone else I knew.”

“When your powers began to develop,” I nodded.

“Exactly,” Kal sighed, frowning. “It was sometimes almost more than I could deal with, to see those differences in me. Now, I had to contend with the fact that I was obviously a child from another planet.”

He paused, taking a sip from his canteen.

“That was something that bothered me for years,” he continued. “One thing that it did was give me questions about the things I was learning in church. The way that the Bible is written, it sounds as if your God looks at a universe where only Earth has intelligent life. Well, I was obviously intelligent life, but from another planet. The spaceship certainly wasn’t made anywhere on Earth, and nobody else on the planet had my powers and abilities. So, was the Bible really a book worth believing in? Was there such a thing as ‘salvation’, and – if so – did it even *apply* to me?”

A thought occurred to me, and I voiced it. “Your folks couldn’t answer those questions, and you really couldn’t go to your pastor and ask them. You’d have sounded insane, unless you went ahead and displayed your abilities to him, and that was taking a risk that your parents had cautioned you against, from the time you were old enough to understand language.”

“Correct,” he nodded, pausing to sip some more water. “So, I went through my teenage years going to church – basically to please my parents – but secretly beginning to doubt the underpinnings of the faith in which I had been raised.

“Then, when I was seventeen, the ship became active, and the damaged recording of my real father’s voice told me that I was the sole survivor of my world – that he had sent me to Earth to save me, like some sort of cosmic ‘Noah’, from the impending destruction of Krypton. Well, that was kind of the ‘final straw’, you might say. I mean, how could any being who is described by his followers as a ‘loving God’ decide to destroy a planet? Kill off an entire race of beings?”

“You just made reference to the fact that Jor-El sent you to Earth like some sort of ‘cosmic Noah’,” I countered gently. “Did it ever occur to you, that there could perhaps be an even stronger parallel to that tale, than you knew?”

“What do you mean, Perry?” he asked me.

“Well, in the Bible story, there was a time – about forty-three hundred years ago, when the descendants of Adam and Eve had grown large in number and had turned away from God. If you believe some folks’ interpretations of the sixth chapter of Genesis, there was even the added assist of corruption from fallen angels mating with human women, creating a race of ‘giants’ who might even have been considered demigods. Regardless, the scripture is clear that the hearts of nearly all of humanity had turned to wicked thoughts and even more wicked deeds.

“The Bible says that God, seeing all of this wickedness, repented that He had made humankind. He destroyed the entire planet’s human population in a global flood, keeping safe only Noah and his wife, and their three sons and their wives in a ship known as the Ark, the biblical equivalent of your little spaceship.”

“What are you getting at?” Kal asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, let’s look at a couple things, from a bit of a logical perspective,” I suggested. “Either your father, or some other Kryptonian scientist, had invented a star-drive that was capable of getting an infant to Earth before he could starve to death. That infant grew up to become the most powerful mortal on his adopted home world.”

“We’ve established that, Perry,” Kal nodded.

“I know,” I agreed, “but you haven’t left me finish, yet. There’s a sequel to the movie you and Lois watched, last night. In it, those three Kryptonian criminals from the beginning of the film you saw – General Zod, a woman named Ursa, and another man called Non – escape from the Phantom Zone and find their way to Earth. Anything like that ever happen, in your real life?”

“Yes,” Kal responded slowly, his eyes widening.

“Then, I’m assuming that you managed to defeat them, since you’re here with us, today.”

“True,” Kal smiled. “Though, it was probably the second-worst battle I’ve ever had to fight.”

“‘Second’ meaning, in relation to your fight with Doomsday?”

“Yes.”

“Then, Kal,” I continued, “what would have happened, had the people of your world built vastly larger starships, capable of taking hundreds or thousands of your fellow Kryptonians out into the galaxy? How many potential ‘Zods’ might have been loosed on an unsuspecting universe?”

“And your God destroyed my world, to keep that from happening?” Kal asked the unspoken question.

“People appear to be people, whether on your world or mine,” I nodded. “There are good ones, like you and your folks – Jor El and Lara, on Krypton, and Jonathan and Martha Kent, here on Earth – and there are evil ones, too, like Zod and Lex Luthor.”

“I’ve never thought about that,” Kal admitted, “and one could mount a very persuasive case, based on that conjecture. Still, it requires proof.”

“I can’t give you proof, Kal,” I said, shaking my head. “Nobody but God, Himself, can do that for you, and I’ll be praying that He does. Meanwhile, just let me offer you a couple pieces of evidence for you to ponder.”

“Go ahead,” he smiled.

“Well, first, let me ask you a question. The condition you were in, when we found you. I know that Clark showed you the photos, and you know that you were unconscious when I found you.”

“Right.”

“Could you – would you have drowned, if I hadn’t been there to pull you onto the boat?”

“Lois and I would both have drowned, Perry,” he admitted. “I can’t possibly think of anything I can ever do, to repay you for saving both me and my wife, let alone taking us in the way you have.”

“Anyone who happened to be nearby would have attempted to save you. As far as taking you in is concerned, anyone – at least anyone in *this* valley, where the population is nearly all Christian – would have done no less, simply because it’s what our Lord requires of us.” I told him, waving a hand at his offer of a ‘pay-back’. “Too, there’s the unique privilege of just having been able to meet you. To meet, and actually be called ‘friend’, by Superman!”

“I’m not exactly ‘Superman’, at least not at the moment,” he shrugged.

“You will be,” I told him. “It’s just a matter of doing some sunbathing.”

“Still, there must be something...” he insisted.

“Alright,” I smiled. “I’ll tell you what: when you’re back to normal – or, rather, what’s ‘normal’ for you – take me flying with you once, and we’ll call it even.”

“Done!” he laughed, extending a hand to shake on it. I was glad, for just that instant, that he wasn’t in possession of his powers. Even unaided, his grip could have crushed my hand like a vise.

“Meanwhile,” I added, “Here’s a thought for you. The only reason that I was there, to rescue you, was because I had this recurring dream every night for a couple of weeks, about something – or someone – falling into the middle of the lake, right where my boat happened to be, that afternoon. I couldn’t make sense of it, so I went out on the lake to get alone with God, and ask Him to make the meaning clear. I’d scarcely finished receiving the meaning of it, from Him, when the sky split open and you and Lois fell out of it.”

“From another universe,” Kal reminded me.

“Doesn’t matter,” I told him. “Any being who can create an entire universe, simply by speaking his thoughts out loud, can create more than one universe. It’s not much of a challenge for him. The only challenge is the one issued to us: believe He did it.”

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s certainly a point worth pondering. My life saved, and Lois’ as well, because of a dream sent from God?”

“I’m not asking you to believe, Kal; just to weigh the options and think about it. The only reason I was there, to rescue you, was because of the dream I had, of something falling into the lake.”

“I’ll have to,” he nodded, “now that you’ve told me about it. Coincidence only goes so far, when explaining things.”

“If that’s the case,” I suggested, “then you might want to consider your name.”

“What do you mean?” he asked me.

“It means ‘Star-child’, in your native language, right?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“Do you suppose that it might have been cause for a few giggles, behind your back, when you had matured and were no longer a child?”

“Possibly,” he sighed, a tight grin playing around the edges of his lips.

“So, did you ever wonder why your parents selected that name?”

“More times than you can imagine,” he chuckled.

“Well, maybe there’s a reason for it.” I suggested.

“Such as?”

“You’ve spent a fair amount of time traveling around your Earth,” I told him. “How well have you learned its languages?”

“I can make myself understood in most,” he mused, “and I’m fluent in French, Spanish, Russian, and a couple Asian tongues. Why?”

“How about Hebrew?” I asked.

“That’s one of the languages I have yet to master,” he replied.

“Well, then you’ve probably never run into the fact that, in Hebrew, ‘Kal-El’ can be translated, ‘Hand of God’, or ‘purposed by God’, have you?”

* * *

By the time we got back to the house, it was just a trifle after eleven, and Lois was already standing on the back porch, watching for us.

“I’ll give you fifteen minutes to pop next door and check out the clothes I selected for you, darling,” she smiled at Kal as we made our way across the backyard, “and then it’s time you were soaking up some sun.”

With that, she led him next door, and Clark and I went inside to chat with our wives about the morning’s shopping events.

“Hi, honey, how was the hike?” Bonnie called out from a corner.

“Enjoyable,” Clark responded, walking over and bending down to kiss her.

“Did you have a good time?” Dot asked me.

“Yeah,” I answered, giving her a quick peck on the lips. “Kal and I had a really interesting conversation.”

“Did you get the chance to ask him about why he doesn’t believe?” she asked.

“That’s what made the conversation interesting,” I nodded. “And, while we have a few minutes of privacy, I ought to bring you three up to speed on that.”

As quickly as I could, I gave Clark and the ladies a capsule version of the talk that Kal and I had had, regarding his falling away from the faith in which he’d been raised.

“I had suspected that it might be something like that,” Clark nodded as I finished my report. “It made the most logical sense, based on the briefing you gave, yesterday, on his background. I have to say that, if I were in his shoes, I’d have probably reached the same set of conclusions that he did. They’re all faulty, granted, but it’ll be up to us to try and gently point out those flaws in his arguments, as God gives us the openings to do so.”

We had just enough time to quickly go to the Lord, in prayer, asking that He make such openings for us, and give us the words to use when they occurred, before Lois came through the kitchen door.

“Well, I’ve got ‘Smallville’ settled on a blanket on the back lawn,” she smiled. “But he did mention the fact that he was hungry, so I guess that means I ought to go and see about fixing him some lunch, now that our pantry and refrigerator are stocked.”

“We might as well just do another communal meal,” Bonnie suggested. “Mitch will be here, shortly, and I’m sure he’ll be hungry, too.”

“Mitch is coming here?” I asked. “Why?”

“Well, I called him, this morning, right after you boys went for your nature-walk. Got his grumbling backside out of bed, I guess, judging by the sound of his voice. Anyway, just before I was about to tell him what I needed, I got this really heavy sense that this whole thing needs to be kept as quiet as possible, including not discussing things over either radio links or the phones. So I told Mitch that we really needed him, here, just as quickly as he could get dressed and head in. As it turns out, Monk’s son was there, picking up a new Osprey for the air taxi service, so he’ll be bringing Mitch in.”

Even as she spoke, we heard the unmistakable sound of an Osprey’s engines and rotors overhead. Since it wasn’t the right time of day for any scheduled flights into Arronaxe, that meant it had to be Gumball and Mitch.

“Figure half an hour to get the Osprey squared away, another ten minutes to get here by Flea Run,” I said, glancing at my wristwatch. “We better get lunch ready.”

“I thought we might be having a couple more of those multi-family meals,” Dot chuckled.

“There’s big tubs of potato salad in the fridge, and everything we need for burgers and stuff.”

Walking over to Dot, I gave her a hug and asked her, “Did you get the chance to do the bit of shopping I asked you to do, for me?”

“It’s on the counter,” she smiled, nodding at a large paper bag next to the coffee-maker. “Every current-issue comic featuring Superman that the newsstand had on its racks, and some major selections from the fellow’s back room. Apparently he does a nice Internet business in the older issues as collector’s items. I also stopped by the audio-visual department at the Institute, and picked up a portable DVD player. There’s a bag on the table – the player, and season one of *The Adventures of Superman*, *Smallville* and *Lois and Clark*.”

“Thanks, babe,” I said, giving her a quick kiss. “It’s a shame that my collection is back at the house in Oregon, but at least these will give him a bit of a gauge of how well he’s known, here.” I picked up the bag and headed for the door.

“I’ll go fire up the grill,” I called out over my shoulder.

“I’ll take care of that, Perry,” Clark waved a hand. “You see to our guests.”

Don’t ask me how or why. Maybe it was that copy of *Boy Meets Grill*, by Bobby Flay, that Bonnie had picked up for him, in an effort to try and show him what *real* southern barbecue was all about. All I know is, Clark had become a first-class barbecue nut, and loved to handle the cooking.

“I’ll bring the burgers and stuff out to you, shortly, Clark.” Dot offered.

“I guess that means we’re in charge of tables and chairs, Bonnie,” Lois chuckled.

I strode out into the yard, bags in hand, to where Kal lay on the blanket, basking in the sun.

“I had Dot pick you up a little ‘reading material’,“ I told him, as he opened his eyes to look at me. “I’m sorry we don’t have any real lawn chairs, so that you can be more comfortable when you change sides.”

“That isn’t a problem, Perry,” he smiled at me. “It’s not like I’m working on a tan. The object is storing up solar radiation, and, for that, it doesn’t matter which portion of my skin faces the sun. In these trunks,” he indicated the red briefs that were all that was left of his well-known costume, “there’s as much skin exposed on my back as there is on my front.”

“Well, I had Dot do a bit of shopping for me, while the girls were out this morning,” I said, handing him the bag. “My complete collection is back home in Oregon, but these ought to give you a bit better idea about what the folks in this world think of you.”

“Just judging from the movie you showed us, last night, I’m apparently pretty well known, in your world,” he nodded, sliding the first of a series of comic books from the bag.

“Well, in this world, that ‘S’ symbol on your costume is trademarked and copyrighted, owned by the folks that publish those comics,” I told him, nodding at the issue of *Action Comics* he had just opened to page one. “Someone did a survey, a few years back, and that symbol is the

most widely-recognized logo in the world.”

“Fancy that!” he chuckled. “Mom will find that interesting, if I ever get back home to tell her about it. She’s the one who thought to use that character, you know.”

“Well, I know that it was your adopted father, Jonathan, who suggested the notion of the costume, in the first place,” I nodded, “so that you could both use your powers to aid humanity and still have a chance at leading a normal life in your ‘off hours’. And I recall that it was your mother, Martha, who created the costume. But what do you mean, by ‘character’? Isn’t it simply the letter ‘S’, enclosed in an asymmetrical pentagon?”

“In a way, it is,” Clark grinned. “But Mom got a real brainstorm, with it.” He sat up on the blanket, picking up a pen and small notebook that lay at his side.

“I hope you don’t mind my having borrowed these, from the desk in your study. I usually like to have pen and paper handy,” he explained. “It’s an old reporter’s habit, plus it’s good for when the inspiration for a book strikes me and my laptop isn’t handy.”

He began marking on the pad, putting down a series of strange symbols. His writing was nearly machine-perfect, and I waited until he finished and turned the pad toward me.

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

“That’s a sample of the alphabet used on Krypton,” he explained. “It’s not all of them, but these are the ones that exactly correspond to English letter-sounds, arranged in English alphabetical order. Mom was familiar with it, because she and Dad had seen some of the symbols, over the period of my teen years.”

I gave him a questioning glance.

“There were some characters on the outside of the ship that brought me,” he explained, “and quite a few more on a piece of the equipment inside the craft. Also, there were some symbols on the octagonal ‘key’ that was needed in order to open the ship.” Here, a somewhat embarrassed expression stole across his face, and he blushed slightly. “And then, there was that symbol I accidentally burned into the side of the barn, when my heat-vision started showing up.”

“When I finally understood what the characters were, I explained them all to her. When it came time to come up with my costume, she thought that a symbol would add to it. Since Lois’ article in the Daily Planet had already named me ‘Superman’, she figured that some sort of ‘S’ symbol would be appropriate. Then, she remembered the Kryptonian character that carries the same sound as the English letter ‘S’, and hit on the idea of removing the right side of the upper loop, and the left side of the lower one, so that the strokes inside the pentagon looked more like an ‘S’.”

“So that’s how it came about,” I whistled. “I never knew that! Thanks for telling me. Your mother must be one pretty special person!”

“She is, and I just hope that we can figure out a way to get Lois and me home, to see her and Dad again!”

“We will,” I promised him. “I figure you’re here for a reason and, once we’ve got that

figured out, the rest will fall into place as well. Now, if you'll excuse me, I heard you're getting hungry, so we ought to see about lunch. I need to go fire up the grill, so we can do some burgers."

"You sound just like my Dad," he called after me, and I turned to look at him.

"Jonathan, or Jor-El?" I asked him.

"Definitely Jonathan," he laughed. "I can't remember how many times, during my teen years, he'd put his arm around my shoulder and tell me that he just *knew* that God had put me on Earth for a reason."

I could have suggested a reason, but I didn't. He wasn't ready to hear it, yet.

Chapter Six: "Answers Lead to Questions"

Arronaxe, New York
31 July, 2005

The first of the hamburgers were just coming off the grill when Mitch arrived at the house. Gumball, it seemed, had things to do as far as putting the new Osprey into our active air transport fleet was concerned. I was a little disappointed at that, because Gumball was another of the avid Superman fans in our little group, but I shrugged it off and figured that he'd get the chance to meet our new guests eventually. Mitch stalked through the gate in the privacy fence around our yard, and made a beeline for Bonnie.

"Alright," he said, as he approached her. "I'm here. Now what was so all-fired top secret and important that you had to drag me up here, rather than discuss it with me over the phone?"

"Hello to you, too, Mitch," Bonnie smiled disarmingly at him. "Did you have a pleasant flight?"

"Yeah, it was pleasant enough, I guess," he growled. "To tell you the honest-to-God truth, I really didn't take notice. I was too busy stewing over what could possibly be so urgent and confidential that a conference call on the secure-link wouldn't cut it, and I had to make a trip all the way to Arronaxe. I figured that something really earth-shattering was about to break! I get here, and what do I find? You're all lounging around here, having a blasted cook-out!"

"Calm down, Mitch," Bonnie attempted to pacify him. "The matter really is 'earth-shattering', as you put it. It's also one that is so mind-boggling, I couldn't take the risk that even one of your most trusted lieutenants might overhear us. It's going to take just a bit of time to explain it all. Have you been introduced to our guests, yet?" She waved a hand in the direction of Kal and Lois, where they sat on the blanket, leafing through the pages of a comic book.

"No, I haven't," Mitch said.

"Well, I think it's time you met them. They're the reason you're here. Perry?"

"My pleasure, Bonnie," I replied from my position a few feet away. I'd been waiting for her to go ahead and make the introductions, since she was the one who thought to bring him in on

this whole thing. Still, I certainly didn't mind making the introductions. Knowing the realist that Mitch was, I couldn't wait to see the expression on his face.

"Folks, I'd like you to meet Mitchell Drake," I said, beginning the introductions. "Mitch, this is Clark and Lois Kent."

"Clark Kent?" Mitch spun to face me, full-on, hands balled into fists at his side. "What sort of joke are you trying to pull on me, Perry?"

"It's no joke," I told Mitch.

"It has to be!" Mitch raised his voice. "Unless this is just a case of some father whose last name is Kent, inflicting needless jokes on his child by giving him that name. And that means it's not very 'earth-shattering', at all!"

"That might be possible," I nodded. "There are – and I checked it out on the Internet, this morning – currently thirty nine individuals named Clark Kent listed as living in the United States. Although, one of those is a listing for a Clark Kent at 344 Clinton Street, in Metropolis, Illinois. That's—"

"— the address of Clark Kent, as given in the comics, before he and Lois got married and they moved to a new apartment," Mitch nodded. "I'm a big Superman fan, from 'way back. But Metropolis, Illinois, is a tiny little burg whose only claim to fame is the fact that the city's name is synonymous with Superman, in the comics, so that particular listing is probably one that the city fathers drummed up as a tourist attraction."

"This one's the real deal, Mitch," I insisted, pointing at our guest.

"Do you take me for a fool, Perry?" Mitch continued his rant.

"Commander Drake," Kal began, rising to every bit of his six-four height, "I assure you that Perry is not playing any sort of joke on you.

"Well, if you expect me to believe it, you're gonna have to do a lot more than just *tell* me that you're really Superman!" Mitch told him flatly. "You're gonna have to do something that only Superman is capable of doing, to convince me that you're the real thing. Fly. Leap a tall building. Bend steel with your bare hands. Stop a bullet. Something!"

"Sorry," Kal frowned briefly. "The super-strength isn't available, at the moment. Neither are my invulnerability or flight capacity. It apparently has something to do with the way that Lois and I were transported into your world-line. However, the x-ray vision still functions. Let's see what I can tell you, that will convince you."

He studied Mitch briefly, and then smiled.

"Your right knee and hip are Teflon replacements. The serial number on the titanium surgical pin in your left femur is GS three-two-seven-eight. You're concealing a Walther thirty-eight caliber automatic pistol – it started out as a semi-automatic, but someone's performed the conversion to full auto on it – in a holster at the small of your back, and it's loaded with eleven rounds of a type of ammunition that is highly illegal in most countries. You've also got something that resembles a Sykes-Fairbairn commando knife concealed along the inside seam of

each boot. The compound the knives are made out of is one that's unknown to me, but I can give you its molecular structure, if you want."

"It's called 'Paradox', Kal," I told him. "Something that Monk invented. It can be used in all sorts of things. Body armor, blade weapons, structural members for buildings. But I thought that all of your powers were offline, temporarily. What's the scoop?"

"As I said, flight and invulnerability are offline, as is any other power that requires expending stored solar energy. But I've read a few of the comics you brought me, so I think I have a fairly good inventory of what you consider my powers to be. The hearing's genetic, so that's still there. From where I stand, I can hear every heartbeat around me, including inside Bonnie's uterus. If you stand twenty feet away, with your back to me, and whisper, I'll still be able to hear it. The 'vision' powers aren't really related to my eyes. They're more along the line of mental abilities. X-ray, telescopic, and microscopic vision are really various aspects of a sense of perception that my race had, that yours does not. Heat vision is one that requires some of the stored solar energy. I project that energy, mentally, directing it to cause rapid acceleration of molecular vibration in something. The faster it vibrates, the more friction is built up, thus raising the heat present in the object. If I keep it up long enough, at a high enough power, the object will reach a point where it bursts into flame, melts, or sublimates."

"What about your normal muscular capability? Shouldn't you still be able to run and jump better than the rest of us?" I asked. "Clark said that your musculature should allow you to out-perform any of us, even without the addition of stored energy to amplify your abilities."

"I don't know," Kal shrugged. "I haven't tried either, since regaining consciousness yesterday afternoon."

Squatting slightly, like an athlete about to attempt a standing broad-jump, he rocked back and forth slightly on the balls of his feet.

"Straight up and down only, Kal," Clark called from where he stood at the grill. "We don't need you taking a tumble and injuring yourself further."

"Relax, Clark," Kal replied. "I did this all the time, back in Smallville, before I learned how to fly."

"I know," I responded, picturing the scene in my mind – him leaping across whole fields of corn or wheat. The relative isolation of the Kent family farm must have proved to be the perfect 'test-track' for him, as a teenager discovering the boundaries of his powers.

"But you had the added asset of your invulnerability, then," Clark cautioned. "Your bone-structure and musculature should allow you to handle a jump and landing without breaking any of your bones, but if you get off-balance and hit anything, there's nothing to protect you against lacerations and bruising."

"I see what you mean," Kal nodded, altering his stance slightly. Then, with no warning to us, he snapped his body upright, and leaped fully thirty feet into the air, coming to ground almost precisely where he had been standing a moment earlier.

"Still want to doubt?" I asked Mitch, who was busy reeling his lower jaw back into position.

“That’s more than enough to convince me,” Mitch said. “But I’m hoping someone will clue me in on how a comic book character has suddenly come to life.”

“It’s a long story, Mitch,” I grinned. “Why don’t we cover it over lunch?”

“Sounds like an excellent idea, to me,” Kal agreed. “I’m starving.”

“Well, then, let’s eat, ‘Smallville’, Lois nudged him in the ribs. “Lunch is on the table!”

* * *

The midday meal was over for nearly half an hour, before we got Mitch completely caught up to speed on our guests’ arrival in our world.

“So what is my part, in all of this?” Mitch asked.

“Well,” I explained, “All we know at the moment is that these folks are temporarily our guests. We haven’t a clue – at the moment, at least – as to *how* they got here, or which of the possible thousands or millions of alternate Earths they came from. That means that they could be with us for a very long time. We can cover most aspects of that, so long as they remain here in Arronaxe. If the search for the way back happens to take them outside the valley, though, they’re going to need some pretty good identification documents. Their identities are going to need to be backstopped in the federal and state databases. You’re the only one that any of us could think of, that has the capability to handle that.”

“The reporters with more cover stories than anyone else in the history of journalism turn out to need a ‘cover story,’ eh, Kent?” Mitch chuckled.

“Good pun, Mitch,” Lois nodded. “Still, it’s true. Our world-line never had an event like your September Eleventh, so things are a little more lax, there. Judging from what Perry and Clark have told us, we’re going to need identities – and histories – that are as bulletproof as my husband normally is!”

“Well, that much I can certainly do,” Mitch grinned. “Boy! Providing ‘papers and pocket lint’ for Superman! It’s a cryin’ shame that I’ll never be able to put this one in the log books!”

“We’ll also need absolute discretion, Mitch,” I added. “If you need to use assistants to handle anything, they better be the sort who’d die before revealing this secret!”

“I have four or five people in mind, that I can trust,” Mitch nodded, “They’re all-round types, skilled at just about everything we do. There shouldn’t be anything these folks need, that we can’t get done for them.”

We spent the next half hour discussing the types of identity documents we needed for Kal and Lois, along with the backstopping in both the Federal and New York databases that might be required if their stay here went much beyond a couple months. Eventually, Lois ordered her husband back to the beach blanket to resume his sun-bathing.

“The identity documents are no problem,” Mitch waved a hand as we finished. “The same is true of giving you a listing in the proper databases. I’ve got agents in place in the vital

statistics bureaus of most of the fifty states, plus a couple working at the federal level here, and one in the British government.”

“How discrete are they, Mitch?” Bonnie inquired. “Or are they part of the ‘four or five’ individuals you referred to, earlier?”

“No, that’s a different group of people,” Mitch acknowledged. “But don’t worry. These individuals have been in place for over a decade, and their performance record is sterling. We’ll fabricate the identities at the base, and pass the data files along to these other people for insertion into the proper databases. We’ll be taking several photos of each of them, using wigs and some theatrical make-up to change hair color, age, and style, We’ll have them wear some different outfits, to give the photos the proper ‘period’ look, as well. When we get done, they’ll each have a valid current driver’s license and passport, plus there will be the proper history of earlier license and passport photos in the requisite databases. With a bit more work, I think we can even swap out the file-copies of a couple of college yearbooks – University of Kansas, and NYU would be my suggestion – to show four years of college for each of them. They’ll have transcripts, as well, if anyone ever gets that curious. We can probably wrap that up in three days, back at the base. Can you spare them for that long?”

“Sounds fine, to me, Mitch,” I nodded. “You’ve got more experience in this sort of thing than I do. Bonnie, do you see anything that’s been overlooked?”

“I think Mitch has it covered, Perry,” Bonnie answered, shaking her head as a ‘No’ answer to my actual question.

“Anything else you want?” Mitch asked.

“Well, Mitch, there is one thing...” I offered diffidently. By this time, the rest of the group had left the table and was moving to clean up from the cook-out. Bonnie rose to join them, and Mitch and I were left alone to discuss my idea.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Mitch agreed, once I’d outlined to him the sort of thing I wanted. “Frankly, I was just thinking the same thing, myself. It won’t give him everything he’s missing at the moment, but it might just stand him in good stead, if there’s a sudden bit of action and he forgets his current condition.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Mitch,” I smiled, clapping him on the shoulder.

“They’ll have to come back to the base with me, though, for that,” Mitch continued. “Can you folks spare them, for awhile?”

“How long are we talking?” I asked.

“I’d say about a week,” he mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Get the photography out of the way, and handle the documentation, measurements for that item you asked for, plus time to do the actual preparation.”

“Mind if I ride along?” I asked. “Kind of ‘keep them company’?”

“Not at all, Perry,” he smiled. “In fact, I’ve got one or two items to show you, that you might get a kick out of!”

“I can’t wait!” I grinned. “Why don’t you go and get better acquainted with our guests, while I go let Dot know about the trip.”

* * *

Alpha Base, Florida

1 August, 2005

The Osprey swooped in low, over the desolation of the Florida Everglades, and Gumball made a somewhat out-of-character announcement over the cabin’s intercom speakers.

“This is your captain, speaking,” his voice carried the sound of a chuckle. “We’re beginning our approach for landing. Our altitude is approximately twenty five feet, airspeed seventy-five miles per hour. We’ll be touching down at Alpha Base in just under seven minutes, followed by a brief bit of jockeying and getting the aircraft down into the hangar. Please keep your seat belts fastened until the aircraft has come to a complete and final stop. We hope you’ve enjoyed your trip, and - on behalf of the entire flight crew – thank you for flying Arronaxe Air.”

Kal squirmed in his seat, and Lois looked over, laying a hand gently on his arm.

“He’s never really comfortable, flying commercial,” she explained to me as I looked over at the two of them.

“I can imagine,” I told her. “I guess I’d be a bit nervous, too, if I was used to being able to fly without the aid of an airplane. Having to trust someone else to handle the flying can’t be easy, for him.”

“I’m also used to being invulnerable, Perry,” Kal reminded me.

“That’s true,” I agreed, nodding. And it was. For a man who – less than three days ago – could have flown through an atomic blast and come out unharmed, the thought of a crash would be a bit intimidating, to say the very least. The more I thought about it, the more I understood the sort of problems that Kal was being forced to confront. It gave me a new level of respect for him. This whole thing couldn’t have been easy, for him. Yet, he was obviously trying to make the best of a strange situation, and he certainly wasn’t complaining about things, the way some folks might, in his shoes.

True to Gumball’s prediction, we were down on the landing pad within the seven minute time-frame. Another two minutes saw the sections of the roof slide into place over the pad and the hydraulic pistons lower us beneath the surface of the swamp. Above us, I knew that no casual observer who hadn’t been witness to the actual landing would have had a clue that the hand of man had ever been in this place. Mitch’s engineers and craftsmen were good!

Once the hydraulics had finished their task, the dome retracted into the floor, leaving us in the subterranean hangar bay. Gumball turned off the seat belt signs in the passenger cabin. Slipping through the connecting doorway, he extended a hand to Kal.

“Sir, it’s been one really sweet pleasure to meet you!” he told our guest, smiling broadly. “A bit of a shock, since I’d always imagined you as nothing more than a comic book character, I’ll admit. Still, knowing that you actually do exist – even if it’s in some alternate universe, is a

thrill I never imagined I'd have.”

“If it makes it any easier for you, Clark,” Kal told our pilot, Clark Mayfair, “think, for just a moment, how I felt, when I met Doc and your dad. In *my* universe, they're the fictional characters I read about when *I* was a teenager.”

“Well, I know that Mitch has a pretty full agenda for the two of you,” so I ought to let you folks get on with it. I've got a flight to make, out to Lincoln City, to pick up my wife, and some pieces of electronics. She's got a bit of work to do, integrating them with some other equipment that's already here, and then we need to freight the whole lot of it out to Caroline Island, later on in the week.”

“By the look on your face when you said that,” Lois interjected, “I'd say it sounds like a bit of an emergency. Is anything wrong?”

“Not terribly,” Gumball shook his head. “Apparently, there was a pretty bad electrical storm in the Mediterranean, and it hit the island with a bolt of lightning that took out most of their communications gear. If it wasn't for Pat's satellite phone, they'd be totally cut off from the outside world. Mitch and I got the message en route to the base, here, and began making arrangements to fly in the relief supplies.”

“Well,” Kal put in, “if you need some help with anything, and I'm free, I'll tag along if it's okay with you folks. If nothing else, I lug equipment around fairly easily.”

“Roger, that,” Mitch agreed, stepping through into the cabin. ‘Come to think of it, those eyes of yours might just come in handy, tracing cables to make sure we don't have any breaks in them! Consider yourself drafted!’”

“You can't draft volunteers, Mitch,” Lois laughed. “I can't do much on the technical end of things, but maybe I can lend a hand at the orphanage, or something.”

That was about all it took. It looked like we were headed for a side-trip out to Caroline Island, before returning to Arronaxe. I looked over at Dot, who had decided to accompany us and spend time with Lois, and got a nod from her.

“Count Dot and me in, on the ‘relief expedition’, as well,” I instructed Mitch.

“Glad to have you aboard, Liston,” Mitch grinned at us.

An hour after landing, our bit of luggage was stored away in guest quarters on the base, and Mitch's select crew was busy working on the primary task. Both Lois and Kal had gone through a brief make-up process, to make them appear as though they were still in high school, and photos were being taken for insertion into phoned-up yearbooks and the driver's license databases in Kansas and California.

It was a bit grueling, but the photography work was completed by the end of the day. It still had to go through the hands of one other technician – one who was a whiz with Adobe's PhotoShop software, to compensate for what make-up couldn't handle, but that would be taken care of while the text-details of the new identities were fleshed out and readied for uploading.

On the second day of our visit to Alpha Base, Mitch showed us around the base after a

hearty breakfast, and then took us back to one of the stops we'd seen early on the tour. It consisted of a small – relatively speaking – lab area dominated by a cylindrical chamber about seven feet tall. Kal and Lois were both introduced to the tech on duty – another of the select crew Mitch had tapped to handle our special needs. Her name was Grace Jurgensen, and she directed Kal to go and stand inside the chamber.

When Kal was inside, she pointed out a pair of 'footprints' that were painted on the floor of the chamber, and instructed him to make certain that his feet were exactly on top of them. Then, she asked him to extend his arms directly out from his sides, at shoulder level, close his eyes, and hold absolutely still.

Grace then pressed a couple of controls on an instrument panel in front of her, and the chamber was lit with a dull reddish glow. Lois took a step forward, stopping only when Dot grasped her by one wrist.

"The last time he stepped in a chamber like that..." Lois stammered.

"Relax, Lois," I told her. "Mitch wouldn't do anything that would hurt him.

Grace, attention focused primarily on her task, was a fraction of a second longer at making the connection than I was.

"It's true, Lois," she smiled over at us. "Those are just low-level lasers. We're taking exact measurements of his body."

Three seconds later, it was all over, and Kal stepped unharmed from the chamber, to Lois's great relief.

"The measurements will be transferred to a piece of software that we use in our costume department," Mitch explained, leading us across the lab to another workspace. "We can get just about any piece of period clothing, in a custom fit, in a matter of hours. Beats employing a whole room full of seamstresses."

"But what were you measuring him for?" Lois asked.

"This." Mitch waved a hand at the work-table, with a grin that would have shamed the Cheshire cat.

There, laid out on the table, were bolts of fabric that glimmered a shiny black.

"I can't take the credit for this, really," Mitch went on. "It was actually Perry's idea. We've been perfecting the fabric for awhile now. It's a form of Spandex, into which is woven Paradox threading. We use a thicker form to fashion bulletproof vests out of, and it works really well. This stuff," he fingered a bolt of the fabric, "will stop any bladed weapon cold, and never show a trace. It'll also deflect any typical small-arms fire, up to a .223 round."

"Why?" Lois asked him.

"Old habits die the hardest, lady," Mitch got serious. "Hopefully, you'll stay safe and out of harm's way for however long you're on this Earth. Or, at least, until your husband gets his full powers back. In the meantime, say the two of you were walking down the street and some guy

steps out of an alley with a pistol pointed at you. What's the first thing you'd think would happen?"

"He'd step in front of me," Lois mused, and then her expression turned to one of total understanding.

"Exactly," Mitch nodded, deadly serious. "He'd forget, completely, that he's no longer bulletproof, and thus put his own life at risk. Having this on under his street clothes won't be anything he's not already used to, and it may very well save his life."

"What about heavier caliber stuff?" I asked.

"We're taking a leaf from Hollywood, in that," Mitch chuckled. "You've seen at least some of the 'Batman' films, right?"

I nodded, and he resumed his explanation.

"Using the measurements we got when Kal was in the chamber, we're going to make a custom-fitted chest-plate that will be adhered to the underside of the cloth, resting against his skin. That'll stop just about anything else from penetrating. He'll still feel something from the impact, and I can't guarantee he won't get a cracked rib or something, but the round won't get through the armor."

"What about his head?" Lois wanted to know.

"The average thug is usually a pretty lousy marksman. They tend to aim for the chest, which is a much bigger target. Soldiers are *taught* to aim for the chest. So, the odds are that you'll never run into anyone who thinks he's good enough to make a head-shot count."

"I see," Lois nodded, satisfied.

"Remarkable, Mitch," Kal effused. "I'm in your debt. And I can think of at least one way that I can repay that. Do you have a good electronics lab, here?"

"Do we, ever!" Mitch burst into laughter. "Son, we've got labs here that practically every scientist in the world would give their eye-teeth for a chance to play in!"

"Well, all this conversation is nice, but we really do need to get back to the task at hand," Grace suggested diffidently.

"Alright, Grace," Mitch chuckled. "We'll get out of your hair."

With that, the technician pointed at Kal and hooked a thumb in the direction of the work area. Lois stayed to watch for a moment, but Mitch and I retreated to the corridor.

"I've got one more favor to ask of you, Mitch," I said to him, while we had the relative privacy.

"Whatcha got in mind, now, son?"

I cast a quick glance over my shoulder to see that Lois and Kal were still occupied, and

then leaned forward to murmur my suggestion in Mitch's ear.

"That shouldn't be a problem, Perry," he chuckled, clapping a hand on my shoulder once he'd heard me out. "I should've thought of that one, myself!"

* * *

Miami, Florida
1 August, 2005

Elena tugged her wheeled carry-on case the last few yards down the concourse and rounded the corner out of Concourse F and into the main portion of Miami International Airport. The Aerohonduras flight had been long and tedious, due to a major tropical depression hovering in the Gulf of Mexico, and she was relieved to be on the ground once more. MIA was a strange airport, to her. She had only flown into New York's JFK, of the American airports, on her few business trips for her uncle and on her first trip to the Institute. She was so caught up in looking at the sights, and for the signs guiding her to Baggage Claim, that she completely missed the face of Gwen Saunders, standing in the milling throng just outside the security checkpoint.

"Elena!" she suddenly heard the familiar voice above the rest of the din and commotion. Turning, she caught sight of her friend and roommate, running to catch up to her.

"Didn't you see me?" the blonde asked her as she opened her arms to hug her friend.

"It's a big place," Elena giggled. "And I figured you'd be waiting for me down at Baggage Claim."

"Guess again, *amiga!*" Gwen laughed. "I can't have you getting lost in this place! You might never find your way out!"

"I would have stopped and asked for directions," Elena smiled. "And I do have your cell phone number, now that I'm back in America and my own phone works again."

"I know," Gwen nodded. "I tried your cell, first, the other day, and got the 'out of area' message. Well, let's go get your luggage, and get you home so you can relax a bit. Hungry?"

"*Muy!*" Elena rolled her eyes. "The airline food was miserable. Do you think we have time to stop in one of these restaurants and let me eat something?"

"We probably do, but I'd advise against it," Gwen smiled. "Mom's laid on a real feast, to celebrate your arrival. It won't do, not to do justice to it, if you get my drift."

"That's understandable," Elena nodded. "Tia Linda would be insulted if a guest came to her dinner table without an appetite, too."

The two young women reached the escalator that led down to the baggage claim area, and Elena hefted her small case by the handle, only to have Gwen try and relieve her of it.

"Let me have that, for awhile, hon," she said. "You've lugged it through an airport and a half, already, today."

Unconsciously, Elena's grip tightened on the handle of the flight bag. Save for the actual flight, when the case needed to be in one of the overhead storage compartments, she had not let go of it since pulling it from the trunk of Tio Estebán's car early that morning. Inside the thin front pouch, concealed amidst a stack of maps and tourist brochures, was the print-out of the map and her ancestor's account of his retrieval of the Singing Stone. She had held her breath during the standard Customs search of her bag, and let go a grateful exhale of thanks when the agent had given the papers only a cursory glance and moved on.

Arriving at Baggage Claim, they checked in with one of the attendants and learned that it would be nearly half an hour before the luggage from Elena's Aerohonduras flight would be set out onto one of the long carousels for pickup.

"Let's go outside," Gwen suggested. "I need to call Mom and Dad, and let them know we're going to be a bit delayed, and I can't get a decent signal in here – too much steel in the building, or something."

The sliding glass doors gave way before them and they stepped out into the heat of the Miami afternoon. Taking a seat on a concrete bench some few feet from the doors, Elena leaned back, briefly, against the wall of the terminal building, and let the welcome heat seep into her. Despite to its location – over three thousand feet up the slopes of Mount Picacho – the climate of Tegucigalpa is semi-tropical, and Elena had dressed with that in mind, that morning. The cooler air in the passenger cabin of the airliner, and of the terminal at Miami, had left her feeling rather chilled. It felt good to simply bask in Miami's warmth.

As she felt the chill leave her body, she turned and grinned at her roommate.

"I'm sorry," she laughed. "I was just enjoying the warmth."

"Warmth? Girl, this is outright hot!" Gwen looked at her, somewhat mystified.

"But when I left home, this morning, the temperature was a lot like this," Elena explained. "And we don't have nearly so much 'air conditioning', back home." She sighed contentedly and stretched her travel-weary frame. "This feels wonderful!"

"Glad you like it," Gwen grinned. "Though, you're probably about the only person I know, who does!"

"So, what's our schedule, for the next day or two?" Elena asked her.

"Well," Gwen began, raising a hand to tick the planned events off on her fingers, "First, there's dinner tonight. "Like I said, Mom's planning on a royal feast."

"Sounds wonderful," Elena interrupted. "I enjoyed her cooking, when I stayed here with you last Christmas."

"Then, tomorrow we can sleep in," Gwen continued, "and then go do a bit of shopping. I need to pick up a couple of things, before our trip. We'll drive around, a little, too. You've only seen Miami in the winter, so far. Summer, here, is totally different. Mom and Dad bought me this cute little Miata, for my birthday, last month – my old Triumph finally bit the dust – and we can cruise around with the top down, and I can show you the sights."

“Sounds like fun!” Elena enthused. “I need to do just a bit of shopping, too. The shops at home, in Honduras, don’t seem to have as wide a selection of things as your American stores do.”

“That’s America, for you,” Gwen laughed. “Let me know what you need, and I’ll find the mall where you can buy it!”

Both girls spent a moment in laughter, and then Gwen continued listing their schedule.

“Tomorrow night, there’ll be another big dinner, over at our church – kind of a ‘send-off’ party for the mission team. We’ll have to hit the sack early, though, because our flight leaves at just after eight in the morning on Wednesday. We have to be at the airport an hour and a half before boarding.”

“*Ai de mi!*” Elena groaned, rolling her eyes. “Ah, well; I suppose there’s nothing to do but go along with it. Hopefully, we’ll be able to nap on the flight.”

“Don’t count on it, girl,” Gwen laughed. “Twenty five teenagers, all on an adrenalin rush? I doubt that the flight will be quiet enough for sleep!”

The girls continued to chat, keeping an occasional eye on the monitors above the baggage carousels. Finally, they saw the notice that baggage from the AeroHonduras flight was now available for pickup. After the usual interminable wait, Elena cried out that she had finally spotted her bags in the mass of luggage. They grabbed them quickly, and exited the building.

It took them a few minutes to reach the section of the parking garage where Gwen’s new white Miata was parked, and get the convertible top down and stowed away. There was just enough space in its tiny trunk and behind the seats to stow Elena’s luggage. As Elena got comfortable in the passenger seat, Gwen slid behind the wheel and started the engine. Dipping into the glove box, she extracted her iPod and connected it to the Miata’s sound system. As the sounds of a jazz-fusion melody issued from the speakers, she put the car into gear and they were off.

Gwen navigated the tiny convertible out of the airport’s parking garage and out onto the southbound lanes of Northwest 42nd Avenue. The late afternoon traffic was congested, so it took them longer than Elena would have imagined to make the half-mile trip south to the Dolphin Expressway’s eastbound entrance ramp. The expressway was less crowded, so they made good time to the MacArthur Causeway across Biscayne Bay and onto the southern end of Miami Beach, where the road became Florida Route A1A.

Turning north, Gwen slowed their progress somewhat so that her roommate could have the time to take in the sights and sounds of the famous Art Deco Historic District. She took a slight detour onto Collins, making a pass by the Fontainebleau Hotel.

“Remind me, when we get home,” she told Elena as they drove straight toward a tall building. “I’ve got a picture of this building before it started into its renovations. Remember the section on *trompe l’oeil* that we had, in Professor Gant’s class?”

“Sure,” Elena nodded.

“Well, that whole wall section, there, had the most massive *trompe l’oeil* painting you could imagine. A huge arch, with these immense statues on either side of it, and it looked as

though you could drive right through it! It's gone, now, sadly. The hotel owners wanted to do a massive renovation on the building, and the city fathers – in their 'wisdom' – made getting rid of the mural one of the mandatory items, in order to get the construction permits. The police were getting tired of all the fender-benders that happened when tourists driving along here suddenly realized that it was a mural. The street takes a hard right, just before the building."

"The price of progress, I suppose," Elena commiserated. "Pave paradise, and put up a parking lot!"

After the Fontainebleau detour, the rest of the trip was made in fairly short order and they were soon pulling onto Gwen's home street in the Surfside district.

"Just so you know," Gwen slowed and pulled toward the curb for a moment, looking over at Elena, "My parents still don't know that you smoke. They know that your uncle owns a cigar factory, so they may have a suspicion, but I never told them anything. Not even after your visit here, last Christmas. Sometimes, my folks can be hard to fathom. They might be okay with you going out on the patio and doing it, or they might have a cow. I don't know. So I was figuring that, if you wanted one, later on tonight – I remember you said that you only do it a couple times a week, usually after a big meal – I figure we can take a drive north, to the point north of Bal Harbour. Moonrise will be around nine thirty and, even though it's only just shy of a half-moon, it's unbelievably huge when it rises over the ocean. It's something you should really see, at least once in your life, anyway"

"I'd love to see the moonrise, over the ocean, Gwen." Elena told her. "You've talked about how beautiful it is, so many times. Whether I'm in the mood for a cigar, or not, let's plan on that, okay? I have something I want to talk to you about, and I would prefer to do it out of the hearing of your parents. That would be a good time to discuss it."

"It's a plan, then!" Gwen nodded enthusiastically, putting the car back into gear and driving three more houses down the block and pulling into a long, wide driveway. "Well, we're here."

They had no sooner coasted to a stop at the end of the driveway than Gwen's parents, Terry and Patricia, came out of the house to greet their guest and help her inside with her luggage.

"We're so glad you could come, Elena," Patricia enthused as she gathered the girl into her arms for a hug. "Gwen has talked so much about you – and been so morose, at times, wishing that you lived closer, to spend some time with her – that I'm beginning to feel as though I actually have a second daughter, I know so much about you!"

The girls shot each other an eye-rolling glance, chuckling, and followed the adults into the enormous house.

Dinner was served almost as soon as Elena had stowed her luggage away in one of the guest bedrooms and changed into more casual attire – shorts, tee-shirt, and sandals – for the evening. It was a big affair, lasting nearly two hours, during which the conversation was filled with humor and animation.

"We're glad you're going to be able to spend some time with us, after your mission trip ends, Elena," Terry told her. "You were here over the Christmas holidays, I know, but Miami is a totally different place, during the summer. It's much more vibrant, alive, than in the winter"

months.”

“So Gwen has told me, *Señor* Saunders,” Elena replied. “She plans on showing some of it to me, tomorrow, on our little shopping excursion.”

“Good!” he smiled. “We’ll show you a bit more, when you two are back from the mission trip. And, rather than be so formal as to call us ‘*Señor*’ and ‘*Señora*’ Saunders, how about you just pretend we’re another set of parents and call us ‘Dad’ and ‘Mom’? Gwen already acts like you’re her sister, so we might as well make it at least informally official.

“I would like that, very much!” Elena answered, her eyes brightening. “My real parents died when I was very young, and I went to live with my aunt and uncle. I really can’t remember a time when I called someone ‘mother’ or ‘father’.”

“What else would you like to see, while you’re here for that week?”

“Well, Gwen said something about the two of us perhaps driving to Orlando, and seeing some of the theme parks, there. I’ve seen so many advertisements for them, and we have simply nothing like that, in my country. And I would also like to see the Space Center, which – Gwen tells me – is very near Orlando. Beyond that, I trust that she – or you – will have some other good suggestions.”

“Just to do the theme parks, you’ll need an entire week, dear,” Patricia informed her. “So maybe we ought to see about extending your visit another week.”

“Call your aunt and uncle,” Terry advised. “You really should, just to let them know that you’ve arrived okay, anyway. Then, ask them if it’s alright for you to stay an extra week. We don’t want to interfere, if your uncle has things you need to take care of, at the factory. If it’s alright with them, I’ll get on the Internet and revise your return-flight date.”

Eventually, dinner ended with coffee and dessert, and then the younger women assisted Patricia in clearing the table and cleaning up the kitchen. By then, it was nearly nine o’clock. Elena telephoned her home, apologizing profusely for the delay in placing the call. Her aunt and uncle were relieved to know that she was safe, and had no objections to her adding an extra week to her visit to Miami. When she finally ended the conversation, Elena turned to find Gwen leaning against the door to the study, tapping a foot gently against the floor.

“Moon’s going to be coming up in another ten minutes, or so,” she advised Elena. “If you want to get there before it pokes itself up over the horizon, we ought to get moving!”

Elena raced up the stairs to collect the few things she wanted with her, and toss them into a shoulder bag stitched from an old Mayan-style blanket. Patricia stopped them on their way out the door.

“Where are you two off to, at this hour?” she asked them.

“North to the point, just below the bridge to Haulover,” Gwen explained. “I promised Elena I’d show her the moonrise over the ocean.”

“And you need such a huge purse, for that, dear?” she looked at Elena with a smile that held an element of mischief.

“I only brought two purses with me,” Elena offered. “This bag, and the one I traveled with. That’s a Prada, and I’d rather not take it to a beach. But I still need to have my passport and things with me, in case anything happens. I read the newspapers and watched television, while I was at school, and I’m very much aware of the problem with illegal immigrants, in your country. If we should be stopped by your police – for whatever reason – I have no wish to be mistaken for an ‘illegal’!”

“Fair enough,” she nodded, following the girls out to Gwen’s Miata. They paused at the side of the car, and she gave her daughter a hug.

“Drive carefully, and don’t stay out too late, dear!” she advised, kissing Gwen on the forehead. Then, she turned to Elena.

“Enjoy the moonrise, Elena,” she spoke quietly. “And your after-dinner cigar.”

“Mother!” Gwen exclaimed.

“Her uncle owns a cigar factory, honey,” Patricia said, and the laughter that she held out of her voice was nonetheless present in her eyes. “And she’s been being trained for years in the business. You’ve told me all of that, and so did she, when she was here last Christmas. Now, I suppose, you’re going to tell me that she doesn’t smoke what her uncle manufactures? What is it, that you teenagers say? *Get a life?*”

“It’s ‘Get real!’ , Mom,” Gwen chuckled. “But—“

“But, nothing!” Patricia smiled. “I’m not saying that I wholeheartedly approve, but I do understand. It’s a different culture, where she grew up. And, as for my suspicious nature, well, your father and I both smoked, from high school on up. We quit when I got pregnant with you, though I suspect that your father still engages in an occasional cigar at the country club, after he finishes his weekly golf game. Trust me, honey; I did my share of slipping out after supper, to grab a smoke without the parents catching me, back when I was your age and younger. And, despite what some pastors may say about it, I’ve never seen smoking as a sin. It may not be the absolute healthiest thing you can do, but it’s not a sin.”

With a mischievous smile, Patricia turned and went back into the house, and the two girls just looked at each other, rolled their eyes and shrugged their shoulders. Then, still smiling, they got into the convertible. Neither spoke until the car was turning out of the driveway and into the street.

“Your mother is very special, Gwen,” Elena told her, smiling. “She’s very much like my Tia Linda.”

“I’ve kind of gotten that picture of her, from what you’ve told me,” Gwen nodded. “I’d love to meet her, sometime.”

“We’ll have to arrange it, then,” Elena agreed. “I’ve been made welcome as a guest in your house. You and your family must come to Honduras, and visit me, too!”

They arrived at the northern point of the coastal island, and pulled off the road into a gravel parking area that was otherwise deserted. Elena lifted her bag from the floor of the car, and

placed it on her lap. Digging into it, she extracted both a small cigar and the plastic bag containing the print-outs she had made, of the map and her ancestor's journal. She handed the map packet to her friend. Gwen opened the packet and began taking out the various papers while Elena prepared and lit her cigar.

"Where will we be working, on this trip, Gwen?" she asked, taking the map back in hand and smoothing out the folds in the paper.

"Right about here, I think," Gwen said, after a brief study of the main island's contours. She pointed, with the tip of a fingernail, to a spot near the eastern end of the island. "Our youth pastor said it's right on the coast – a little fishing village. This map isn't too detailed, though. I wish I'd known you were going to ask about it. I've got a much better map – it was part of the mission packet we all got – in my bedroom. Remind me, when we get back to the house, and we can check it to see."

Gwen looked at the map a little more intently, studying the way it was drawn.

"This looks like a copy of a really old map," she commented. "The writing..."

"It is old," Elena agreed. "Very old. It – the original one, that is – was concealed inside the cover of a journal that was written by one of my ancestors, some five hundred years ago."

"Wow!" Gwen whispered. Then, "What's this little star, in the water to the south?"

"Do you remember, when you called me the other day, I asked about free time?"

"Sure."

"I want to rent a boat, and some scuba gear, if we can find a place close enough to where we'll be working."

"What for?" Gwen leaned toward her, curiosity blazing in her eyes.

"How would you like to go looking for sunken treasure?" Elena asked, grinning.

Opening the other folded pages of print-out, she began to tell her roommate the story of her great-ancestor, Fernando Lopez de Avila, and *La Piedra el Cantar* – the Singing Stone.

Chapter Seven: "A Fin, a Fan, and a Find"

Alpha Base, Florida

3 August, 2005

We saw precious little of Kal, the rest of that day and all of the next, save short intervals for lunch and supper. He and Amy Roberts Mayfair basically locked themselves in the largest of the base's electronics labs and refused to utter a word about what they were up to, despite our continued barrage of questions during the meal breaks. Whatever it was that they were working on, it was novel and exciting. The look on Amy's face was proof enough, of that.

Since Alpha Base is situated in the middle of the Everglades, there wasn't much to do in the way of 'sightseeing', unless one wanted to take an airboat ride and get bitten by the hordes of mosquitoes and 'no-seeums' – what the Floridians call those little biting insects who seem to be invisible until after they've drawn blood from you. Not feeling terribly inclined to provide a three-course meal for the local insect population, Lois, Dot, and I busied ourselves helping Mitch's people load up a pair of Ospreys with the relief supplies and equipment for the folks on Caroline Island.

By the end of that second day, we had the Ospreys loaded and ready for our departure, the following morning, for the island. Dot, Lois, and I were just finishing up dinner with Mitch and his lady-friend, Jill Woodward, when one of Mitch's people stuck his head into the ward room and announced that Amy and Kal wanted us all to come down to the lab. We set off for the room at a breakneck pace, anxious to see what the two had been working on in such secrecy.

We arrived at the entrance to the lab and Amy buzzed us inside. I looked around the room for Kal, but didn't see him. Then, I heard his voice calling to me from overhead.

"Up here, Perry!"

We all looked up, and I found my heart leaping into my throat. Kal was lazily weaving figure-eights in the air near the ceiling of the three-story facility, and I couldn't see any trace of wiring or a harness.

"You got your powers back!" I exclaimed. "Fantastic!"

"Unfortunately, no," Kal responded, circling lower and lower until he finally landed on his feet directly in front of us. It was only then that I noticed the black nylon straps of some sort of harness fastened around his torso. From a distance, they had blended in perfectly with the solid black tee-shirt and slacks he had been wearing.

"So far, there seems to be no improvement on the 'power' situation," he continued, "That being the case, I decided that it was time to put technology to use in duplicating what I can. You and Mitch already conspired to duplicate my invulnerability, using Earth technology in the form of the spandex interlaced with Paradox. I decided to add a little to it, in the form of an inertial dampener and some anti-gravity."

"Anti-gravity!" Mitch exclaimed. "Do you know how many scientists have tried to achieve that, and concluded that it was impossible? The same thing's true with the notion of nullifying the inertia of an object!"

"That's probably true, based on your Earthly technology," Kal nodded. "But I'm not limited to that, fortunately. "

"Kryptonian technology?" I asked, utterly astonished. "Is that even possible, here?"

"With some dodges, yes," Kal smiled. "The crystals that Jor-El – my real father – sent to Earth with me were the repository of just about everything that the people of my home-world knew about science, among other subject areas. Amy and I had to back-step a couple of times, to develop and fabricate some of the parts we needed out of Earth technology, and it's much more crude than the Kryptonian equivalents of such devices, but we got it working."

“What supplies your forward motion?” Mitch asked.

“Right now –“ Kal turned to one side and we saw the array of items strapped to the harness – “it’s a kludge of the actual gravity and inertial dampeners, plus a couple of aerosol cans to give the motion capability. That’s why the forward motion isn’t terribly fast. Amy assures me, though, that she’ll have the hardware refined and upgraded in a few days, with much improved airspeed. Don’t be fooled, though. Even using these aerosol cans, we had to throttle them ‘way back, for use in indoor testing.”

“Your speed, with the inertial dampener running, would max out at the point where your forward motion meets a limit imposed by the resistance - the friction – of the medium you’re traveling through – air, in this case.” I commented, nodding.

“I hadn’t thought you were really that up on your physics, Perry,” Kal smiled at me.

“I’m not, really,” I blushed. “A classic science fiction author, Edward E. Smith, made great use of ‘inertia-less propulsion’, in several of his novels. Some years back, I read a piece by some scientist or other, who commented on Smith’s idea of inertia-less drives. He said that, in theory, the principle was sound enough, as was Smith’s notion of forward speed being limited only by the friction of the medium in which travel occurred. The trick was in actually coming up with a way to nullify an object’s inertia without affecting its mass – something that the best of our physicists all agree is totally impossible. As ‘Scotty’ would put it, ‘Ya cannae’ change the laws o’ physics!”

“I remember that quote,” Kal laughed. “In a way, he was right – based on your race’s current understanding of the laws of physics.”

“I take it that the folks on Krypton never studied law?” Mitch chuckled. It was an old joke, used in at least a half-dozen cartoons I could think of, over the years, but it still evoked a short laugh from each of us.

“Quite the contrary,” Kal grinned. “They developed a deeper understanding of the laws. They discovered some principles your race has yet to do more than imagine. You could say that they simply appealed the case to a higher court.”

We all laughed, and then I turned to Dot, smiling, my hands clasped in front of my chest.

“Can I have one, honey? Please? Pretty please?” I asked her.

“Promise to clean your plate at dinner, from now on?” she giggled back at me.

“I promise!” I exclaimed.

“Well, I suppose so,” she laughed. “But you’ll have to ask the nice lady to make you one, you know.”

“The nice lady,” Amy couldn’t keep the laughter in any longer, and nearly doubled up and turned red in the face, “will have one – a Mark Two model, much improved and much more compact and controllable – for both you and Kal, by the time you get back from your trip to Caroline Island,” she finally managed to get the words out.

“I did make a promise to take you flying with me, Perry,” Kal reminded me.

“That was when you get your powers back,” I reminded him.

“Perry, I’ve been through this once before,” he sighed. “I’ve done enough basking in the sun that at least *some* degree of power should have been noticeable, by now. I’ve at least got to face up to the possibility that my powers are gone, for good, this time.”

“Kal,” I clapped a hand on his shoulder, “There’s a line I remember, from the movie that we showed you on your first day in our world. Jonathan Kent, telling you that he was certain that you were here – with all those powers you possess – for a reason.”

“I lost count of the times, during my teenage years, that he actually did say something like that,” Kal nodded.

“Shakespeare said that ‘there’s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will.’” I continued. “Just as you were sent to your Earth for a reason – to use your powers for good – you’re here, in *my* world, for just as specific a reason. Without your powers, whatever you’re here for won’t happen. There’s got to be something we’re all overlooking, here. When we get it figured out, you’ll get your powers back. Of that much, I’m sure!”

“I hope you’re right, Perry,” he said solemnly.

“I do, too,” Lois echoed. “His ‘birthday’ – the anniversary of the day he landed on our Earth – is coming up in a few days.”

“Getting my powers back would be the perfect gift,” Kal nodded, with a wan smile.

The perfect gift... Those words would haunt me, for the next few days, until I managed to figure out why the Holy Spirit was causing them to reverberate in my mind.

* * *

Caroline Island, the Mediterranean
3 August, 2005

The Ospreys touched down about fifty yards apart, on the paved landing area outside the main compound. We sat in the passenger cabin for a moment, waiting for the twin rotors to spin down to a halt. Mitch cracked the door open as soon as the rotors stopped spinning, and dropped the short set of steps to the tarmac. Dot and I were first in line to exit the aircraft, and we moved toward the hatchway.

I stood in the hatch for a moment and drew a deep breath of the warm Mediterranean air, laden with its characteristic pleasant scents, and glanced at the small group of people waiting at the edge of the tarmac. It was easy enough to spot Kenji Columbo, since his short, wiry body was at the front of the queue and he was fidgeting animatedly. I smiled softly, and stepped down out of the Osprey. No sooner had I done so than Kenji left the queue and raced toward me, his arms wrapping around me in his version of a ‘bear hug’ as soon as he reached me.

“*Señor Spook!*” he cried out. “It is wonderful to see you, again!”

“It’s good to see you, too, short stuff!” I laughed, hugging him back with one arm and tousling his hair with my free hand.

I had first met Kenji a couple years earlier, when our little crew had come to Caroline Island on a rescue mission after the island had been seized by a terrorist group. The nickname ‘Spook’ was a reference to the fact that, when we first met, I was using the invisibility ring that I had inherited from my Uncle Perry, after whom I was named. Somehow, the youngster and I had developed an affinity for each other that had turned into a kind of friendship over time. From my point of view, the notion of friendship was long past.

Due to an injury sustained some years before God blessed me by bringing her into my life, Dot can’t get pregnant. On several occasions, she and I had talked about adopting, and we had finally spoken to Kenji – and his sister, Kenya – about it.

“I cannot, Spook,” he answered, when we extended the invitation to him and his sister, to come to America and be part of our family. “The other orphans, here, need me to keep them in line.”

There was a certain level of truth, in that. The younger orphans all seemed to look up to him, and they pretty much did whatever he asked or suggested. We had heard from Pat Savage that Kenji’s influence with the rest of the youngsters really helped make her immense task of administrating the orphanage a lot easier.

“Give it another year, or so, Perry,” she’d told me the last time Dot and I had visited the island, “and I think he’ll be ready. He’s a bright kid, and a quick learner. I’ve been talking to him quite a lot about the Institute, and how he could get a much better education than we’re able to provide him with, here at the orphanage. He’s found another boy in the group – a boy named Meeno De Luca – whom he appears to be ‘grooming’ as his replacement. I think that, by the time he’s old enough for junior high, he’ll be ready to make the move.”

“And maybe, by then, things will have settled down enough that Dot and I will be able to spend more time at home, and be proper parents.” I replied. That was the other thing that had really kept Dot and me from pressing Kenji and his sister to come live with us. It’s difficult to be a good parental figure, when your ‘calling’ seems to be dragging you back and forth across the country, and around the world, as often as ours appeared to be.

“So, how are you?” I asked him. “How is Kenya?”

“We’re fine,” he laughed. “No different than the last time you saw us, last month!”

I joined his laughter, and so did Dot, who had – by this time – stepped out of the Osprey and drew him into her arms to plant a motherly kiss on his cheek. As she pulled her lips away, I saw the faintest trace of a lipstick impression, and I watched to see what Kenji would do. The back of his left hand came part-way up across his body, headed for the cheek, stopped short, and dropped back to his side.

“Not gonna wipe it off, this time, sport?” I asked him.

“When the other ladies do that, *si*,” he grinned. From *Señora* Dot, or *Señora* Patty, it is a badge of honor!”

“Ready to come to America, yet, honey?” Dot asked him, smiling.

“Soon, I think,” he admitted, giving his shoulders a gentle shrug. “Meeno is nearly ready to take over watching the children. Then, Kenya and I can come and live with you, in America.”

I fought hard to stifle the laugh, and I could see that Dot was doing the same. Kenji was scarcely an adolescent, himself, and yet he didn’t seem to put himself in the same group as the other orphans on the island.

“I heard that you’re well-liked, on this island, Perry,” Kal’s chuckle came from behind me, “but I hadn’t realized that you actually had a fan club!”

I turned to face him, and Kenji pulled free of my hug, drawing himself up to his full height to properly greet this newcomer to the island. I looked at him and saw his jaw drop and his eyes go big and round.

“*Uh-oh!*” I thought, rolling my eyes. I didn’t have to ask the kid, to know exactly what he was thinking. Why is it, that children are always so quick to recognize a truth when it stares them in the face, and adults can remain as blind and deaf as a stump, to it?

“Well, I have at least *one* fan here,” I laughed. “Say hello to Kenji Columbo. Kenji, meet my good friend, Kal Clark.”

“Pleased to meet you, Kenji,” Kal smiled, extending one of his big hands. Kenji’s smaller hand nearly got lost in the grip, but – somehow – Kal managed to pull a genuine handshake out of it.

“Pleased to meet you, Mister Clark,” Kenji returned, still giving him the ‘once-over’ with his eyes.

“Call me ‘Kal’, please, Kenji.” Kal instructed. “After all, any good friend of Perry’s ought to be a good friend of mine. And this is my wife. Her name’s Lois.”

Bad move, that. I saw the look that flashed over Kenji’s face, when the man who looked for all the world like the Superman introduced his wife that way. Mentally, I kicked myself in the butt, wishing a number of things had gone differently. I wished I’d never bought Kenji that subscription to Superman comics. I wished we’d thought to have Lois adopt her middle name, Joanne, for use on our world. I wished...

It was all useless berating, of course. Never, in my wildest flights of imagination, could I have imagined hosting the *real* Superman on an extended visit to this version of Earth. And, as far as the name Kal’s wife was using? I didn’t even want to *think* about going to Mitch with a request to re-do all of that identity-creating!

“Well,” I suggested, hoping to distract Kenji’s attention to other matters, “I guess we ought to get our suitcases out of the cargo hold, and find the rooms we’ll be using for the next couple days. What time does *Señora* Pat have dinner scheduled, Kenji?”

“She says I am to bring you to her house as soon as you’ve had a chance to put your things away and freshen up,” he replied.

“Well, let’s get the luggage, and be on our way, shall we?”

“Not so fast, Perry!” Mitch countered. “Before you nice folks go getting all cleaned up, you might as well work up enough sweat to actually warrant a shower. Let’s get the cargo out of the hold, and onto those trucks over there, so I can button up the Ospreys and tie them down.”

That was that. We spent the next hour unloading everything out of the aircraft and into the three surplus military trucks that Pat had appointed for our use. Kal and I paired off, lugging some of the items. As we moved them across the compound, I gave him the condensed version of my first experience on Caroline Island.

“I’d noticed the scars on your back,” he commented, “and I’d been meaning to ask you how you came by them. I guess that explains the ‘fan club’ too.”

“Pretty much,” I shrugged.

“The way you tell the story, it doesn’t seem like it holds that much pain in your memory. I’d be wanting to forget a thing like that.”

“Most people would,” I nodded. “Me? My savior took thirty-nine lashes on my behalf, before he was hung on a cross. He was innocent of any wrong-doing. I remember the pain, and I think about how He bore it, willingly, on my behalf...”

I cast a quick side-long glance at his face, saw the strange look in his eyes, and decided to drop the subject, for the moment. I’d given him some food for thought. Then, properly sweated up, we grabbed our own luggage and hiked across the compound to the guest dormitories where our rooms – and some nice, hot showers – awaited us.

“You’re going to have to keep an eye on Kenji,” I told Kal as we lagged behind the rest of the group a couple yards.

“So I see,” Kal chuckled. “Well, if I could keep Lois from stumbling on my secret for years, I ought to be able to manage one little boy for a day or two! Especially since I can’t really *do* anything ‘super’ at the moment!”

Dinner was served in Pat’s personal dining room, in her house at one end of the massive compound, as soon as we’d managed to shower and change. Knowing how much we hate being catered to and waited on, she had simply had the kitchen staff set up a long buffet against one wall of the room. We lined up, grabbed plates, and helped ourselves to the roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, and vegetables. Once everyone had a full plate and we were seated around the long dining table, Pat tapped me to ask a blessing, and then we dug in.

“So, where are you and your wife from, Cal?” Pat asked, a few minutes into the meal, and what’s your connection to my cousin, and this strange fellowship of people he’s managed to collect?”

“I was raised in Kansas,” Kal responded, “west of Hays City. It’s a tiny town, so small that most folks have never heard of it. In fact, we called it ‘Small-ville’.”

Fortunately, everyone was looking at Kal, so nobody caught the way my eyes rolled at that little ‘joke’ on his part. I also remembered a line from that movie, one that the real Lois had

stated was entirely factual. "*I never lie, Lois.*" He hadn't really said that he was *born* in Kansas, just that he was *raised* there.

"And you, Lois?"

"All over, really," Lois smiled. "Daddy's a career officer in the military, so I've lived in more places than I can remember."

"And, as far as their connection to us is concerned," I ventured, "I've known Kal for quite a few years. I've known Lois nearly that long. I was so happy, when the two of them got married. We're looking at developing a school of journalism. I've recommended Kal to help set up the broadcast end of it, complete with curriculum, and Lois to fill a teaching slot."

Thinking about that 'I never lie' line had me really watching what *I* said, now. And what I'd said was the truth, at least in a manner of speaking. Through the pages of comic books, and the films and television series, I *had* 'known' Kal for most of my life. Lois, too.

"So you're both journalists?" Pad marveled. "That had to make for some rivalry, at least at the beginning of your relationship, didn't it?"

"Yes and no," Lois giggled. "We met, the first time, as teenagers, when I went to visit a cousin of mine, who lived in his home town. We couldn't stand each other! He thought I was obnoxious and headstrong, and I thought he was a small-town hick hayseed."

"It's true," Kal agreed, when everyone looked at them in astonishment. "Of course, I was sweet on another girl, at the time..."

"Fast forward a few years, though. I was working as a reporter already, and he applied for a job at the same newspaper."

"*Please don't ask the paper's name, Pat!*" I prayed. How could either one of them get around that "I never lie" bit, and yet avoid uttering the words, "Daily Planet"? Fortunately, Pat didn't bother to ask, and Lois continued her story.

"I guess that we'd each grown up a great deal, because we saw each other in a totally different light. He tells me that he fell in love with me at first sight. Our editor paired us off, quite a bit; it turned out he'd acquired a lot of polish and connections, over the years since we'd last bumped heads. He wound up actually helping me get a lot of really great scoops."

"So, when did the realization hit you?" Pat asked.

"Me? It took me a little longer to figure things out. Cal was a great co-worker, and not at all the hayseed I had thought he'd be. But, just like he'd been sweet on that hometown-honey, back when we were teenagers, I had my sights set on someone else, for a long time. It set me up for a mighty long series of major disappointments, because he wasn't in a position to return my love. It was only after I finally got so desperate that I took the matter to God, in prayer, that I finally came to my senses and found the love of my life had been right under my nose all the time!"

It seemed like Lois was trying to live by that 'never lie' standard, too, based on what she'd said. I did find some interest, though in that last bit, and planned on asking her about it at

my first opportunity.

We managed to get the next few bites in relative silence, and then Kal finally noticed that Pat was staring at him.

“Do I have a bit of gravy on my chin, or something, Pat?” he asked her, turning his best megawatt disarming smile on her.

“No,” Pat admitted, blushing slightly. “It’s just that – looking at you – well, has anyone ever told you—“

“—that he looks a lot like Superman?” Lois beat her to it.

“Well, frankly, yes.” Pat nodded.

“He gets that almost on a daily basis,” Lois laughed, patting her husband gently on the back, “and he’s usually a pretty good sport about it. Though, I must admit, it’s kind of freaky, when you stop and think about it. I mean, what are the odds? He’s a reporter, he looks a lot like Superman, and he’s married to a female reporter named Lois!”

“So you’re not Superman?” Pat mused with a wry grin, still looking at him. “What a shame! The world has my cousin, and his associates, but having Superman around would be a real blessing!”

“I’m afraid that all you’re going to see of him, in me,” Kal said, getting the words just a bit impolitely around a morsel of roast beef, “is the mild-mannered reporter.”

* * *

Longitude 21° 43’ North

Latitude 71° 35’ West

5 August, 2005

The days since their arrival on the island had been filled with both hard work and the making of new friends, and Elena had gone to bed each night both exhausted from the labor, and also strangely invigorated and pleased by it. Still, she had been more than ready when the mission team was given a rest-day to relax and explore their surroundings. The rest of the group had decided to explore the nearby city. Elena and Gwen had headed for the waterfront, looking for a place to rent a boat.

It had taken three separate exploratory dives to actually locate the site of the wreck, as her ancestor’s recorded navigational marks had been far less accurate than her hand-held GPS unit. She had had to make two more, when they had finally found the site, before she managed to locate the remnants of the specific chest and retrieve the cracked brick of clay that concealed *La Piedra el Cantar*. The Stone now reposed in a large canvas bag, in a storage cubby beneath one of the bunks in the boat’s tiny cabin, safe from prying eyes. Alongside it nestled a smaller bag containing a few artifacts made out of gold and set with precious and semi-precious stones.

Elena sat on a cushioned bench at the stern of the boat, a thick terrycloth towel draped across her shoulders and a most contented expression on her face despite the exertions of the afternoon. The sun was slipping lower in the western sky, and soon they would have to raise

anchor if they wanted to make port by sunset. Just now, Elena was enjoying the warmth of the sun as it dried her, and puffing on one of her uncle's cigars in celebration of her find.

"So now what?" Gwen asked as she lounged on the opposite bench. "And, are you gonna let me have a taste of that 'victory dance', since I made every one of those dives with you?"

"I suppose," Elena sighed with a smile, leaning forward to pass the cigar to her friend, "since you're obviously going to keep asking me. But, you probably won't like it."

Gwen put the cigar to her lips and took a timid puff.

"Yechh!" Gwen made a face and spat the smoke out again. "How can you possibly *like* that?"

"It's an acquired taste," Elena giggled. "The liking comes with time. The more tastes you take, your tongue grows acclimated to it. Try it again."

"No thanks,:" the blonde laughed, passing the cigar back. "I'll take your word that it's an acquired taste. I don't see any need for me to acquire it."

"Very well," Elena chuckled. She watched, with modest amusement, as her roommate rummaged in their small cooler for a fresh bottle of soda, twisted off the cap, and took a long drink to wash the taste from her mouth.

"I'll repeat my question," Gwen said, at length, "Now what?"

"Now what, *what?*" Elena returned.

"What do we do, about all that treasure that's down there?"

"It will take a bit of time," Elena explained, "but eventually we'll need to find a reputable salvage firm and begin the task of raising it all to the surface and cataloging it. I imagine that Professor Littlejohn will know of at least one or two such firms, and the proper channels for our disposing of all the artifacts, as well."

"What do you mean, 'disposing'?" Gwen asked, puzzled.

"Well," Elena explained, "once we notify the authorities that we're beginning salvage operations, there will be many museums bidding to purchase pieces of the trove for inclusion in their collections. Private collectors of such antiquities will no doubt be looking to purchase some of it, as well. After that..." She closed her eyes, smiling mischievously, and puffed at the cigar.

"After that, what?" Gwen demanded.

"After that, you and I will need to hire accountants, and be a little more suspicious when the *muchachos* come to court us. You and I will be two very rich *señoritas*! We will need to know, does he love me, or merely my..."

Elena had intended to say 'money', but her voice suddenly faded when the water on the starboard side of the boat began to bubble crazily. She crossed the small cockpit and leaned on the starboard rail with her friend, watching in apprehension as the small black submersible rose to

the surface beside them.

“I’ve got a bad feeling, about this,” Gwen muttered, casting a quick glance at her friend and pointing to the skull-and-crossed-bones insignia painted on the side of the little submarine’s conning tower.

“Me, too,” Elena breathed.

The hatch atop the tower clanged once and popped open, and a swarthy-looking man shoved the upper half of his body out of the opening, leveling a silenced pistol at the two girls.

“Well, well,” he grinned malevolently. “What do we have, here?”

He clambered on through the hatch and stood balanced on the tiny flat hull surface just forward of the sub’s sail, motioning to the girls.

“Get over here, and get inside!” he commanded in a gruff voice.

Both Elena and Gwen were paralyzed with fear, and neither one moved.

The pirate, for so he was dressed and so his actions named him, aimed the pistol just a bit to Elena’s right, and pulled the trigger. The weapon coughed quietly, but the round made a loud, resounding crack as it passed through the inner bulkhead of the rear compartment where the inboard engine and fuel tanks were located. There was a sudden trickling sound, and the smell of gasoline fumes pervaded the cockpit. The bullet had penetrated not only the bulkhead, but the fuel line leading from the pump, as well. A thin stream of amber gasoline was now spurting out onto the cockpit sole. Casting a quick glance down between her feet, Elena could see the oily rainbow sheen of the fuel as it collected atop the bit of standing water. The smell of it grew rapidly, as the fuel began to vaporize in the warm tropical air.

“I’m not gonna say it a third time,” the pirate warned. “Now, get over here! You first, Blondie!”

Elena puffed at the cigar nervously as her roommate clambered over the side and leaned to plant a foot on the little submarine. A second pirate appeared in the conning tower hatch and caught the hand Gwen thrust forward to keep her balance, pulling her hard against the outer wall of the tower.

“Now, you,” *Señorita*,” the first of the two pirates commanded. “Get across the rail, and get over here!”

Clamping the cigar lightly between her teeth and puffing nervously all the while, Elena grasped at one of the starboard mast-stays and hoisted herself up onto the cockpit coaming, stretching out with one foot toward the sub.

“Loose the stogie, missy!” the pirate snapped. “Don’t’cha know it’s bad for your health, to smoke?”

Elena puffed the cigar twice more, turning the lit end into a brightly glowing red coal, and then flung it at the forward bulkhead where it crashed just left of the cabin hatchway and burst into a shower of glowing sparks – sparks which ignited the fuel-vapors drifting above the

cockpit sole just as she completed the crossing.

“Hold on, both of you!” the pirate roared out. Then, leaning over the open hatchway, “Erik! Engines full ahead and pull us out to starboard. The little witch just set the boat on fire!”

He turned his head and trained a baleful glare on Elena.

“Don’t look at me! You’re the one who shot a hole in our gas tank!” she shot back at him.

The pirate drew back his hand to strike her, but the movement went uncompleted as the fire aboard the small sailboat reached the fuel tank at last, and the craft exploded into a fireball and a shower of flaming debris. The three, pirate and captives, ducked as much as they could behind the poor shelter of the submarine’s sail as the debris rained down around them.

An explosion takes place in real-time, its individual stages occurring far faster than the unaided eye can discern. To an onlooker, it appears to all take place in the briefest instant. To the matter involved in the explosion, it is a different story altogether.

Initially, the sparks showering from the discarded cigar provided sufficient heat for tiny wisps of the fuel-vapor to ignite. In turn, this heated the fuel pooled on the cockpit floor to the point where it, too, moved from liquid to gaseous state. This newly-formed vapor then also ignited, raising the temperature even higher, thus causing a more rapid vaporization of the remaining liquid fuel outside the tank. Eventually – in real-time, the space of a mere few nanoseconds – the temperature of the area surrounding the fuel tank reached a critical point, at which time the liquid fuel inside the tank began to vaporize. Vaporization is an expansion process, and soon the pressure of the expanding vapor inside the tank reached a level beyond which the metal of the tanks was no longer sufficient in strength to contain. Pressure built up evenly along the interior surface of the tank, but one of its seams was weaker than the others. The building pressure slowly forcing the weakened seam to split open the breadth of a human hair. Vapor seeped through the rent, seeking an area of lesser density and pressure, and was ignited by the surrounding flame.

At this point, the physics of the reaction reached another level of intensity. As the stressed seam continued to give way, a tiny tongue of the flame managed to lick its way inside the tank, touching off the cloud of vapor within. This vapor was under a pressure which could not be equalized quickly enough. The surrounding heat was still forcing the liquid gasoline in the tank to vaporize at a rate faster than the tiny split in the seam could vent it to the outside. As more vapor in the tank burst into flame and raised the temperature, more liquid began to vaporize and add to the process. In the space between two heartbeats, a point was reached where the pressure inside the tank was capable of shattering its heat-stressed metal walls and the supports beyond. The energy-level suddenly increased by logarithmic proportions.

Gaseous and solid matter, alike, fled in a full sphere before the resulting shock-wave, yet it could not out-race the expanding corona of heat-energy which streaked from the center. The farther out the wave raced, the more matter it incurred, and so the greater was the force of its impact. The wave of heat instantly stressed the fiberglass shell of the tiny craft, and the shock-wave of concussive gas that followed hard in its wake shattered the weakened material that could not move out of its way.

The boat bucked, hard downward at the stern, and then was slammed hard upward by the reaction of the water in which it rested. In the tiny cabin below decks, in the storage cubby where

it lay, the clay-encased artifact was first hurled against the lid of the latched compartment, and then dashed against the inside surface of the hull. After five hundred years, the poorly-fired shell of clay surrounding the artifact – weakened by centuries of direct exposure to salt water and the recent seismic activity – shattered, exposing the crystal artifact within to the glare of the burning, expanding gas and to the light of the lowering sun. The artifact, however, had been fashioned by one who knew his craft well. Far more force than this puny blast would have been required, to damage it beyond functionality.

The exposure lasted only an instant but, as much of the energy was at extreme close range, it was enough. In a matter of a single heartbeat, the crystal absorbed enough energy in the form of heat and light to reach the lowest level at which its primary function could be executed. Tiny switches and relays, some only two or three molecules in mass, closed or opened as was required by their design and programming. Energy was converted to electricity and channeled into the primary circuits.

The artifact screamed.

* * *

Caroline Island
5 August, 2005

It was a beautiful Mediterranean Saturday afternoon, and the warmth of the sand between my toes as Dot and I held hands and walked slowly along the nearly deserted beach felt almost too wonderful for words. Back in Lincoln City, there are a lot of accesses to the beach from the houses. Dot and I had spent many a time there but, due to the Pacific Current flowing southward from Alaska, even in summer it had never been this warm.

About fifty yards up ahead of us, Pat Savage and Lois sat on a blanket beneath the comforting shade of a couple large beach umbrellas, enjoying a cold drink and chatting, while Kal lay a few feet away, his body basking in the sun. Overhead, a few white gulls soared on the thermals rising up from the heated sand. A hundred yards or so offshore, Kenji and Kenya frolicked in the light surf, trying to master the pair of short ‘boogie boards’ that Dot and I had bought for them. I took a deep, relaxing breath of the salt air, and felt Dot do the same as she walked along beside me. It was an idyllic scene, the sort you’d expect to find in a Hollywood film.

I was thinking *Endless Summer*, complete with the twanging guitar soundtrack done by The Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, Dick Dale, and others.

Mother Nature, unfortunately, was thinking *Jaws*.

Suddenly, above the sound of the surf and the cries of the gulls, I heard a blood-curdling scream. The voice was Kenya’s and, as I tracked it to its source, I saw both her and Kenji struggling to climb up onto their boards and the menacing dorsal fin that was closing in on them at a rapid pace.

“Shark!” I cried out at the top of my lungs.

Kal was already on his feet and looking for the source of the earlier scream. Catching sight of the fin, he took a half-dozen running steps toward the water’s edge, and then pushed off

with both feet.

I had seen Kal try that little jump, that afternoon in our backyard, but this went beyond that by a huge degree. His leap took him a good fifty yards into the air in a long, shallow arc, and brought him down into the water just to the left of the shark – a seven-foot great white – as it swam past. As it cleared his position, he reached out and grasped it by the tail with both hands.

The shark tried to jackknife its body in order to sink its teeth into this sudden obstacle, but Kal was already twisting his own body in the water, towing the shark by its fins as he did so. Like an Olympic athlete competing in the hammer-throw, he held the shark by its tail for three full turns, building up momentum, and then let loose with a mighty heave of his arms and shoulders. The shark sailed nearly two hundred yards through the air, coming down well beyond the buoys which marked the line of the shark net which Pat had had her people install a few years earlier. Then, he assisted both Kenya and Kenji onto their boards, grabbed the leashes attached to the nose of each, and towed the pair of frightened youngsters quickly in to shore. By the time he waded out of the surf with one youth under each arm, Dot and I had reached the spot and were waiting, along with Pat, Lois, and a trio of dry towels.

Dot and I grabbed a pair of towels and saw to Kenji and his sister, while Lois pulled her husband into a strong hug.

“That was magnificent, darling,” she smiled up at him.

“If that’s a sample of what you can do *without* your full powers, Kal,” I called over to him, chuckling, “I’d hate to be on your bad side, with them fully restored!”

“For the moment, though,” Lois responded, letting go of him, “he better learn to be a bit more careful!” Then, she turned to face him again, hands planted firmly on her hips. “What if you’d been just a bit off-target, and that creature got its jaws on *you*?”

“Not much, if he had as much trouble sinking his teeth into me as Clark did when he took that last blood sample,” he responded, trying to downplay the issue.

Any additional confrontation between him and Lois was postponed for the moment, as Kenji ran between them.

“I knew it!” he cried, shaking a fist in the air. “I knew he was Superman!”

“Kenji!” I called to him firmly, thinking to at least ease the situation a bit.

“It’s alright, Perry,” Kal waved me off. “I’ve got this one.” He draped an arm gently over Kenji’s shoulder, and the two of them strolled slowly south along the beach, talking.

“He’s got this one!” Lois snorted. “Who’s got *him*? That kid’s gonna eat him for lunch, over this deal!”

“Let it be, Lois,” Dot suggested. “In his career, he’s had to have at least *some* experience in dealing with kids before. And Kenji’s a pretty good kid, all things considered. It’ll be good practice for Kal, for when the two of you start having kids of your own to deal with.”

‘And it isn’t as if this hasn’t been brewing for the last couple days,’ I added. “He

basically recognized Kal as soon as he stepped off the plane. I've been wondering how long we could keep the truth from him."

"Speaking of holding back the truth," Pat approached us, "just how long were you two going to keep me in the dark about him? And how did a comic book superhero come to life, for that matter?"

"It's a long story, Pat," I told her, "and one we really don't have an ending for, as yet."

"So much for that famous 'I never lie' line of his," she snapped.

"He never once lied to you, Pat!" Lois turned on her with an almost feral snarl, and I laid a cautioning hand on her arm.

"She's right, Pat," I confirmed. "They came here from an alternate-universe version of Earth. Whatever tossed him and Lois from their world to ours, it stripped him of the bulk of his powers. He can't fly, and he's not invulnerable. If that shark had gotten its jaws on an arm or a leg...! In every sense that really matters, he's *not* Superman – at least, not at the moment."

We cast a last look at the pair as they walked slowly along the surf, Kal gesturing with his free arm as he attempted to explain the notion of alternate universes – and the sudden loss of his powers – to Kenji, and then we turned and headed for the shade of the umbrellas to finish filling in all the details for Pat. We had gone about ten steps when Kenji's shout rent the air.

"***SPOOK!***" he cried. "Come quickly!"

I spun in my tracks. Kal was on his knees, hands clasped to the sides of his head as though he was in extreme pain of some sort, and Kenji was standing helplessly next to him. As I raced down the beach toward them, Kal pitched face forward onto the sand and lay still.

Chapter Eight: "Crystal Clear"

Caroline Island
5 August, 2005

It was very fortunate that among the items we had brought with us to Caroline Island was a new cellular base station and antenna to replace the one that the storm had damaged. Without the aid of our cell phones to summon Mitch with one of the smaller trucks, there was no way that Dot, Pat, and I would have been able to wrestle Kal's three hundred-plus pounds back up the sloping path from the beach to the compound.

By the time we were wheeling him into the orphanage's tiny hospital, Kal was starting to come around again, but really couldn't shed any light on what had happened to him.

"I was walking along the beach, explaining to Kenji how Lois and I had arrived here, when all of a sudden there was this ear-shattering squeal that felt like it was splitting my head open," he told us. "The next thing I knew, it was just a few minutes ago, and you were just pulling the sheet up over my chest."

Of course, the incident required that one more person in our world became privy to the secret of Kal's identity. Pat ordered that the clinic's supervising physician be the only person attending the case, and then we had to explain to Doctor Diane Cunningham just why she had such a difficult time drawing a blood sample, and what was responsible for the differential in Kal's pulse and body temperature from standard human norms.

"Of course I'll keep your secret safe," she promised solemnly as she shook Kal's hand at the end of his examination. "Oh, sure, I'd love to tell my husband that I just got finished giving Superman an exam, but even *he* wouldn't believe me! So why bother?"

She laughed merrily, and we joined in with her. It helped to dispel the tension we'd all been feeling since Kal collapsed on the beach.

"The only records of this visit will show that a male patient was admitted to the clinic for a brief period, suffering from a mild case of hyperthermia – that's heat prostration, in layman's terms – and then released. Since there's only one other patient in the clinic – a young boy who took a fall from the monkey bars on the playground, yesterday, and broke his leg – the only staff member present is the duty nurse, so it's not like there were a lot of witnesses."

She turned to Lois and spoke again.

"Based on what you've told me, with regard to the vital-signs readings that pass as 'normal' for your husband, he seems to be perfectly healthy. Give it another hour or so and, if he shows no further signs of distress, he's free to leave." She paused, and then chuckled, "I doubt that we have any restraints here, that could hold him against his will, anyway."

Over the course of the next hour, it appeared that Kal had fully recuperated from whatever the event was, that had affected him on the beach. Lois returned to the guest room appointed to them, for a pair of shorts and a shirt for her husband, and then we quietly checked him out of the clinic. By that time, the sun was almost below the horizon, and – after a meal at Pat's home – we all retired for the evening.

* * *

Longitude 21° 43' North
Latitude 71° 35' West
6 August, 2005

Rutger Müller arrived at the base at his usual time, that Sunday morning, checked his e-mail and messages, and learned that a pair of teenage girls had been captured while scuba diving near the underwater entrance to the complex. They had been locked in a vacant office, during the overnight hours, and awaited his pleasure with regard to their disposition. Picking up the telephone on his desk, he called down to the guard station and ordered the prisoners brought to him for questioning. While he waited, he looked out the window of his office, down onto the dock area, where the first of his two Russian subs was in the final stage of loading for the most important mission in her illustrious young career.

Hearing the door open, he turned from the observation window as the two girls were dragged into his office. Hands bound behind their backs, the captives were thrust down on a pair of stools across from his desk, the guards escorting them standing ready to assure that they would remain seated and docile.

Müeller came around the desk and inspected the young women intently. The two-piece bathing suits that the captives were wearing left most of their skin visible to his eyes, and – aside from a slightly reddened hand-print on each girl’s arm where the guards had grasped them to move them along – he could detect no signs of bruising or other mistreatment. That was good. Bruised merchandise was always so much more difficult to dispose of at a profit.

“What were you doing, out there on the boat?” he asked them in a harsh voice.

“Reef-diving,” Elena answered sullenly. “We are here with a church mission team, doing relief work on the main island, and this was our day off.”

“Why dive there?” he pressed the issue. He had to know precisely what these girls had been up to. Had anyone sent them? Though they looked rather young, there was the possibility that they could be undercover operatives from Interpol, investigating either the rise of piracy in the vicinity – his doing, of course! – or the drug trade, in general, in the region.

“We took a course in marine biology at college, last year,” Gwen ventured. “It required a few dives to study the interaction of various species of marine life living around coral reefs. We got to the point where we loved diving. Somebody told us that the reefs around these islands were good sport diving, and so we came.”

“What college?” Müeller snapped.

“University of Miami,” Gwen responded.

“Well, I hope you enjoyed your year at college,” Müeller sneered, “and your bit of summer vacation, because it was your last.”

“What are you going to do to us?” Elena demanded hotly.

“Me? Nothing, actually,” Müeller laughed. “But I have a friend in Bangkok, who runs a modest recreational establishment, who will pay good money for young women of your quite surpassing beauty – especially ones who are...unsullied...”

Whatever Müeller would have said next was interrupted by the buzzing of his intercom unit. Turning back to his desk, he pressed a button on the small box.

“Yes?”

“*Gehrter Herr, sehr sind wir bereit, die emissiles zu laden,*” a voice issued from the small speaker.

“*Geben Sie acht! Ich wünsche nicht jene Warheads, die hier explodieren!*” Müeller responded. “*Ich bin dort in einem Moment, die Aufgabe zu überwachen!*”

Müeller clicked off the intercom and turned to the guard.

“Put them in the room next door and lock them up,” he ordered. “I have something to look after, down on the dock, and then I’ll be back to get hold of our friend in Bangkok.”

He turned and leaned forward, thrusting his face closer to his terrified captives.

“I’ll deal with you later, my little pretties,” he told them. “For the moment, I have a few cities full of fanatics to destroy.”

With that, Müeller strode from the office, leaving the two guards to yank the girls from their perch on the stools and hustle them a few paces down the hallway. Another door was unlocked, and the girls were thrust unceremoniously inside the room.

“Behave yourselves, and don’t make a mess!” the larger of the guards advised with a menacing expression. “We’ll be back for you, later.” The door slammed shut behind him, and the girls heard the sound of a key turning in the lock.

“What do we do, now?” Elena mused, looking around the room for anything that could be used in their favor. Save for a desk and a pair of chairs, the room – a duplicate of the office they’d just been taken from – was empty.

“I don’t know,” Gwen shook her head and stared out the twin of the other office’s observation window, “but we’ve got to figure *something* out! Look!”

Elena joined her friend at the window, and looked down onto the floor of the cavern below.

“This place looks like it’s an old German U-boat base,” Gwen explained.

“Like the one in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*,” Elena nodded.

“Exactly. Only, with all that skull-and-crossbones crap, these people aren’t Nazis. They’re just modern-day pirates. I saw some references to it, when I was reading up on Caribbean islands, in preparation for this trip. It seems that the Disney people aren’t the only ones who’ve resurrected the concept of ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’, only these guys aren’t working an amusement park ride. They’re the real deal! The only thing I can’t figure is, the articles I read didn’t say anything about pirate activity near the Turks.”

“It would make sense, though, Gwen,” Elena suggested. “If I were such as these,” she waved a hand toward the window, indicating the groups of rough-looking men laboring near the slips below, “I would not want the authorities investigating incidents so close to my base of operations. We were only aboard that little submarine for, perhaps, half an hour. We must still be very near to where we were captured.”

“Well, we’ve got to try and figure out a way to get ourselves out of here, and alert the authorities!” Gwen hissed. “And we don’t have a whole lot of time to do it, either!”

“I agree!” Elena nodded. “I didn’t like the sound of that talk of Bangkok.”

“It isn’t just that, Elena!” Gwen looked at her, and Elena could see the terror in her friend’s eyes.”

“Then, what?” Elena asked.

“My mom’s parents emigrated from Germany, just after the end of the second world war.

I grew up learning a lot of German, so I understood what that guy was saying. Someone told him that they were ready to load the missiles, and he ordered them to be careful, because he didn't want the warheads going off, here."

"I caught the word, 'warheads', and I thought there was something that sounded like missiles, too," Elena agreed. "Go on."

Gwen pointed a finger to where their captor was joining a group of men near two flat-bed trucks. The freight carried by the first was already open to view, and they watched, as he climbed to the bed of the second truck and began to strip back the tarpaulin.

"I was afraid of that," she gulped.

"Of what?" Elena hissed. "Will you tell me what you think is going on, down there?"

"Do you see those crates on the truck to the right?" Gwen asked, again pointing. "Those are Soviet KH-55 'Granat' missiles. They're the equivalent of the American Cruise missiles. They can be launched normally, or from the torpedo tubes of a submarine! Their range is something around fifteen hundred miles or so, and they can skim just above the surface, over water or land, avoiding obstacles and radar, and still reach a programmed target. I count at least six of them."

"Are you sure?" Elena asked, amazed. "Where did you learn all this stuff about weapons?"

"I read a lot of Tom Clancy, and I've got two older brothers in the navy – one in Naval Intelligence. So sue me! Now, look at the other truck."

The tarp that had covered the second truck's cargo had been completely stripped away, by this time, and – though the freight appeared to be only a half-dozen medium-sized crates – it was evident that the loading crew was treating them with great care. A red star, and characters that appeared to be Cyrillic, were visible on the outside of each of the crates. So was the yellow and purple trefoil that was the internationally-agreed-upon symbol for radioactive materials. As they girls looked on, helpless, one of the workers clambered up into the truck and carefully opened the top of one of the crates, revealing a cone-shaped object nestled in tight padding.

"The idiots are going to start a war!" Gwen gasped.

"What do you mean?" Elena asked her, shocked at the expression on her friend's face.

"Those things *have* to be Soviet nuclear warheads, Elena!" Gwen explained. "There have been a lot of rumors that a whole bunch of those things – supposedly marked for removal and deactivation in the wake of the agreements between the new Russian government and our own – made their way out onto the black market, instead."

"But, Elena countered, "what would a band of modern-day pirates want, with nuclear weapons?"

"I saw a couple things, in that guy's office," Gwen shook her head sadly. "At first, they really didn't make much sense, but – in light of what's going on down there – now it makes all the sense in the world!" Shoulders slumping, she dropped into one of the chairs and sat for a

moment, looking dejectedly at the floor between her feet.

“Tell me!” Elena snapped.

Gwen raised her head, finally.

“There was a calendar on one wall of that office,” she explained slowly. “There was one square that had a big red circle around it, with the words ‘Der Tag’ – that’s ‘The Day’, in German – written inside the circle. Then, there was a big map next to the calendar. It was a map of the middle-eastern countries. There were six cities with red circles. Six cities, six missiles. You do the math. Add to that his comment about having a bunch of fanatics to destroy, and it’s pretty self-explanatory. He’s gonna launch those missiles, somehow, against those cities. And, when the Arab nations retaliate, they’ll do so against all western nations, because they won’t believe that neither the USA or Great Britain launched such an attack. It’s gonna start a war!”

“What can we do?” Elena whispered.

“I don’t have the slightest idea,” Gwen sighed, shrugging her shoulders. “But we’re not gonna be able to do anything without backup. The first thing we do is pray!”

Elena nodded, and the two girls slipped from their chairs and knelt on the floor in the center of the room.

“Heavenly Father,” Gwen began, “We approach your throne boldly, in this time of need. We confess that we are wholly inadequate, in our own strength and wisdom, to deal with the situation we are in, and the forces that the Enemy has arrayed against us, and so we ask for your help...”

* * *

*Clark Savage Institute
Arronaxe, New York
7 August, 2005*

Professor William Harper Littlejohn – ‘Johnny’, to his few close friends and associates – had arrived at JFK International on an early evening flight, Sunday, and had to wait for two hours for the arrival of the Osprey from the Arronaxe Flight Service to pick him up at the private-terminal side of the airport. Thus, it was approaching midnight before he finally stepped inside the door of his modest house in Arronaxe. He was tired; bushed, in fact, and so he locked the front door and headed for bed.

He rose at his customary six thirty, had coffee and breakfast, and then saw to the unpacking of his luggage. After starting a load of laundry, he sauntered into his study. There was a fairly large pile of envelopes in a styrofoam postal service bin next to his desk, courtesy of one of his teaching assistants, Edward Jameson, who had stopped by the house daily to take in the mail, and he spent the next hour sorting through the pile and taking care of the essential items.

Next came the voice-mail messages. He listened to them, deleting the ones from telemarketers and jotting down the numbers and names of those he deemed important enough to warrant a return call. He spent perhaps ninety minutes in dealing with the urgent phone business, and then turned to the facsimile machine. That, at least, was not awaiting his attention.

“It figures,” he chuckled. “Everyone sends e-mail with attachments, nowadays. I should just get rid of the machine but, as soon as I do, the one person in the world who doesn’t have e-mail would be asking for my fax number!”

And, speaking of his e-mail, he turned to that program on his computer. Once again, he spent nearly an hour in handling various correspondences, saving those which he knew to be from students for the end of the session, as there were a great many of them. He truly liked his students, enjoying both their questions and their opinions, and his relationships with them on an individual basis were a source of joy to him. Unfortunately, those relationships were also a source of joy to the students, who often corresponded with him over their summer months. He read them all, but put off replying for a time when his fingers would be feeling a little more like incurring typing cramp from answering them all.

He was just about to close the e-mail application, when it began its quarter-hour poll of the mail server for new incoming messages, so he left it run. It turned out, for all parties concerned, that it was well that he did so, for the incoming message was from another of his teaching assistants, who made her home in Honduras. It was marked ‘most urgent’, and was laden with attachments.

“Johnny,

I hope that your summer is going well, and that you are enjoying your time in the mid-east. Have you unearthed anything of significance, at the dig? If not – and, perhaps even if you have, I think you will find the attached images intriguing.

I have just come into possession of a most curious document. It is the journal of one of my ancestors, a soldier who served under Cortes against the Aztecs, and the volume has been in my family for five hundred years.

Among the incidents he relates, is a very strange tale dealing with an artifact known as ‘The Singing Stone’ – ‘La Piedra el Cantar’, in Spanish. I have imaged the pages containing the tale, and you will find them in the attached file. I was wondering if, in your travels or research, you have ever heard such a tale, or of such an artifact, from any other source. The tale, itself, sounds so much like an old soldier’s tall-tale that I do not know whether to believe it. Yet, concealed within the binding of the journal, my ancestor hid a map that notes the site where his ship sank, supposedly with the stone still on board. A scan of the map is also included in the file.

I apologize if this message arrives at an inconvenient time, but I did not want to wait until I return for classes, to ask you if you had ever heard of this legend.

*Warmest Regards,
Elena”.*

Johnny smiled as he looked over at one of the overcrowded shelves. Sitting next to an Egyptian canopic jar stood a framed photo of the two of them, taken at a dig near Cairo the previous summer. He was quite fond of Elena Ybarra, and thought that she was one of his best, and – in his opinion – most gifted students and assistants. She was headed for a bright career in archaeology, provided she could avoid having to go back to Honduras and take over her uncle’s cigar factory at some point.

“The things some people expect out of their children!” he muttered, as he opened a web browser window and typed in the address for a website he knew dealt extensively with Cortes and his expedition. “I would hate to think what my life would have been like, if I’d followed in my father’s footsteps and taught medieval literature!”

The Cortes website contained a wealth of information on the conquistadores, including a complete listing of the officers and soldiers who accompanied him on that expedition. Perusal of the listing proved that there had, indeed, been a Fernando Lopez de Avila among the men who served under Cortes, so that much of Elena’s story was obviously the truth. With that fact firmly established, he opened the first of the attachments she had forwarded.

The image of the document appeared on his monitor, and he studied it intently for several minutes. He’d have to have the original document in his possession, in order to run tests on the pages and the binding, but what did show in the color image looked genuine enough. Certainly, the penmanship and lettering was of a style concurrent with the period of Spanish conquest in Mesoamerica, and the fading of some of the characters would be about right, based on the inks that the people had available to them, then. The sketch of the shrine near Popocateptl was accurate enough; he’d been there, many years ago, and recalled the curious circular room with its twelve skylights and the niches. The mirrors described in the accompanying text were missing, when he visited the shrine, and had been so for ages. Until he read this text, the accepted archaeological verdict on those niches was that they were originally platforms for the display of statuary honoring whatever unnamed god that shrine had been dedicated to.

“If there were golden mirrors, certainly the conquistadores would have eventually gathered them for themselves, either shipping them home to Spain in their original form, or melting them into ingots for easier transport,” he mused.

That, of course, was all based on the notion that the document was not a hoax. Many such supposed journals had been ‘discovered’, over the years, all hinting at the location of some great treasure or other. Most had been discovered to be clever frauds, the ‘bait’ in some scheme to swindle people out of their life’s savings on a chance of uncovering untold wealth. Only a rare few had proved to be genuine.

The strange characters included in the sketches and journal pages were of a type that he had never before encountered, and that was saying a lot, given the number of years he’d been traveling the globe and exploring ancient ruins. Still, there was enough factual data included in the text that he deemed it worth a bit of further investigation.

He glanced at the clock on the wall across from him, noting the time. With all he had spent the time doing, since arising, it was nearly midday. He spent a brief moment doing the mental gymnastics required to calculate the current time in Tegucigalpa. Spooling the attachments to his laser-jet for printing, he accessed his remote link to the Institute’s main computers and opened the student information file. Entering Elena’s name, he retrieved her file and located her Honduran home telephone number.

It took nearly a minute for the connection to be established, and then he was speaking with Elena’s uncle, Estebán, and learned that Elena was off on a summer mission trip with her college roommate’s church youth group.

Owing to his long years as an associate of Doc Savage, Johnny had – through time and much practice – developed an ear for detecting abnormalities in a person’s speech patterns. Even

through the stilted, halting English coming from the girl's uncle, Johnny heard a blatant pattern of stress.

"Is anything wrong, Estebán?" he asked.

"*Si*, Professor," Estebán replied, his voice now sounding tired and drawn. "Elena and her friend have apparently gone missing from their mission tour."

"I see," Johnny responded, leaning forward and taking up a pen and paper to make some quick notes. "Where was this mission trip, and do the authorities there – or the chaperones with the youth group – have any idea where she might have gone?"

"The authorities, no, *señor*," Estebán answered, "aside from what they learned from the adults who accompanied the youth group."

"And what was that?" Johnny prompted. He looked over at the printer, to see that a large drawing – apparently a map of some sort – was just finishing its print-process. He took the map and laid it in front of him. Though the islands it depicted had no names marked on them,

"It is said that Elena and her roommate, Gwendolyn, rented a small sailboat and some equipment – underwater breathing apparatus – from a business along the waterfront in a place called Cockburn Harbor. This was early on Saturday morning. When the boat did not return to port by nightfall, the authorities were notified. On Sunday morning some bits of wreckage, including the portion of the stern with the boat's registration number, were found washed up on the shore, but no trace of the girls has been found."

"Where is this place, Cockburn Harbour?" Johnny asked.

"Oh! *Estoy apesadumbrado, señor!* I am so sorry. It is in the Turks-Caicos islands."

"Thank you, Estebán," Johnny told him. "And, don't give up hope of finding your niece, please! Can you be reached at this number, at any time?"

Elena's uncle responded in the negative, but immediately offered his office number as an alternative. With a brief goodbye, Johnny cut the connection.

Turning back to his computer, Johnny pulled up a map of the Turks-Caicos islands group, and was not surprised to see that the island shapes were identical to the ones on the map that had been included in Elena's message attachments. Copying the map to a graphics image file, he opened it a second time in Adobe PhotoShop alongside a copy of Elena's map. It took him some few minutes to get the scale of the web-map to match that of Elena's inclusion, but eventually he had it within a hair's breadth of precision. Reaching into one desk drawer, he fished in a rack of hanging files until he found several eight-by-eleven sheets of clear acetate – he often used them to make map overlays – and inserted it into the printer. Sending the new map across, he lifted his phone and dialed Clark's cellular number.

"Good morning, Johnny," Clark greeted him. "How was your trip?"

"Not terribly successful, with regard to the actual digging, but still a pleasant time of renewing old friendships," Johnny told him. "But that's not why I called. Something interesting has popped up, that I'd like to discuss with you."

“Well, Bonnie and I are over at Perry’s, and we’ll be having lunch shortly. Why don’t you head over, and join us?”

Johnny stole a glance at his wristwatch. It *was* nearly noon, after all. The morning, with all of its interesting developments, had fairly flown by. No wonder his stomach was beginning to rumble.

“I’ll be there, shortly, Clark,” he assented.

He tucked the print-out of Elena’s message and attachments, along with the Turks-Caicos acetate overlay, into his briefcase and made ready to head for Perry’s house.

* * *

Johnny arrived at our place about fifteen minutes before the first of the hamburgers were due to come off the grill, and I spent the time introducing Johnny to Kal and Lois – the full intro, of course; Johnny had been with Doc’s old crew long enough that I wasn’t worried about any leaks coming from him – and then it was time to sit down to eat. It chanced, by the way we all took seats, that Johnny wound up to my immediate left at the table.

“So, how was the mid-East dig trip?” I asked him. “Find anything interesting?”

“Not particularly,” he shrugged his shoulders. “I had hopes of being there when something of importance was unearthed, but things just didn’t pan out that way.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I offered.

“On the other hand, they say that interesting things turn up when you least expect them to,” he continued. “And that, apparently, is true.”

He reached for the briefcase he’d brought with him, sitting it in his lap while he opened it and pulled out a small sheaf of papers.

“One of my third-year students in the archaeology course sent me some images of pages from a diary, purportedly some five hundred years old, that she was given as a birthday present. The diary,” he laid the papers on the table and returned his briefcase to the ground, “purports to be the recollections of a Spanish soldier serving with Cortes in Mexico, during the Aztec conquest.”

Johnny paused, for a moment, shuffling through the first couple of pages.

“Of particular interest – at least to my student – was an account of a brief expedition that the girl’s ancestor participated in, in search of an artifact called ‘*La Piedra el Cantar*’ – the Singing Stone. According to the text and accompanying sketches, it was found in a –”

I had been looking over Johnny’s shoulder at the document, as he shuffled through its pages. Though my Spanish is basically limited to elementary tourist phrases, the symbols penned near the bottom of one page caught my eye.

“Kal,” I interrupted, grabbing the page out of Johnny’s hand and passing it across the

table to him, "I think you better have a look at this."

He took the page from me, scanning it with his eyes.

"Near the bottom of the page," I urged him. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Great Caesar's Ghost!" Kal exclaimed in a subdued whisper.

"What is it, honey?" Lois, on his right, asked him, craning to see the page.

"These symbols!" he whispered. "Where were they found?"

"They were supposedly etched into the face of a rather large crystalline object, which projected the image of a magnificent city, also apparently constructed – at least, in part – of crystal," Johnny explained, trying to get back into the course of his narrative. "Apparently, it was a most advanced city, as aerial conveyances of some sort are included in the soldier's description of what the crystal displayed."

"It was a Kryptonian city!" Kal stated flatly.

"What makes you say that?" Clark asked him.

"The description of the crystal city, for one thing, Kal explained. These symbols, for another. They're Kryptonian writing."

"Well, what's it say?" I demanded.

"Believe it or not, it says 'Kal-El of Krypton'!" his voice was filled with awe.

Johnny looked at him, apparently on the cusp between belief and disbelief. Everyone else at the table waited in silence.

Without a word, I got up and went over to the blanket where Kal had been doing his sunbathing. Retrieving Kal's notepad and pen, I headed to the table, shuffling through Kal's pages of notes until I found the page where he'd jotted down the Kryptonian alphabet for me, a couple days earlier. It took only a few seconds for me to hastily pen the English letters beneath the Kryptonian ones, and then I handed the pad to Johnny.

"Kal did this for me, the other day, explaining how the symbol on his chest came to be." I told him. "He said that these symbols carry, in order, left to right, the sounds represented by our alphabet. There are more, but they're combination letters, like in Russian. Use this as the key, and translate the symbols on the document, would you?"

Kal handed the page back across the table, and Johnny took the pen, studying both pieces of paper for a moment. Then, with deliberate strokes, he penned English letters beneath the strange characters.

"The characters do translate 'Kal El za Krypton'," he reported, after completing the transcription. "I'm assuming that 'za' is the Kryptonian equivalent of our English 'of'."

"It is," Kal verified.

“Then I would submit that the existence – at least, five hundred years ago – of such an artifact, as well as the claims laid forth in the diary from whence this extract came, are genuine,” Johnny stated flatly. “It seems improbable, given Perry’s report on how and when Kal and Lois entered this world, that there could be any prior knowledge, on their part, of this artifact, nor any collusion between them and my protégée, Elena.”

“That actually creates more questions than it answers, Johnny,” I ventured.

“Such as?” he looked at me expectantly.

“Well, for one thing, we’ve surmised that Clark and Lois were somehow transported from their world – in an alternate universe – to ours. According to Lois, and later confirmed by Clark, he has been on his Earth for approximately thirty three years. Since his home star is just a nudge over thirty-three light-years away, it will be another few months, roughly, before the people on his Earth will see the light from when Krypton’s sun went nova – assuming, of course, that the explosion is visible at this distance.”

In the pause between my explanation and Johnny’s reply, I wondered if there would be an explosion in our universe, as well.

“I follow you so far,” Johnny nodded. “It all seems logical enough. Where do you see more questions being created?”

“Well, for starters, we apparently have an artifact bearing Kryptonian characters, that somehow made it across whatever barrier normally exists between universes, and landed on OUR Earth, only it did so at *least* five hundred years in our past. Maybe more. How did it manage that?”

“Could it have come from some sort of space-probe, launched hundreds of years earlier in the planet’s history?” Dot asked. “Everything I’ve ever seen, with regard to Superman, talks about Krypton being a world that was hundreds of years ahead of ours, technologically.”

“Not with my name on it,” Kal responded, shaking his head.

“What do you mean, not with your name on it?” I questioned him.

“I’d have to teach you a lot about Kryptonian customs, and how the alphabet works,” he told me. “Remember, I told you that the characters I put on the pad are only the ones that directly correspond with letter-sounds in the English language. There are quite a few more, in the full ‘alphabet’, since it was originally pictographic, like ancient Chinese. The extra symbols carry the sounds of combined vowels, or combined consonants.”

“Similar to Russian, as Perry said.” Johnny tried to clarify the point.

“Exactly!” Kal nodded. “But, to put it in capsule form, the way Kryptonian names work, I am the only being in the entire history of my world who has ever borne the name, ‘Kal-El’. There was no equivalent of the Earth custom of naming sons after their fathers – as was true in Clark’s situation – or other male ancestors. Every child was given a unique ‘first name’, and then the family name.”

“I see,” Johnny mused, stroking his bony chin with thumb and forefinger. “Any thoughts on the matter, Clark?”

“Other than its having passed through a wormhole or other similar phenomenon, no,” Clark replied. “However, even if a wormhole is involved, it would have to be one capable of bridging not only the barrier between universes, but the barrier of time, as well, in order to land such an artifact on our world, in an alternate universe and some five hundred years in our past..”

“Look,” I ventured, “how the thing got here isn’t what’s really important, at the moment, is it? It’s Kal’s, or it was specifically intended to be his – maybe another crystal made by his real father, Jor-El. The fact that it has Kal’s name etched into its face makes it important enough for us to locate.”

“It may be even more imperative than that, Perry!” Johnny intoned with a most-serious note in his voice.

“Why do you say that?” I asked him.

Johnny pulled the copy of de Avila’s map, and the acetate overlay, out of his case and laid them out on the table.

“This is the map that the old soldier drew, logging where the ship carrying the crystal sank in a hurricane,” he explained. “This,” he laid the overlay next to the old map, “is a map that I printed out not an hour ago.”

We leaned forward across the table or gathered around behind him, to see the images more clearly.

“A few days ago, Elena left Honduras to go on a mission trip with her roommate from the Institute. That trip was to take them to the Turks-Caicos islands.” He tapped the clear overlay with a finger.

“I can’t imagine a girl as bright as Elena looking at a trip to a distant place without at least first getting hold of a map of where she was headed. If she did so, she couldn’t help but notice the similarity between this map and the chart-copy drawn by her ancestor. And I’m fairly certain that she did notice. Saturday morning, while the rest of the mission group were headed to do some sightseeing on the larger island, she and her roommate rented a sailboat and some scuba gear from a place in Cockburn Harbour.”

His finger stabbed at a tiny dot on the Caicos overlay, and then he lifted the acetate and placed it over the copy of de Avila’s map.

“Note the proximity of Cockburn Harbour to the point on the map indicated as the site of de Avila’s shipwreck, here near the Seal Cays.”

“She went looking for the crystal!” I whistled.

“And never came back!” Johnny added. “Debris from the boat washed ashore on the largest of the islands, early Sunday morning.”

“There’s a lot of piracy going on in that part of the world,” Mitch offered. “If the boat

was decent enough in size, and fairly nondescript, it'd be a target for theft. There's a big market for stolen boats, for use in drug trafficking."

"That's true," Clark mused.

"Do you think the girls are still alive?" Lois asked.

"I can't hazard a guess, in that regard," Johnny shrugged. "But this is something I think needs pursuing."

"I agree," Clark nodded, rising from his chair.

"How do we work this?" I asked. "Who makes the trip?"

"I really ought to make a trip down to that temple site," Johnny pointed out. "If we do retrieve the crystal, we're going to need some exact measurements of that temple set-up, in order to reproduce the results apparently achieved by the ancients."

"At your age, you shouldn't go off into the jungle alone, Johnny," Clark chuckled. "And I've been working on a variant of a laser device that ought to take your measurements at a much quicker pace than using standard methods."

"Let me do some nosing around on the islands," Lois intruded into the conversation.

"Not on your life!" Kal objected. "Not unless I go along."

"You should go along on the temple expedition, Kal," I countered. "There might be some other bits of Kryptonian writing there, and you'd be able to translate it for us, a lot quicker than Johnny, no disrespect intended."

"I'll go along to keep an eye on her, Kal," Bonnie volunteered.

"No, you won't," Clark's voice carried a note of finality. "Until that baby arrives, you're staying right here, where it's safe!"

"I'll go with Lois, then!" Dot ventured.

"**Dot!**" I exclaimed. Well, she's my wife, and I wanted her safe.

"I'm going for a walk," Lois informed us in a heated tone. "Let me know when this committee of chauvinistic men gets done deciding my place in all of this, will you?"

She spun on her heel and stalked off, past the back end of the yard and into the woods beyond.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bonnie whisper something into Dot's ear. Then, after a brief pause, she slipped around the back of the group, trailing after Lois.

* * *

Chapter Nine: "Ladies' Choice..."

Clark Savage Institute
Arronaxe, New York
7 August, 2005

With an ease and grace born from expert training and honed in the forests and jungles of six continents, Bonnie followed Lois deeper into the woods, keeping roughly fifty yards behind her, yet always keeping her quarry in sight.

Lois stalked on through the woods until she had put several hundred yards between herself and the debate going on back in Perry's yard. Eventually, she reached the clearing she'd visited occasionally over the last few days. Sitting with her back against the bole of a tall oak, she closed her eyes for a moment, then fumbled with her purse to find the cigarettes and lighter. Eyes still closed to fight back the tears of frustration, she slid the cigarette from the pack and brought it to her lips, working by touch alone. Only when it came time to light it did she open her eyes again, and she closed them once more as she pulled the first drag into her lungs.

In the brush, a few yards away, Bonnie smiled softly. She'd guessed as much, already, having noticed Lois slipping off into these same woods on a trio of other occasions. Patiently, she sat and watched as her new friend smoked. When it became obvious, from the set of Lois' shoulders, that the worst of the woman's frustrations were ebbing, Bonnie rose quietly from her patch of concealment. With a silent tread that even one of the great cats would have envied, she slipped into the little open space and sat cross-legged on the ground only a couple feet away from the reporter.

"Hey," she called softly.

Lois's eyes snapped open instantly, and she stifled a startled cry.

"Bonnie!" she gasped, trying to catch the breath that had been frightened out of her. Then, a trifle outraged at having been trailed to the spot, "Do you make a habit of sneaking up on people like this, and then scaring the dickens out of them?"

"Only people I care about, Lois," Bonnie snickered. "So. What's going on, here?"

"What's it look like?" Lois snorted, taking another puff and venting both it and her feelings simultaneously. "I got frustrated with the direction the little conversation, back there, was taking. I'm so fed up with not being able to do anything to help. I'm as much involved in this as anyone else is! I needed to take a walk and clear my head."

"That's clearing your head?" Bonnie asked, nodding her head in the direction of the cigarette Lois was holding at her side.

Lois lifted the cigarette to her lips and took another drag. "Okay," she sighed, venting the smoke away from Bonnie as best she could. "So I needed a cigarette. The day Clark – my Clark, that is – and I first met all of you, I told you I smoked occasionally, so why are you so surprised? I just figured it'd be better if I did it in private, rather than offend the rest of you by doing it in front of you."

"Offend somebody?" Bonnie chuckled. "Did any of us give you any reason to think we were offended by the fact that you occasionally smoke? Honey, it's just a cigarette. Millions of

people smoke. Last time I heard, it was still legal to do it – though that may be open to some debate, in California. It’s not like you’re out here doing something that the Word actually lists as being a sin!”

“But the people around here –“ Lois countered. “They’re so...”

“Religious?”

“Yes.”

“Lois,” Bonnie smiled gently, “I won’t say that there’s not a single ‘religious’ person in this valley. There probably *are* one or two, who’re like that. Most of us, though, are just people who love the Lord with all our hearts. There’s a huge difference between those notions, if you stop and think about it.”

“But smoking is pretty much considered to be a sin...”

“I don’t know if anyone really knows that, for certain, Lois,” Bonnie said. “There isn’t anywhere in the scriptures where it says, ‘Thou shalt not smoke.’”

“Then, why do so many churches make such a fuss, about it?” Lois asked her.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Bonnie shook her head. “The ones that do make a fuss about it usually cite 1 Corinthians 6: 19, where it says, ‘*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.*’

“I’ve hear that one, before,” Lois agreed ruefully.

“But you didn’t let me finish, Lois,” Bonnie objected. “They say that smoking defiles that ‘temple’, and so you shouldn’t do it. Now, smoking may not be exactly the healthiest thing you can do but, in the seventh chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells us that it isn’t what a person puts *into* his mouth that defiles him or her. Instead, it’s what comes *out* of his mouth – really, the things a person says, which stem from his or her thoughts – that makes a person impure. And, if you go back and read the entire text of that chapter in 1 Corinthians, you’ll find that Paul is speaking about sexual immorality. He wasn’t talking about food or drink. Or smoking.”

“Interesting argument,” Lois nodded, taking another puff. “But, doesn’t the fact that their view has become so widespread lend truth to their side of the debate?”

“Weight of public opinion doesn’t make a concept right,” Bonnie countered. “Or true. Ask anyone who’s experienced oppression because of his faith. Do people persecute the Jews, back on your Earth? Did your world have a Stalin, who persecuted Christians?”

“Good point!” Lois nodded.

“You know,” Bonnie went on, “there are quite a few denominations whose leaders preach that having so much as a glass of wine with dinner is a mortal sin. They’ll quote Ephesians 5: 18, where it says, ‘*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit,*’ to justify it. Now, I’ll agree that getting drunk isn’t the best thing you can do. It does a number on that part of your brain that’s able to choose between right and wrong. Just ask any woman who’s gotten drunk at a bar or a party, and ended up having sex, either before marriage or

outside of it, and wound up either with a sexually transmitted disease, or pregnant. But there's a big difference between getting drunk and having a glass or two of wine with a meal."

"Agreed," Lois said tersely through a cloud of exhaled smoke. "Go on."

"The folks who preach abstinence from alcohol all seem to forget that," Bonnie continued. "They act as if anyone who has a sip of alcohol will become an alcoholic. They also forget – or maybe just ignore – the fact that, in his first letter to Timothy – chapter five, verse twenty-three, to be exact – Paul urged Timothy, '*Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.*' It took scientists in the twentieth century to figure out that drinking a bit of wine helps to put back some of the intestinal bacteria that we need for proper digestion, that our penchant for spicy foods tends to destroy. And that a glass or two of wine, per day, helps to lower the amount of unhealthy cholesterol in our bodies, reducing the risk of heart attacks or strokes."

She shifted her position on the ground slightly, edging closer to Lois, and continued.

"Most of these doctrines stem from some pastor, reading the scriptures and coming to his own private understanding as to what they're saying, and then preaching it to his congregation as if it was divinely revealed to him. The Word tells us, flat-out, that the scriptures aren't for this sort of private interpretation, but it still happens. These preachers eventually get promoted in the hierarchy of their denomination and, suddenly, it's no longer merely what was preached to a local group of worshipers. It's denominational doctrine, and you can obey it or leave."

"I never heard anyone suggest anything like that, before," Lois mused, stubbing out the remnant of her cigarette and reaching for the pack again. "Do you mind?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be sitting here, talking with you," Bonnie smiled.

Lois flicked the lighter again, as Bonnie continued.

"As far as smoking goes, it's probably not the healthiest thing you can do, but I have yet to see a scriptural injunction against it. That makes it a matter of personal conscience, between you and God. Charles Spurgeon was one of the most dynamic of the evangelists of the 1800's. He smoked one or two cigars every day, throughout his adult life, in public and in private. He preached to crowds as big as ten thousand at a time and, over the course of his lifetime, he won hundreds of thousands of souls to Christ. Obviously, the fact that Spurgeon smoked didn't limit God's ability to use him."

"I've been doing a little reading on Christianity in your world – trying to find things to use, to convince my husband – and I ran across several references to Spurgeon, including his cigars." Lois nodded.

"Yeah, and there were some pastors who really looked down on him, because of it," Bonnie added. "They said he didn't belong in the pulpit, preaching. Some even said that Spurgeon didn't even belong in the Church, as long as he continued to smoke."

"I guess it's a good thing he didn't listen to them," Lois smiled. "I read that, because of Spurgeon's preaching, a number of other people accepted Christ, and then went on to become great evangelists, as well."

“True enough,” Bonnie nodded. “Spurgeon preached the sermon that brought Dwight Moody to Christ. Moody, in turn, preached a sermon that reached into the heart of a baseball player named - appropriately enough - Billy Sunday, and set him on fire for the Lord. It was Billy Sunday whose preaching reached into the heart of a young Billy Graham, who then went on to become the most noted evangelist of the twentieth century. I don't think anyone's ever come up with a count of how many souls Billy Graham has reached, for the cause of Christ, but I hear that the best guess is somewhere above a billion, over his lifetime.”

“Then it's definitely a good thing that Spurgeon didn't listen to the folks who wanted to ban him from preaching,” Lois decided.

“You've got that right, honey,” Bonnie chuckled. “You see, one of the biggest problems with the churches - the ones where smoking is regarded as a sin - is what it does to the smokers who walk through their doors for the first time. Here's a person, maybe a husband and wife, who might not even have really heard much about God, or Jesus. God begins to work in their lives, through the Holy Spirit's urgings. He gets them to the point where they begin to wonder if maybe there's something they're missing - something that would really complete their lives - in this whole 'Christianity' bit. They show up in church, one Sunday, sit through the worship time, and through a really first-class sermon by the pastor. They walk out of the building feeling that their souls - their spirits - have been fed, for the first time in their lives. Of course, they've been a couple hours without a cigarette, so what's the first thing they do?”

“Light up, of course,” Lois answered, “after getting a suitable number of feet away from the doors into the building.”

“Right!” Bonnie agreed. “And then, just as they're taking that first puff, along comes some well-meaning member of the congregation - probably one of the same folks who noticed them in the foyer after the service, realized they were first-timers, and welcomed them - telling them that smoking is a sin, and that they're going to have to 'clean up their act' and quit if they really want to become Christians. You know what happens, then, don't you?”

“If the couple is like most smokers, nowadays, they've probably already tried to quit and failed,” Lois mused. “So they get in their car, drive away, and never come back. What's the use in subjecting yourself to that sort of attitude, again?”

“Exactly,” Bonnie said, quietly. “That's just what happened to me, when I was about twenty. I'd just arrived at Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, for parachute training, and Sally - one of the gals in my unit - invited me to church with her, one Sunday. She'd been engaging in a Bible study with me for a couple months, and I was just beginning to feel like there might be something I needed, having this Jesus as part of my life. Finally, I let her drag me to church at this little Baptist meeting house off-base. I enjoyed the worship, because I love to sing, and something in the pastor's sermon really got to me. At the end of the service, the pastor invited anyone who didn't have Jesus as their savior - but wanted Him in their lives - to pray that Sinner's Prayer along with him. I did. Then he told us that there was going to be a baptism time during the evening service, that night, and anyone who'd just prayed that prayer was welcome to come.

“After the service, I went up to thank the pastor, and tell him that I was coming back that evening. He seemed really happy about it. Well, Sally drove us in her car, that morning, and she had to meet with a couple other folks after the service, so I went outside to wait for her. I had wandered about fifty yards away from the building, and sat down under a tree and lit a cigarette. I'd smoked maybe half of it, and here comes the pastor. Told me that smoking was a sin, and I'd

have to give it up if I wanted to be baptized.”

“No!” Lois whispered, wide-eyed.

“Yes!” Bonnie nodded, a sad expression flitting across her features. “I was crushed. It just didn’t fit, not with the Jesus I thought I’d read about in the Bible, and not with the Jesus that same pastor had talked about from the pulpit not an hour earlier! I mean, Zaccheus was still a lying, cheating tax collector when Jesus went to dinner at his house. It wasn’t until afterward that Zaccheus changed his ways. In my mind, - and from what Sally had been teaching me – the things the pastor said didn’t match, at all. It was like he was saying that I had to get cleaned up before I could take a shower!”

Bonnie closed her eyes and heaved a heavy sigh.

“I was so hurt! I stood up and stomped on what was left of the cigarette, and went to find Sally, to take me home. I never set foot in a church again. Not until I met Clark and Perry, that is – and it took a whole lot of my seeing the way they lived out their faith to convince me to give it another try!”

“Such a waste of all those years!” Lois told her sadly.

“Amen!” Bonnie nodded vehemently. “Of course, God never did give up on me, and it really all worked out for the best. I mean, if it had all gone down some other way, I’d never have met Clark, let alone become his wife!”

“*God works all things together for good...*” Lois paraphrased the scripture.

“Just so,” Bonnie nodded, smiling. “Look – if there was credible evidence that smoking was a sin, you’d figure that smoking would be banned, here in Arronaxe, right? Yet, here you are, smoking. You obviously found out that you could get a pack of cigarettes at the local grocery and convenience stores. I know you did, because you were sneaking off into the woods to smoke even before we took that trip to Alpha Base and Caroline Island. I could smell the smoke on you, when you came back from your little excursions. You should have at least said something, asked one of us about it. We’d have told you that all of the public buildings, and most of the residences, have at least one room with heavy air filtration equipment, designed for those folks who smoke. It’s rather shabby treatment, to send them out into the woods or the street to do it, especially considering the way our winters can get.”

Lois was silent, pondering what she could – or even should – say, in response to Bonnie’s devastating rebuttal.

“So what, now?” she finally asked. “Why did you follow me? Did you plan on telling me all this?”

“No,” Bonnie grinned. “It all just sort of worked out that way. Actually, I thought I’d join you in a smoke, so you wouldn’t have to feel so alone,”

Then, with a speed Lois wouldn’t have imagined a woman her size could possess, Bonnie reached past her and snatched the pack from the ground next to the purse, along with the lighter. Slipping a cigarette from the pack, she put it between her lips and brought up the lighter, flicking it gently and cupping the flame against the slight breeze with her other hand.

"I didn't know you still smoked, Bonnie," Lois remarked, in an astonished voice.

"I haven't, in years, but – like I said – I used to. I started when I was twelve, and quit when I was twenty five. It interfered with my stamina and my ability to concentrate when I was in the field, on missions," Bonnie answered, lowering the lighter temporarily, its task uncompleted, "But yours smells soooo good, I thought I'd join you. They say that the body never really forgets..." She smiled devilishly around the filter and brought the lighter up again.

"But, your husband - what's he going to say, about this?"

"Not a thing, shugah," Bonnie snickered, again leaving the cigarette dangle unlit from her lips. "I don't plan on telling him, any more than you plan on telling your hubby that all those long walks in the woods you've been taking were just so you could sneak a smoke without getting caught."

"But, you're Doc Savage's wife -- !"

"That's supposed to count for something?" Bonnie sneered. "Honey, to anyone but a handful of people – even here in Arronaxe – I'm Bonnie Dent. Practically everyone in my world thinks Doc Savage died decades ago!"

"But you know it..."

"Oh, so you're going for the '*You* know it, and that's the important thing' angle, eh? Well, if that's really all that important, consider this: whether the folks in your world know it, or not, you're Mrs. Superman. If who *I'm* married to is supposed to make any difference, then who *you're* married to oughtta make even *more* of a difference. After all, I bet there are 'way more people – in either world! – who've forgotten about your husband, than have even *heard* of mine!"

Bonnie flicked the disposable lighter and moved it toward the end of the cigarette, then stopped short.

"You know, there's another angle that you might not have considered," she said.

"What's that?" Lois asked, taking another long puff.

"It's the image that *you* present," Bonnie told her, pointing a finger.

"What do you mean?" Lois demanded. "I never smoke in public!"

"But you carry your cigarettes around, don't you?" Bonnie pressed the notion. "You have 'em in your purse, or maybe in the pocket of a blazer. Let's hypothesize, for a moment. Have you ever done a 'career day', at a school, talking about what it's like to be a reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper?"

"Sure," Lois nodded. "Probably two or three, a year, for the last few years."

"I thought so," Bonnie nodded. "Let's say you're doing one, and there's a young girl there who *really* wants to go into journalism as a career. She's read your articles, in particular, for a few years, and really admires you. She wants to talk to you, in more detail, after the main event

is over. What happens if she catches sight of your pack in your open purse? Or, worse, she tails you outside the school building, and catches you in the act of lighting up?"

"Then, I guess, she'll find out that I smoke," Lois shrugged.

"Right." Bonnie nodded emphatically. "And she may decide that, if her idol smokes, it won't hurt her, either. Kids in school get enough peer pressure to try stuff, without having adults they respect making such practices seem okay.

She lifted the lighter toward the end of the cigarette, which had never left her mouth, flicking it into life.

Quickly, Lois leaned forward and blew out the flame.

"No, Bonnie!" Lois gasped. "You can't do that! You're pregnant!"

Even as she said it, though, her mind flashed to the numerous times her own husband had done the exact same thing - often, from across the room, with a tightly-focused puff of his super-breath.

"I want you around for a long time, darling," he'd say. "Our children are going to need a very loving mother. The kind I had."

"And what if you're pregnant, too?" Bonnie asked, flicking the lighter again.

"But I'm not!" Lois sputtered.

"You've run the test? You're absolutely certain, or you just think so?" Bonnie countered, the flame still hovering a scant inch from the end of the cigarette that bobbed between her lips as she spoke. "You and that husband of yours been abstaining, or taking precautions, the whole time since the two of you showed up on our doorsteps?"

"Well, no," Lois admitted, blushing and looking at the ground between her crossed legs while she tried to wipe the sheepish grin from her lips.

"Then how do you know you're not risking anything by going ahead and taking another drag off that thing?" Bonnie scooted over next to her and pressed the point home. "Look, I know you're under a lot of stress. Heaven knows, if I were in your shoes, with what you and your husband have been through in the last few weeks, I'd probably be on the verge of going bonkers, myself. But there's plenty of other ways to deal with that stress, and most of 'em are a lot healthier than smoking."

"Like what?" Lois asked, dejectedly.

"Like prayer, for one thing," Bonnie ticked the item off on a fingertip. "And letting the people who want to be your friends help you through it, for another. Honey, both Dot and I have been watching you, knowing what you must be feeling inside. You're stranded about as far from home as it's possible to get, with no knowledge of how to get back, or even *where* your home is, relative to here. Your husband, who used to be the most powerful mortal in your universe, has lost his powers, not to mention the faith he really needs at this point in his life. We've wanted to help you deal with it all, but you have to open up to us. We're not just gonna butt our noses into

your life, unasked. At least, not beyond what I've just laid out for you."

"And sneak up on me when I try to grab a quick smoke," Lois reminded her.

"A girl's gotta start somewhere," Bonnie shrugged, smiling.

The pent-up tears of weeks of frustration and fear began to fall, at last, from the corners of Lois's eyes, and she crushed the remnant of her cigarette out on the ground at her side in a savage motion. Bonnie gave her own cigarette, and the lighter, a heave off into the brush, and leaned forward to console her friend.

"It's gonna be alright, Lois," she whispered as the woman began to sob heavily into her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Bonnie," Lois said, pulling back just enough to look Bonnie in the eyes.

"What for, shugah?" Bonnie asked.

"For smoking in front of you. Romans 14: 21 – 22: *'Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.'*"

"I think that God understands, Lois," Bonnie comforted her. "Besides, I really wasn't planning on lighting up that cigarette. After all, I'm pregnant! I just wanted to spend a few minutes alone with you, and let you know that you don't have to deal with your problems all by yourself. Whether it's your smoking, or your fear and frustration over what's happened to you and your husband, you've got a pair of sisters here – Dot and me – who want to be there for you, and help you get through it all!"

She glanced at her watch.

"We ought to be getting back to Perry's, now, hon," she suggested. "The men have had just about enough time to talk this thing through and realize that – if they're all going to head for Mexico, to check out this temple, *somebody's* going to have to head for the Caicos and look for those missing students – and us ladies are all that's left!"

* * *

Bonnie's surmise proved correct, and the two women arrived back at Perry's to learn that two of them – Lois and Dot – would head out the next morning for the Caicos Islands. Neither Kal nor Perry were terribly enthused about their wives going off like that, but it couldn't be helped. Johnny was needed, to examine the temple. Clark was needed, to work the new laser measuring and diagramming equipment, because he'd invented it. Kal was needed, in case there were any additional instances of Kryptonian characters adorning the temple walls, and to examine the temple for concealed rooms with his x-ray vision. I was to stay in Arronaxe, and handle communications with both groups while they were away. Bonnie, of course, was to remain in Arronaxe and out of danger until the baby arrived.

"We'll be fine, honey," Dot told me, just before she and Lois boarded the Osprey, the next morning, for their flight down to the islands. "Are you forgetting that I was a federal security

guard, before you met me and brought me into all of this?"

"It's not you, that I'm worried about," I told her quietly. "It's Lois. The comics, the movies, and the television episodes are filled with demonstrations of this 'knack' she has, for getting herself into tight spots. In all those media, it's Superman who bails her out of the jam. Superman, however, is temporarily unavailable. So I'm counting on you – and so is Kal – to keep her out of mischief. Just go down there, ask a few questions and get whatever answers you can, and stay out of trouble."

"We will, honey," Dot promised me, smiling.

As she headed off toward Gumball's Osprey. I wondered why the only thing that ran through my mind was a piece of dialogue Harrison Ford had uttered three times as 'Han Solo', and three more times, as 'Indiana Jones':

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

I couldn't pin it down to anything, though, so I stood back and watched the Osprey lift off, and then went across to the other pad, to bid a temporary farewell to Clark, Kal, and Johnny.

"I'm still not sure that it was such a wise move, Clark," Kal was saying, as I got close enough to hear the conversation.

"What's not a wise move, Kal?" I asked.

"Letting our wives go off, like that, Perry," he replied with a worried frown.

"They're just going out to the island, spend a day or so asking some questions of the locals, and then head back," I shrugged, trying to act innocent. "What can go wrong?"

"Quite a lot, Perry," Kal shook his head. "Lois is a wonderful woman, and a truly gifted reporter, but she..."

"Has a knack for getting herself into a jam that it usually takes you to get her out of?" I finished the sentence for him. "I know. Your life's an open book, to me, remember?"

"And you can just stand there with that silly grin on your face, and not worry?" he persisted.

"Kal, there are a few things you might find useful to know, about Dot. When I first met her, she was a security guard at a Federal building. She's a good shot with either a pistol or a rifle. She's also good with a knife, close in. She's taken a few courses in self defense, from Mitch's people. Mitch assures me that, while she's never formally 'tested' for a belt, she's the equivalent of a black belt in at least three martial arts. On top of everything else, she can keep her cool in a firefight or in hand-to-hand. Short of Doc, here, or you at full power, there isn't anyone else I'd want at my back, in a fight."

"Just the same, Perry..." Kal shook his head again, "I'm worried."

"Can't do much about it now," I shrugged, "unless you want to call the Osprey back. Of course, then we'd have to deal with the fury of a couple of very angry women."

“I don’t know which is worse,” Kal sighed.

* * *

The Osprey approached the southeastern tip of the island under cover of night, coming in low over the water from just over a hundred miles offshore to avoid the American navy’s three coastal radar installations. Settling into a hover a foot above the surface and fifty yards from the surf line, Gumball put the craft on auto and opened the hatch. It took about a minute to inflate the small rubber raft, a miniature version of the standard military Zodiac, and drop the equipment bags into it. Then, carefully, the two women clambered aboard.

“We’re going east, near Cockburn Town, on Grand Turk,” Gumball called softly to the women. “You get in a jam, you hit the distress beacon on your belts, and we’ll log your GPS coordinates and be there inside of fifteen minutes.”

“A lot can happen, in fifteen minutes,” Lois ventured.

“I know,” Gumball nodded. “Unfortunately, it’s the best we can do, under the present circumstances. If there are any modern-day pirates cruising around, down here, they’ll most probably avoid the larger towns, and we can go pretty much unnoticed.”

“It’ll have to do,” Dot nodded. “Besides, we’re just doing a bit of recon. Get in, ask a few well-placed questions, and get out – regardless of the answers. What trouble can we get into, doing that?”

“Be careful, anyway,” Gumball insisted. “This isn’t just a ladies’ night out. It’s a serious recon mission! Your grand-dad will have my hide, if I don’t bring you back safe and sound!”

“Button the hatch,” Dot ordered, slapping the side of the Osprey’s fuselage with the palm of her hand. “We’re heading ashore.”

Slipping the collapsible oars into the rubber locks, Dot bent her back to the task of moving them away from the hovering aircraft. As she slowly gained distance, Gumball gave a slight tilt to the rotors and the osprey slipped backward another hundred yards and was quickly swallowed by the darkness.

“All ashore, that’s going ashore,” Dot whispered softly a few minutes later, as the raft slid into the soft sand of the beach.

Both women slipped over the side, grateful for the warmth of the tropical waters as they dragged the raft fully onto the beach and then into the cover of some low scrub brush. Once the raft was hidden from sight, they set about donning their ‘tourist clothes’ and their equipment.

“We’ve got an hour until sunup,” Dot commented, consulting her watch. “We’ve only got a couple of miles to hoof it, to get to the harbor. Got everything?”

“I think so,” Lois nodded, mentally going over her own checklist. “But what’s with these big duffel bags? A couple of them feel like they weigh a hundred pounds or better!”

“That’s gotta be the emergency stuff I asked Clark for,” Dot replied. “Should be some

scuba tanks and other dive gear, in case we need to make a hasty exit underwater. Come on, now; let's get going."

With Dot leading the way, the two women trudged off through the low brush in the direction of the main road leading into Cockburn Harbour. Silence settled gently into place over their landing site.

About ten minutes after Dot and Lois struck off for the harbor town, a low rustling came from the raft. To be precise, it came from the largest of the duffel bags that had been loaded into the raft – the one it had taken both Dot and Gumball to hoist aboard. Swiftly, with as little noise as could be managed, the neck of the duffel opened from the inside, and a stealthy figure slipped out into the bottom of the raft.

Bonnie spent no more than two minutes in stretching the kinks and cramps out of her arms and legs. It had taken a wealth of practice and patience to remain both silent and totally inert while her camouflaged mass was loaded into the Osprey. More so, when the bag she'd stowed away in was dropped rather unceremoniously into the raft as it bobbed up and down in the waves below the open hatch.

She'd made it, though. Clark would eventually have her hide for garters, when she got back, but she'd deal with that when the time came. She'd heard the quiet conversation between Perry and Dot, about Lois, and figured that her two friends might just need an ace in the hole. One who was a lot more skilled at the various forms of stealth, reconnaissance, and – if the need arose – combat, than the other two, combined.

Donning her own 'tourist trappings' and shouldering a large, gaily-colored canvas bag filled with a number of items whose appearance belied their true function, she set off after her friends.

* * *

Popocatepetl
Puebla, Mexico
8 August, 2005

The noise of the wildlife from the nearby jungle had settled to a murmur as night grew deep across the Mexican landscape. In the small clearing adjacent to the ruins of the village, Clark, Kal, Johnny, and Monk sat around a campfire, relaxing from their day's labors.

"Kal?" Clark quietly broke the overall silence of the group.

"Yes, Clark?"

"I was wondering... I was exercising, the other morning, while you and Perry had your little chat. I didn't really hear what was said, between the two of you, and Perry didn't feel that it was his place to recount much of it. I was hoping that..."

"That I'd fill you in on what happened to my faith?" Kal smiled gently. "Sure. I was wondering when you'd get around to asking, and then – when you didn't – I figured that Perry filled you in."

“All he really said was that the nature of your extraterrestrial origin, coupled with what you learned about the destruction of your home-world, resulted in your having questions which you couldn’t answer, and which you couldn’t ask aloud for fear of revealing your identity,” Clark explained. “Beyond that, well, there are plenty of Earth teenagers who go off to college with a belief. They’re forced to take mandatory classes in philosophy, where their beliefs in God are challenged by atheist professors, and the answers they give are batted down mercilessly. They get stuck in science classes where evolution is taught as fact, rather than as a theory, and that only serves to complicate their ability to retain their faith. If it’s that hard for an Earth kid, it had to be much more difficult for you, under the circumstances.”

“You’re right, Clark,” Kal nodded, his face looking sombre in the flickering firelight. “It went pretty much just that way. Christianity believes that Earth is the center of the universe, that it’s the only place where intelligent life came to exist. I stand as a forcibly mute witness to the fact that such belief is totally incorrect.”

“But, Kal,” Johnny suggested gently, “One needs to consider the fact that the scriptures were written at a time when Earth’s humanity believed that this world was flat, like a plate. It’s theorized that, before the Flood, a great deal more knowledge was available, but that it was lost in the aftermath of that catastrophe. Civilization regressed, to some degree, because it was all that those few individuals on the Ark could do, just to survive. They had no time to pass along the bulk of their knowledge to their children. The first written scriptures we have actually come from the time of Moses. Even those writings, as they account for the creation, are what God told Moses to write down. Would the people, then, have been able to comprehend it, if God had told them that some of those points of light in the night sky were worlds like their own, filled with people not dissimilar to them? I sincerely doubt it. As their relationship to their God was not dependent upon their knowing that they were not alone in the universe, perhaps He simply chose not to tell them.”

“You’ve got a point, in that regard,” Kal admitted, after pondering the elderly scholar’s words for a few minutes. “Still, that doesn’t explain the notion of a supposedly loving God allowing an entire world to be destroyed.”

“What about the Flood?” Monk asked, pointedly. “There’s plenty of evidence that a world-wide flood occurred, despite all the protests of the atheists. What’s the difference, when you stop and think about it, between God wiping out all of Earth’s humanity – except for Noah and his family – and God wiping out your home planet, except for you? You could compare that little space ship of yours to Noah’s Ark, you know. Maybe it didn’t bring two of each of the animals that lived on Krypton, but it saved you!”

“You could also draw a comparison between your ship and that little basket that kept the infant Moses safe, at a time when all of the other Hebrew infant males were being slain because of the prophecy of a deliverer that had been born,” Johnny added.

“Again, you offer a plausible point,” Kal admitted. “But I don’t see what the problem was, with my race, which required its destruction.”

“Maybe you never will, Kal,” Clark suggested. “That’s still not a reason to reject the possibility of an alternate truth from the one you’ve accepted.”

“Lack of evidence is not the same thing as contradictory evidence, as my old buddy Ham would say,” Monk added.

“True, but – “

“And, there’s one other thing I wanted to ask you,” Clark persisted. “Let’s look at names, for a moment. Take ‘Clark’, for example. Its origin lies in the Old English, where the word ‘c-l-e-r-k’ is pronounced ‘klahrk’. That word, in turn, developed out of the word, ‘cleric’, which was another word for ‘priest’.”

“I’d always heard it meant ‘scholar’,” Kal commented, cocking his head to one side as he considered the point.

“In that age, Kal,” Johnny explained, “the priests were the only individuals – aside from the nobility – who could read and write.”

“I see.” Kal nodded thoughtfully. “Where are you headed, with this, Clark?”

“Just this, Kal,” the bronze man smiled. “Perry tells me that your birth name means ‘Star Child’ in the language of Krypton.”

“Yes, it does,” Kal nodded.

“Would you consider it strange, that your folks gave you that name, knowing that you’d quickly enough grow beyond being a child? I mean, do you suppose that your fellow Kryptonians might have chuckled a bit, at the thought of an adult whose name means ‘child’?”

“Probably,” Kal admitted with a rueful grin. “I’ve never been able to figure out my father’s motivation, in that.”

“Well,” Clark smiled, “May I suggest something?”

“Go on.”

“I’ve had just enough time to do some online research into the Superman we of this Earth know, from the comic books. In that art-form, you’ve fought an enormous number of villains who were either extremely powerful, or extremely devious: Lex Luthor, General Zod and his henchmen, Doomsday.”

“All true,” Kal nodded, with a distant look in his eyes. “Doomsday was the worst…”

“From what I read, that’s a serious understatement!” Clark chuckled. “What would have happened, had you not been there to defend your adopted world from those individuals?”

“With powers identical to mine, Zod would have become the worst despot imaginable,” Kal shrugged, nodding. “He very nearly did. Lex would start out with what one might call ‘good intentions’, but his dark side would eventually take over. He’d be no better than Zod, just easier to defeat. Doomsday?”

Kal shuddered at the memory of the battle with his most terrifying opponent.

“That’s twice, now, that this ‘Doomsday’ character came up in conversation,” Monk snorted. “Each time, you got a look on your face like the guy was your worst nightmare. What’s

with that?"

"He *was* my worst nightmare, Monk!" Kal responded.

"Really? What was this guy?"

"He was the result of an experiment, really," Kal began the explanation. "One that began thousands of years ago, on prehistoric Krypton. An alien scientist took the dominant life-form of Krypton – at that point in time – and allowed it to be killed, over and over again. Each time, the scientist salvaged what was left of the creature and re-cloned it, mutating the DNA to make it more resistant to injury. And stronger. Eventually, the creature became virtually unstoppable, a sort of berserker rage trapped in a body that was indestructible and imbued with a strength that rivaled my own.

"Finally, the creature slew its creator. Used its creator's ship to escape Krypton and then it began a killing spree that decimated at least four entire planets before it was finally killed one more time. This time, the victor bundled it into a coffin and onto a spaceship and sent it off into space. The ship crash-landed on Earth, a couple thousand years ago, boring deep underground. Left in the dark – no sunlight to restore its strength – the creature lay dormant until one of Luthor's research groups found it, dug it up, and opened it."

"What happened, then?" Monk asked, leaning forward. "Your wife hinted that this Doomsday character hurt you, pretty badly..."

"Hurt me?" Kal snorted. "He killed me. Literally."

"Seems to me, you're still here and still alive," Monk shook his head.

"I haven't figured that one out, entirely, Monk," Kal nodded. "Some folks thought that I was simply in some sort of a 'healing coma', in which my breathing, heartbeat, and brain waves were all too low to be detected with even the best technology. I don't think so. Lois has shown me the photos. My body was placed in a standard coffin, and sealed into a marble sarcophagus in a tomb where no sunlight penetrated. How could I have been exposed to any sunlight, to help recharge my body?"

"Well, you're still here, alive," Monk continued his objection. "What makes you think that you died?"

"I felt myself leave my body."

"Sounds like some of that metaphysics 'astral-projection' bull, to me, youngster," Monk snorted again. "I don't subscribe to none o' that nonsense!"

"Call it what you want, Monk," Kal insisted. "You weren't there. I was. I was standing there, for a moment, looking down at Lois. She was kneeling there on the pavement, holding my body in her arms. I saw the photos you people took, when you brought me into the infirmary that day. What you saw was light bruising, compared to what Doomsday had done to me. My body had huge gashes in it, and my blood..."

Kal closed his eyes for a moment, took a few deep breaths, and regained his composure.

“There wasn’t a square inch of my body that that...thing...hadn’t bruised or sliced with the bony protrusions from his arms and fists. I was standing there, looking down at it, and I was trying to talk to Lois, but it was as if she couldn’t hear me. Then, the darkness closed in around me again, and I saw a point of light in the distance. Tried to move – swim, fly, whatever – to it, but I was stopped short. There were figures around me – Jor-El, for one – trying to urge me on toward that bright place. But my father – Jonathan – was there, too, trying to pull me back.”

“Jonathan had suffered a heart attack, and died on the emergency room table, after he witnessed your death,” Clark nodded. “The emergency room staff managed to resuscitate him, after which he claimed he’d seen you – as Clark – and brought you back.”

“Just so,” Kal nodded. “I keep forgetting just how much of my life appears to be an open book, to you people.”

“What happened, then?” Monk whispered the question across the campfire.

“I’m not sure, exactly,” Kal answered slowly. “There are moments of confusing images in my mind, from that time. But, then, suddenly, I was back in my body again, emerging from my coffin and from the sarcophagus that held it, and then – finally – breaking out of the tomb that the citizens of Metropolis had erected for me. Alive, again.”

“Blazes!” Monk exclaimed. “Now I understand what Lois meant, by that crack about what you put her through, after your fight with that creature!”

“What do you think, Clark?” Johnny mused thoughtfully. “In my mind, the parallels are absolutely and astonishingly incontrovertible!”

“What?” both Kal and Monk asked, very nearly in unison.

“What Johnny means, is this,” Clark smiled softly. “In John 10, verses ten and eleven, Jesus says, *‘The thief comes only to kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.’*”

“And?” The bronze man had paused, and Kal gestured for him to continue.

“It seems to me,” Clark went on, “that this ‘Doomsday’ was a creature who existed only to kill and to destroy.”

“That’s a pretty fair description, Clark.” Kal assented.

“And, because your native world died, and you had been sent to Earth, you were there to stop the creature – even if it was at the cost of your own life. You laid down your life for the people you had sworn to protect, just as the good shepherd defends *his* sheep with his own life. You knew, going into those final moments of the battle, that your death was a very real possibility, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Kal shrugged.

“Then why didn’t you retreat? You could have taken Lois and flown to somewhere safe.”

“The rest of the world didn’t have that luxury, Clark,” Kal’s eyes glared hotly in the light

of the flames. "I was all that stood between them and that creature."

"Just as Jesus Christ was the only one who stood between Satan – the 'thief' who comes to kill and destroy, in the scripture I quoted – and all of humanity. You laid down your life as a willing sacrifice. You knew that – if you could at least take Doomsday into death with you – the sacrifice would be worth it."

It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," Kal responded. He sat for a long moment, in thought, sipping his coffee.

"It doesn't matter what really occurred," Clark shrugged. "You might have been in some sort of deep healing state, where your body's life-functions failed to register. You might have actually 'died'. My first schooling was in medicine. I can't tell you how many people I've seen die in an operating room, and then get brought back to life. The heart of the issue is a simple series of facts. You were willing to lay down your life to defend Earth against Doomsday. You were judged to be dead. You were buried in a tomb. And, at some later point, you emerged from that tomb, alive again. Jesus gave his life for us all, was killed by his enemies, was laid in a tomb, and rose again..."

"That's something I'd never thought of," Kal finally admitted.

"Perry probably already told you this," Clark added. "In Hebrew, your name means 'Hand of God'. I can't claim to know what moved your Kryptonian parents to name you as they did, but could anything be more appropriate, in light of what you've done to defend your adopted world?"

"But, Doc," Monk interjected. "What's the deal with his powers still bein' gone?"

"It's not like it's the first time," Kal admitted.

"The last time, the effects lasted for nearly a year, if I recall," Clark nodded.

"Yes, it did. It was a time I'd just as soon forget. So many people died, or were injured, that year, in natural disasters. I could have saved some of them, if I'd had my powers."

"I wonder if it wasn't God, trying to get your attention," Clark suggested.

"What do you mean?" Kal asked, leaning forward intently.

"What I mean, is this," Clark offered diffidently. "You walked away from the faith your parents – the Kents – taught you from your earliest days on Earth. In short, you turned your back on the existence of God. You recognized no god. If God doesn't exist, then his Law doesn't exist, either. Those Ten Commandments, and all of the moral, ethical, and legal codes that have been based on them are nothing more than the ideas of men. As such, they're subject to change whenever men feel that the laws no longer serve a purpose. In short, without God to serve as the arbiter, there is no right or wrong, save what men believe for a time..."

"Where are you going with this, Clark?" Kal interrupted, puzzled at the bronze man's words.

“Simply this, Kal,” Clark smiled gently. “If there’s no god to tell *you* what’s right and what’s wrong, then who makes the laws? The people who have the most power, of course. And who, on your Earth or this one – what ‘mortal’, I mean – has more sheer power than Superman?”

“Now, I can’t read your mind, Kal. I can’t see the thoughts you have, or have had, about the way your word works. Maybe you’ve strayed too close to thinking that you ought to set yourself above all the world, as its ruler, because you know better than they do, what’s right and what’s wrong.”

Kal lowered his eyes and gazed into the fire. Like an instant replay from a Metropolis Sharks game, his mind flashed back to incident after incident in his recent past. The thoughts he’d been thinking, even moments before the vortex had grabbed at him and Lois and hurled them across space and time – everything burned across his brain in widescreen high-definition clarity.

Across the fire, Clark felt the Spirit’s gentle nod, and continued.

Proverbs 16: 18 tells us that pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,” he spoke softly. “In the book of Jeremiah, it says in chapter 9, verse 23, ‘This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches...’ And later on, in chapter 17, verse 5, ‘This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD.’”

“Leviticus 26, verse 19, says ‘I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze.’” Johnny added.

“Believe it or not, Kal, that verse was part of my daily Bible study, the very morning on which the sky opened up and dropped you and Lois into our world.”

“That’s a lot to think about,” Kal admitted quietly, closing his eyes.

* * *

*Clark Savage Institute
Arronaxe, New York
8 August, 2005*

It was about eleven o’clock when Clark radioed from the Mexican jungle to let us know that he, Kal, and Johnny had arrived at the deserted village and located the ancient shrine.

“Any word from the other team?” he asked, after completing the basic situation report.

“Got a flash from Gumball, at oh-five-thirty, stating that the girls made it ashore safely,” I replied. “Other than that, nothing. Though, cell phone reception in that part of the Caribbean is a bit spotty, so it’s not necessarily something to worry about.”

“Good enough,” Clark returned. “Well, we’ve accomplished our task. We had to wait for a group of tourists to leave, before we could go in and set up our equipment. Fortunately, the local ‘park rangers’ had enough background in archaeology to recognize Johnny, and that was all they needed. They gave him free rein to do whatever he wanted, with the shrine. We finished up a

couple hours ago, had some supper, and an interesting conversation I'll have to fill you in on, when I get back. We're just about to bed down for the night, and head out as soon as we grab a bite of breakfast. It's been a long day."

"Get back here, first thing in the morning, then," I urged. "I'm not crazy about having you guys so far away, with the ladies out there on their own."

"Will do," Clark intoned. "Is Bonnie anywhere around? I wouldn't mind saying goodnight to her, if you can locate her."

"Not at the moment," I answered. "It's a bit strange, now that I think of it. I haven't seen her since before you guys departed, last night. She was helping to load the gear onto the Osprey for Dot and Lois."

"Check our quarters, Perry!" the alarm in his voice was evident. "She said goodbye to me, early on, complaining that she was feeling some cramps and wanted to lie down for awhile."

"I'll do that right away!" I replied. "Keep the channel open, and I'll get back to you!"

Dropping the microphone on the console, I left the communications room and made a beeline for Clark's house, letting myself in with the secure code. Bonnie was nowhere to be found. Nor, I established a short while later, was her 'personal beacon' anywhere on the grounds of the Institute.

I suppose I took a trifle longer, getting back to the communications room, than was truly necessary. I wasn't looking forward to filling Clark in on what I'd found. I knew, without the slightest doubt, where Bonnie was. I think Clark knew, too, based on the tone evident in his voice in his last command to me.

She'd managed to stow away on the Osprey that ferried Dot and Lois to the Caicos. And we'd been worrying about *Lois* causing problems!

* * *

Cockburn Harbour
Turks-Caicos Islands
8 August, 2005

Dot and Lois sat at a table on the edge of a sidewalk café, sipping coffee and looking dejectedly at each other.

"This is embarrassing," Lois muttered with a rueful smile.

"What is?" Dot asked.

"Ace reporter strikes out," Lois spat the words. "At least, that's what the headline ought to read. We've spent four hours, been all over the harbor area, and we've talked to dozens of people, and we still have no answers. The only folks who remember the girls at all were the guy who rented them the boat, the guy at the scuba shop, and two men who were getting ready to go out for a day of fishing when the girls were loading the scuba gear onto the sailboat."

“We ran that risk, coming here, Lois,” Dot shrugged. “It didn’t seem that anyone was really avoiding answering our questions, though. Maybe it’s just that nobody here knows what happened. Mitch was thinking pirates. Who’d expect the locals to know a lot about that sort of activity, unless there’s some sort of conspiracy and the whole town makes its living off of pirate activity? And who pays all that much attention to a pair of tourists, really? I’m surprised we actually located the two fishermen, to be honest with you.”

“You’re right, of course,” Lois admitted. “So, what do we do, now? Head back to the rendezvous point, and wait for dark?”

“How about another option?” a voice to their left asked quietly.

Both women turned quickly to locate the voice’s source, finally spotting a familiar face at the next table.

“Bonnie!” Dot hissed. “What are *you* doing here? Clark’s gonna have a conniption, when he finds out where you are!”

“He’ll probably be a bit upset, but it’ll blow over,” Bonnie chuckled, rising and taking the few steps to join the others at their table.

“So, what’s this other option?” Lois asked as Bonnie pulled up a chair.

“Simple,” Bonnie chuckled. “You’ve got the raft. You’ve got scuba gear. And I’ll bet that at least one of you has a pocket GPS unit. I do, if neither of you remembered to pack one. What say we try our luck out on the water? I mean, that *is* where the girls disappeared, isn’t it?”

“You’re right, Bonnie,” Lois nodded.

“I agree,” Dot chimed in. “Only, let’s not risk the raft. It’s supposed to be our way off the island, and there’s only so much fuel in the gas tank. With Bonnie’s weight added in, it’s not going to last as long. And it’s not like we can cruise into a marina and refuel, after making a run out to the wreck site, and back. I say, let’s rent a boat. I’ve got my credit card...”

“Sounds like a plan,” Bonnie nodded. “So, to borrow a line from Honor Harrington, ‘Let’s be about it, people!’”

“Uh, I need to find a little girls’ room, quick,” Lois stammered, rising from her chair.

“You just made a trip, half an hour ago, Lois,” Bonnie shook her head. “Remember, I’ve been tailing you ladies, all morning. I’m the one who’s got a legitimate excuse to make those frequent bathroom trips. If you need a smoke, you can smoke in front of us, on the way down to the marina.”

“But – “

“No ‘buts’, Lois,” Bonnie waved a hand. “I know how hard it is, to quit, and I know you didn’t pitch the partial pack in your purse. If you recall our conversation from yesterday, I didn’t demand you go cold turkey. Settle for tapering off, until you get to the point where you can give it up completely without withdrawal symptoms.”

Bonnie stood, then, followed by Dot. Followed somewhat meekly by a blushing Lois who was fishing in her purse, the trio made their way down to the waterfront and headed for the place where Elena and her roommate had rented their sailboat. It didn't take long, with Dot's Institute American Express card, to procure a swift speedboat with a rear-mounted diving platform, and then they headed out of the harbor. Once around the point at the edge of the breakwater, they made a swift detour back to the landing sight to retrieve the diving gear from the raft. Then, consulting Bonnie's hand-held GPS at frequent intervals, they headed for the location of the sunken *Esperanza*.

* * *

Chapter Ten: "Foolish Bravado..."

Longitude 21° 43' North

Latitude 71° 35' West

8 August, 2005

"Well, this is the site," Dot declared, checking her hand-held GPS for the third time. "But, where is the wreck?" There's nothing down there but sand and seashells!"

She was sitting on the stern railing, mask perched up on her forehead and the air hose from the scuba tanks dangling at her side. She'd just come up from a ten-minute exploratory dive.

"You sure you didn't miss anything?" Lois asked. "Maybe not swim far out enough, on the check-dive?"

"Lois, the depth is only about fifty feet, in most of the area," Dot answered. "There's an area where it falls off to probably a hundred, maybe a hundred fifty feet, but if this is the spot, we ought to have seen something. The water's nearly crystal clear, even at fifty feet, and I swam out over the drop. You can see all the way to the bottom, there, too. There's not a sign of an old Spanish galleon."

"Maybe we ought to try coming at things from another angle," Bonnie suggested, opening a small tote-bag she'd grabbed from their raft when they stopped for the dive gear.

"Like what?" Lois demanded.

"Well, it occurs to me that we're trying to track this down by using a GPS fix, based on coordinates that were read from a sextant that was made over five hundred years ago. If the ship's captain took the reading in a hurry – and, according to de Avila's narrative, they were all in a hurry to get ashore and into some form of shelter against the hurricane – their reading is off to some degree."

"Well, what can we do to correct that?" Lois shot back. "Got a crystal ball, somewhere, that we can consult?"

"How about something a bit more scientific?" Bonnie grinned, pulling a small box and a thick coil of cable out of the bag.

"What's that?" Dot asked her.

“It’s a magnetometer,” Bonnie smiled. “A small one, at least. It detects magnetic anomalies in the vicinity of the probe at the end of this coil.”

“How will that help us?” Lois asked, puzzled.

“Simple enough,” Bonnie grinned as she plugged one end of the coil into a jack on the box and began paying the other end out across the coaming and into the water. “We’re looking for the wreckage of a Spanish galleon. Granted, it was a wooden ship, but it would have been carrying cannons in order to defend itself against both pirates and ships of its enemy nations, such as England.”

“I get it!” Dot’s expression brightened. “The ship’s cannons would have had enough iron in them not to have rusted away completely, over the years. Add to that a stockpile of the actual cannon-balls, plus the ship’s anchor, and there might be a sufficient amount of metal for this device to register!”

“Precisely!” Bonnie nodded. “All we have to do is take the boat back and forth in a sort of grid pattern, with the map coordinates as its center. At some point, we should pass over some of the wreckage closely enough that it’ll set off the magnetometer. Then, we dive again, to see if we’ve found what we’re looking for. Dot, you handle the boat. Lois, keep an eye on the sonar unit, and let me know if the bottom is coming up or dropping away. I don’t want to have too much or too little cable dragging in the water!”

* * *

*Clark Savage Institute
Arronaxe, New York
8 August, 2005*

Clark, Kal, and Johnny arrived back at the Institute a lot faster than I had anticipated. In fact, it was a lot faster than I’d have imagined was possible, given the top speed of an Osprey.

“Our friend, here, had a super-brainstorm!” Johnny smiled, when I commented on their record trip-time as they arrived in the communications center.

“It was more a lucky guess,” Kal nodded, blushing slightly. He was moving rather slowly, leaning on Clark for support, and looked to be still shaking off the effects of something.

“What’s wrong, Kal?” I asked quickly, going to his side and aiding the bronze man to get him into a chair.

“He had some sort of seizure, just a few minutes before we touched down,” Johnny commented.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like the one I had, back on Caroline Island,” Kal explained. “But it’s fading fairly quickly. The sound – the high-pitched squeal, just like the last time – is fading out again.”

Clark had grabbed one of the emergency medical kits from a locker near the doorway, and was giving Kal a quick check.

“Blood pressure and heart rate are pretty much back to what’s normal, for him,” he told me after a moment. “Whatever happened, he’s coming back okay.”

“So what was this brainstorm?” I asked Kal.

“Well, before we left, I got to wondering how easy it would be, to find this shrine. What if the jungle had overgrown it completely? Making slow passes over an area with the Osprey wouldn’t work, because the fans would be pointing more downward than rearward, in order to maintain something just shy of a hover. All we’d see would be a mass of vegetation thrashing around in the downdraft. So I ran back and grabbed the inertial dampener prototype that Amy and I developed. I thought that maybe I could fly ahead of the Osprey, and have a better chance of finding the shrine.”

“It turns out that the government down there has kept the vegetation well-trimmed around the shrine, since there are both tourist and archaeological expeditions visiting it fairly often, so we never had to go the route of Kal making a solo aerial survey,” Clark added.

“Then, when we got word from you that Bonnie had apparently stowed away on the other Osprey, and that the ladies were overdue for a check-in, Clark wanted to get back here yesterday, if not sooner. Just before we lifted off, it occurred to me that the dampener’s strength is actually dependent on the mass of the object whose inertia is being neutralized. In other words, the larger the object, the more mass it has. The more mass, the greater the inertia. The greater the inertia, the better the dampening field works – at least, in theory,” Kal continued.

“He brought out the dampening device and we rigged a way to run it off the Osprey’s electrical system,” Clark took over the explanation – most probably to shorten it. Kal, from his lengthy experience as a reporter, was giving us the long-winded version. “It worked. We got an increase in speed, up to the point – “

“Where your forward motion was limited by the friction of the medium,” I finished for him.

“Not quite,” Clark smiled. “In our case, it was the structural integrity of the Osprey that was the limiting factor. If it had been a standard aircraft, we might have gotten another mach number out of it. As it was, those big wing-mounted fans kick up a lot of wind resistance out at the ends of the wings. We had to throttle back a good bit, to keep from shearing them off!”

“We’ll have to start equipping the entire fleet with those, when Amy gets the chance to start turning out a few more copies,” I suggested. “Sounds like a handy thing to have! We…”

“*Perry, this is Dot! Do you read me? Over!*” The words blared from the overhead sound system like music to our ears.

I thumbed a switch on the console and picked up a headset microphone.

“About time you ladies remembered to check in,” I chided.

* * *

Longitude 21° 43' North

Latitude 71° 35' West
8 August, 2005

It took an hour of tedious cruising in a grid pattern, to find the wreck of the *Esperenza*. It took only a few minutes for Dot to go over the side and spot the remnants of a shattered sailboat on the ocean floor. A short distance away, she spied the silhouette of a rusting cannon sticking up from the sandy bottom. A short distance beyond that, she spied the edge of the drop-off they had noted on the sonar, early on in the afternoon.

Closing warily on the wreckage, Dot poked and prodded, looking for a way into what remained of the tiny deck-cabin. After surveying the damage for a few seconds, she spied a small canvas beach bag still laying on what was left of the cockpit sole and snatched it up, dumping the few oddments of its contents onto the ocean floor. Then, using the bag as padding to protect her hands, she placed it around the trailing edge of the cabin roof, braced her feet on the sole fragment, and heaved upward.

Slowly, at first, then with greater speed as the already-weakened fiberglass passed its stress-point, the cabin roof gave way. When it had come clear of the rest of the wreck, Dot shoved it off to one side and was able to peer down into the small cubby. Little remained of what had once been there, but she noted a storage locker fashioned out of a low bench seat, whose lid was missing. Inside, something glinted in the sunlight which now filtered into the cubby from ten meters above. Grateful for the buoyancy afforded her, she approached the locker from directly above in a sort of aquatic handstand, making sure not to snag either her air hose or the tank on any of the projecting debris. A long, stretched reach into the locker, and she pulled back her hand. In it, she held a large crystalline object. Tucking it into a netting bag hung from her belt, she circled until she located the dive-boat's anchor rope and followed it to the surface.

"Well?" Lois asked urgently as Dot climbed across the stern rail and dropped onto one of the lazarette seats.

"The *Esperenza* is down there," Dot panted, taking the towel Bonnie offered her to blot the salt water from her face and smooth her hair back. "So's what's left of that sailboat that Elena and her roommate chartered. Looks like it was ripped apart by an explosion of some sort. No sign of the girls, though, so that may be a good thing."

"It may not be," Bonnie cautioned. "It may mean that they're being held by whoever sank the boat."

"They may very well be," Dot nodded seriously. "But at least that means there's a good chance that they're both still alive!"

"I agree," Lois said. "While there's life, there's hope."

"We need to try and check in with the guys," Bonnie advised.

"The radio in this rowboat doesn't have the range, and we're out of range for our cell phones, too," Dot shook her head.

"Then, there's another good reason for me to have stowed away on this fishing trip," Bonnie laughed, "since I appear to be the only one who thought of packing a satellite phone!"

She pulled the device from her belt and handed it to Dot, who promptly activated it and made contact with Perry, at the Institute.

“About time you ladies remembered to check in,” Perry’s voice chided at the other end.

“Sorry, honey,” Dot lamented. “We forgot a sat-phone. Luckily, Bonnie remembered one. We found the wrecks.”

“Clark will want to have a few choice words with Bonnie, once we get back together, about her stowing away.” Perry cautioned. “For the moment, let’s deal with the important stuff. By wrecks, I take it you mean the wreck of the *Esperanza* and the remnants of the boat chartered by Elena and her roommate? Are you there, now?” Perry asked.

“Affirmative,” Dot acknowledged, “on both counts. No sign of the girls, though.”

“We’ll need to keep looking, then,” Perry advised.

“There *is* one bit of good news,” Dot smiled wanly, pulling on the knot that fastened the netting bag to her belt. “I’m pretty sure we found the Singing Stone.”

She held the crystalline block out for her companions to view while she relayed the story of her finding it to her husband. The late afternoon sun moved out from behind a dense bank of clouds, glaring brilliantly from the facets and from the dots of gold on its sides. As the women looked on in wonder, the artifact began to glow as if it contained an inner fire, pulsing slowly and rhythmically in Dot’s hand.

“Wow!” Bonnie said in hushed awe. “That’s simply – “

Whatever descriptive phrase Bonnie had been about to utter was lost when both the sonar and the magnetometer began to clamor loudly for their attention.

“That’s odd,” Lois said, turning back to the sonar unit’s cockpit view screen as Bonnie turned to the magnetometer.

“Odd isn’t the word for it!” she exclaimed. “This thing’s pinging off the scale! It must be a *huge* mass of metal! And we haven’t moved, from when it gave the last reading!”

“Something’s coming up fast, on our port side, girls!” Lois added. “Fast...and big!”

“The drop-off!” Dot exclaimed, the sudden understanding making her sit bolt-upright.

“I see it!” Bonnie responded. “Periscope off the port stern!”

As all three women looked on in apprehension at the rapidly approaching tube sticking out of the water, they saw the dark shape beneath. Suddenly, the beginnings of a submarine’s conning tower began to clear the surface – a conning tower with an ominous skull and crossed bones painted on its flank.

“*The Pirates of the Caribbean* – for real!” Bonnie intoned.

Hastily, Dot grabbed for a canvas knapsack on the cockpit floor, stuffing the Singing

Stone inside and closing the drawstring top. By the time she looked up again, the rest of the submarine's upper works had breached the surface.

"Do we try to make a run for it?" Lois asked.

"Not with that three-inch deck gun," Bonnie advised. "If the rest of the boat works, so does that gun. And my guess is, there are live 'fish' in the forward tubes, too."

She crossed the cockpit again, to her large duffel bag, and fiddled with something inside.

"Ahoy, the boat!" the words drew their attention back to the sub. The hatch at the top of the sail was now open, a man standing in the conning-tower well with a bullhorn, calling to them.

"Heave to, and prepare to be boarded!"

"There are storage wells under the seats in the cabin below, Dot," Bonnie whispered hoarsely. "Get down there and hide the Stone. We can't let whoever they are get hold of it!"

"But – "

"You found it on the sailboat. Obviously, the girls found it, too. I've got a fix on this position. If we get clear, we'll dig it up again. Trust me. Now, go!"

Dot scampered below and found a compartment beneath one of the seats in the tiny cabin, stowing the crystal inside, still in its canvas bag. Then, she made her way topside again. The sub was now fully alongside them.

"Well, well!" the pirate chortled from the top of the sail. "Another boatload of beauties! Will wonders never cease?"

"They found the girls," Lois whispered.

"Oh, duh!" Dot grimaced. "And they found us, too!"

"Come aboard, ladies. One at a time, and make it snappy! You – Blondie – get your hands out of the duffel, and get over here to the railing!"

One by one, the women were forced to cross over to the sub, until all were aboard and had climbed down the ladder.

"Rodriguez!" the man on the sail called out. Another of the pirates climbed the ladder into the sail well, in response.

"Get over there and take that boat to the surface entrance. Looks nice enough, we ought to get a couple thousand, for it!"

"Aye-aye, Lieutenant!" Rodrigue saluted and jumped across the railing onto the deck of the dive-boat.

"We'll see you in port!" the lieutenant called, then turned and started down the ladder, pulling the hatch closed and dogging it down tight to engage the seal.

“Take us into port,” he commanded the deck officer. “Maximum speed!”

“Aye, sir; make all turns for port!” the other replied.

“Take the women to the brig and lock them in!” the lieutenant ordered another pair of men with side-arms.

The pair, one in front and the other behind, guided the women through a hatch and into the next of the sub’s chambers. This one had numerous railings surrounding unidentified banks of machinery. As they moved along, Dot noticed that Bonnie was keeping an eye on her watch.

Suddenly, Bonnie looked up and grabbed hold of one of the rails. Instinctively, Dot and Lois did the same.

‘What do you ladies think you’re doing?’ one of the guards demanded.

That was when all hell broke loose. A loud noise caromed off the hull plating and, less than a second later, something slammed into the sub like a giant fist.

* * *

Clark Savage Institute
Arronaxe, New York
8 August, 2005

It was a very frustrating few minutes, let me tell you! Just minutes after we got word from the girls that they were safe and had found at least one of the objectives, we knew they were in grave danger. I don’t know whether it was by accident or on purpose, that Dot left the ‘talk’ button in the locked position when the alarms went off on their boat. Even she doesn’t remember, all that clearly. It didn’t matter, though. The results were the same.

The reason that it was a very frustrating few minutes was that, midway through our conversation with Dot, Kal experienced another of those strange seizures. It lasted for a few seconds, then faded away again. But it had left us all struggling to restrain his massive Kryptonian muscles against the contortions he was going through. By the time we got Kal settled, whatever was happening at Dot’s end had occurred. The next thing we heard was a loud noise, and then static from the comm channel.

Again, at the moment of the noise, Kal was wracked by a brief seizure, one that died a quicker death than its predecessor, thankfully. Our muscles were nearly spent from having wrestled him through the earlier bout!

Fortunately, everything that comes in on our comm channels is recorded digitally and stored in a drive for possible later replay. We listened to the conversation again, three times, before any of us except Clark took action. Halfway through the second replay, he was already working the console that checked the location of the GPS transponder in the sat-phone, and logging its last-known position for future reference. Then, he adjusted the controls to another frequency, homing in on a different signal. A small text-box appeared next to a new dot on the screen, bearing the legend, ‘BJD-0536’ and a set of navigational coordinates.

“The homing beacons in Bonnie’s shoes,” I said to him as I watched the dot on the monitor.

We’ve taken a lot of chances, in our particular ‘line of work’, over the last few years. We’ve gotten into any number of situations in which one or more of us had been separated from the rest, and finding the missing team member had been more a result of pure chance or divine providence, than effort on our part. While Clark agreed that – ultimately – we had all placed our lives in God’s capable hands, he felt that there were at least some reasonable precautions we could take, to attempt to ensure our safety.

“After all, God helps those who help themselves,” he’d grinned when he told us all what he’d done.

He’d developed a tiny GPS transponder. Actually, that’s not entirely true. Most cellular telephones have had their own internal GPS transponders, for years. In fact, Federal law now required that all cell phones have such a transponder, and that the units can be activated remotely by the cell-service providers. That way, in case someone goes missing, law enforcement folks can order the transponder activated and – hopefully – get a fix on the phone and its owner. What Clark had created was actually a simple modification of that technology. Powered by a device similar to those watches that get their power from crossing the Earth’s magnetic lines of force, Clark’s GPS transponders would never die from lack of power. He’d assigned each of us an individual frequency, and tuned enough transponders to each, that we all had one in the sole of every shoe we owned. The signal those beacons emitted was powerful enough to pass through a few dozen yards of rock and earth, and through most transportation vehicles with heavy metal shells. The beacons only became active when a sensor recorded weight bearing down on the shoe, indicating that it was being worn.

I knew that, by reflex, Clark had homed in on the beacons in Bonnie’s shoes, or sandals, or whatever footwear she was wearing. The text-designator next to the blip on the screen confirmed that fact. We watched, then, as the blip on the screen took a slight northwesterly turn and began heading on a direct course toward the pair of tiny islands known as the Seal Cays. It looked to be heading for the western island in the pairing.

“I think we’ve got a destination plot,” he said grimly. “Let’s gear up and go after them. Perry, get on the horn to Mitch. Let him know what’s up, and see if he can rustle up one of his commando teams to assist. If these pirates are sophisticated enough to have a submarine, we have no idea how many people they have, or what sort of fortress and weapons we’re dealing with!”

“Roger, that, Doc!” I called after him. I don’t know if he heard. He was already out of the communications room, moving as fast as his legs would carry him – with Kal in hot pursuit.

I picked up the microphone one last time, and punched a button on the master console.

“Airfield,” the response came. “Burton, here...”

“Get that Osprey that just arrived refueled, Burton. You’ve got ten minutes! Copy?”

“Already done, sir!” the crew chief responded. “Mr. Dent ordered it, on landing.”

“Excellent! Have it out on the tarmac, engines warmed and ready for lift-off! We’re on our way! Liston, out!”

I ripped the headset off and threw it on the console as I turned and bolted for the exit, racing down the passage to catch up with Clark and Kal. There'd be time enough to contact Mitch and fill him in, once we got in the air.

* * *

Longitude 21° 43' North
Latitude 71° 35' West
8 August, 2005

The vintage sub limped into port under minimal power. It was over half a century old, with all the wear that such age can bring a piece of metal that spends its time in salt water. More to the point, it had never been designed to be that close to the surface, in relatively shallow water, when a depth charge went off. Effectively, that's what had happened.

What Bonnie had been doing, at the very last, with her hands deep in her duffel bag, was rigging a small self-destruct charge to scuttle the boat. I use the term, 'small', advisedly, though. The two little blocks of C-4 that she had rigged to a detonator and timing device had far more power contained in their tiny shapes than did any average depth charge, back in the day when the U-boat had been a shark harrying Allied cargo convoys. At such extreme close range, it was fortunate that the sub hadn't split in half and dropped to the bottom with all hands in the wake of the massive concussion wave. As it was, the explosion aboard the dive-boat had resulted in a clamorous forty five minutes filled with pirates storming through the sub trying to stem the flow of water through a dozen or more major leaks and many more ruptured pipes.

Most of the trip had been a forced run on the surface, with the bilge pumps and ballast pumps all kept running at full power. The main electrical batteries were offline due to all of the water spraying from the myriad leaks. Only the starboard diesel engine was available. The concussion had rocked the sub against a coral outcropping, damaging the screw on the port engine. The trip back to the base, after the worst of the leaks had been dealt with, took over half an hour. They had submerged only at the end of the run, in order to clear the tunnel that was the only access to the base large enough to admit the sub. And every pirate aboard had crossed his fingers – or crossed himself – and sweated the entire seven minutes.

Once the vessel had been secured in a side-pen that could be sealed off from the main area and used as a dry-dock for repairs, the three women were hauled roughly out onto the deck, marched across the brow, and then led through the complex to Müller's office. There, they were granted a few moments' respite from their terror while the lieutenant and two guards awaited their commander's arrival. The respite ended, though, all too soon.

"What is this place, now, a major tourist area?" Müller demanded as he stormed through the doorway into his office and turned to face his prisoners.

"We were just doing some recreational diving," Lois offered.

"Like the two others, so recently? And in the exact same location?" he fumed. "I think not. Unfortunately, I have no time to deal with you now, the way I'd like. Especially since one of you is responsible for the blast that destroyed the pleasure boat, killed one of my crew, and caused an unknown but immense amount of damage to a quarter of my fleet! Rest assured, though, that I will deal fully with all of you, when my crew and I return from our mission."

“Mission?” Bonnie asked, a grim smile on her face.

“Yes, my dear,” he crowed, pointing first at a map on the office wall and then out the large plate of glass that overlooked the sub pens. “Mission. A mission which will change the face of the world for all time!”

He stepped out of the way and waved a hand, almost graciously, wordlessly inviting the three prisoners to step forward and see for themselves.

“Oh, my God!” Bonnie gasped, as she took in the scene below.

Two submarines lay at rest in the pens below. One was a twin to the U-boat they’d just left. The other was a far larger craft, with sleek, modern lines. As Bonnie watched, a pirate was just completing the task of covering a bright red star with a coat of black paint. Turning her eyes to the activity on the dock near the sub’s prow, she gasped again as her experienced brain took in the sight and recognized the significance of the cargo being readied for loading aboard the larger sub.

“What is it, Bonnie?” Dot demanded fiercely.

“The sub on the right is another vintage U-boat, like the one that captured us,” Bonnie answered, pointing with one hand. “The other’s a Russian Foxtrot-class diesel attack sub, and it looks like they’re loading Cruise-type missiles. And the objects on the other truck – those have to be surplus Soviet nuclear warheads!”

“A very astute observation, my dear,” the pirate commander applauded. “Had those missiles been small enough to load into one of the tubes on either *Donner* or *Blitzen*, this would have been over a few days ago. As it was, I was forced to await delivery of another, more suitable, transport vessel.”

He turned to the two guards.

“Put them in the holding room with the other two!” he commanded. “I will deal with them later! I have history to make, and a world to change!”

The three prisoners were roughly ushered out of the commandant’s office and a short distance along a corridor, then thrust harshly into another room.

“You must be Elena,” Bonnie said, looking at the darker-haired of the two girls cowering in one corner.

“Si,” the girl nodded. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Bonnie,” Bonnie explained. “I’m a friend of Professor Littlejohn. These are my friends, Dot and Lois.”

“What are you doing here?” the other girl asked.

“You must be Gwen, Elena’s roommate from the Institute,” Dot guessed. “Actually, we were sort of coming to rescue you.”

“And now we all need rescued,” Lois frowned.

“Help will be here sooner than you think, Lois,” Dot told her. “Perry was listening when the pirates attacked. He knows what’s going on, and he knows where we were when it all went down. Finding out where we are, now, may take them a bit, but they’ll be here soon.”

“Sooner than you think,” Bonnie smiled.

“What makes you say that?” Lois asked her, obviously puzzled.

“Well, have either of you noticed the fact that I haven’t chosen to go barefoot, like you?”

“The transponders!” Dot whispered, breaking out in a grin.

“What?” That was Lois, again.

“GPS radio beacons, in the shoe soles,” Dot explained quickly, keeping her voice low in case there were listening devices in the room.

“All we have to do is keep our cool and hang in there, until the cavalry arrives,” Bonnie added.

That task would prove to be a bit more challenging than any of the women would have hoped. About twenty minutes passed in relative calm, while they stood at the large window and watched the loading process. Then, just as it looked like the majority of the pirates were boarding the submarine, disaster struck. The door to the holding room opened, and the two guards who had escorted them there strode inside.

“Time for a little fun, Hector,” the larger of the two men laughed.

“The commander wants them untouched, Jorge!” Hector protested. “He has plans for them, and they need to stay unmarred!”

“That’s the young ones,” Jorge guffawed. “These new three are all wearing wedding rings. Tell me they’re still untouched, I dare you!”

“Touch us, and you’ll be sorry,” Lois cautioned. “My husband knows where we are and, when he gets here, he will literally tear you limb from limb!”

“He can try, lady,” the pirate laughed. “He can try. It’ll still be too late to save you!”

* * *

*Opa-Locka Airport
Miami, Florida
8 August, 2005*

It was probably the longest two hours I’ve ever spent, in my entire life. The Osprey’s normal cruising speed is roughly two hundred fifty knots, or two hundred eighty five land miles, per hour. With Kal’s inertial damper running, we managed to goose that up to a bit over eight

hundred miles per hour. Trust me, riding that Osprey as it cracked the sound barrier was an experience I'll never forget. Kal was piloting, with Gumball in the left-hand seat, and he guided the craft through a long, shallow parabolic arc that brought us cruising down across the southern states and then down over southern Florida. We'd received instruction, while still in the air, to divert from the Everglades complex to Opa-Locka Airport, just a couple miles north of Miami International. Opa-Locka handles the bulk of the private commercial aviation traffic for the Miami metro area, and Mitch maintained a huge hangar facility there, under the name "Waverly Aviation".

Once we'd touched down, Kal guided the Osprey into a hangar that, from the outside, looked no different from any of the other commercial aviation shops on the field – an older steel building with spots of rust flaking its sides. That was one of the best bits of camouflage I've seen in awhile. Inside, it was sturdy, buttressed to withstand the direct onslaught of a Category Five hurricane. It was clean and brightly-lighted, and Kal guided the Osprey to a halt across the vast interior from the aircraft Mitch had selected for our use on this mission – a Lockheed C-130 'Hercules'. Mitch met us at the foot of our own ramp, and immediately launched into a rough overview of the mission, as he understood it.

"It'll take us an hour, roughly, to get there," he began, "But – "

"Twenty minutes, tops!" Kal corrected him.

"No way!"

"Way," I stuck my two cents in. "Trust me, Mitch! We made it down here in less than two hours, in that Osprey. We'll get the rest of the way in twenty minutes or less. Kal has a little trick up his sleeve."

"Alright, then," he said, giving a gesture that was a crazy cross between a nod of acceptance and a head-shake of disbelief. "We've got a team of twenty assault troops on board, all armed to the teeth. I figure we'll come in low, do a couple circles overhead to establish a better idea of where your ladies are being held, and then drop the troops and the gear. You said we're dealing with a crew of pirates who have their own submarine?"

"That's correct," Clark nodded.

"Well, that probably means a surplus Soviet diesel – most likely a 'Foxtrot' class. I hear that certain elements in the former Soviet navy have been auctioning some of the older ones off, to raise hard cash for payroll. The local geography kinda lends itself to the possibility of an underground base, somewhere in the islands. The Turks-Caicos archipelago is home to some of the largest underground/underwater caverns in the world, you know. My guess would be that, if they're that sophisticated, they've been operating for quite awhile. My intel sources tell me that there's a character known as 'Blackbeard', who's the go-to guy in the Caribbean, for any drug runner wanting a 'clean' stolen boat for transport. He may be real, may not be. Nobody's been able to find out anything other than the name. If he's real, though, my guess would be he's the guy we're looking for."

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"Fly down there, circle a couple times to get the lay of the area, then come in low and drop the troops. It'll probably be a water assault, if the pirates have a hidden pen for their sub.

Don't worry., though. There's enough equipment on the plane to make this look like the big fight scene in 'Thunderball'!

"Clark already has a last-known position on the girls," Kal corrected him again. "And I'll have an exact location on our first pass!"

"That's right," Mitch mused. "I forgot about that eyesight of yours. Sorry. I'm still trying to get my head around the fact that a comic book super hero has come to life in front of me."

"It's alright, Mitch," Kal shrugged, finally catching up with us. He'd taken time to pull the inertial damper out of the Osprey for use in the Hercules. "I'm grateful to you for all the help, and especially for the backup on this run!"

"Thank me when it's over, and your ladies are safe in your arms, not before!" Mitch growled as they walked up the drop-ramp at the rear of the aircraft. Now, about your gear..."

* * *

Longitude 21° 43' North
Latitude 71° 35' West
8 August, 2005

The pirate took a step closer to the three older women, while the two teenagers backed deeper into the far corner of the room, terrified.

"Let's see...which one of you will be first?" he chuckled menacingly. He paused for a moment, then turned to face Bonnie.

"You'll do," he said, reaching out a grasping hand.

"Leave her alone, you monster!" Lois hissed, stepping between Bonnie and the guard. "She's pregnant!"

"I told you she wasn't untouched," Jorge grinned at Hector over his shoulder.

He took another step forward, and Lois dropped into a fighting stance she'd learned years earlier. As Jorge moved again, she feinted with a move of her right hand. Jorge moved to cover, and Lois shifted leftward into a spinning back-kick that connected with the right side of the pirate's head as she completed the turn. Jorge's head rocked backward, his spine curving and extending his abdomen forward. Lois took advantage of the proffered target and executed a second spin-kick to the groin that pretty much guaranteed Jorge would not feel inclined to molest any woman for the next few hours.

"*Put!*" Jorge spat the word at her as he struggled to catch his breath. "You dare to strike me?"

With that enraged outburst, he drew his pistol and fired one round point blank at Lois's chest. The bullet drilled straight through and out, and Lois sank to the floor before anyone else in the room could make a move. Everyone in the room froze, as the realization of what had just happened sank home in their brains.

Some heartbeats later, the door to the holding room burst open. Müller raced into the room to find Jorge and Hector standing, looking on, while Bonnie knelt on the floor cradling Lois in her arms.

“Tell Kal...I love him...” Lois coughed the words out, along with a spray of blood.

“Save your strength, Lois,” Bonnie urged her friend.

“No...” Lois gasped. “Too late...for me... Tell Kal...accept Christ...only way... together...”

Lois’s muscles went loose, her head lolled to one side, and the foul stench of human waste mingled with the coppery smell of spilled blood in the room as the last wisps of air left her lungs.

Bonnie’s torso began to spasm as the massive sobs wrenched their way out of her. She couldn’t remember ever having felt this way, not even when others of her comrades-in-arms in her Apex days had died in her arms. There had been enough of those deaths, but none of those women had ever placed her own body between Bonnie and harm. Somehow, that made this one vastly different.

“What happened, here?” Müller demanded of the two guards.

“Your stooges decided to have a little ‘playtime’, since you were leaving the base,” Dot spat the words at him angrily. Then, laying a hand on Bonnie’s shoulder, “This one’s pregnant, and our friend tried to defend her. Your goon, there, shot her.”

“Is this so?” Müller demanded of his henchmen. “Hector? Jorge? Answer me, damn you!”

“*Si, Commandanté,*” Hector managed in a weak voice.

“Did I not tell you that I wanted them *untouched*?”

“*Si,*” the stooge pleaded, “but we thought that only meant the young ones. These other three all wear wedding rings...”

“Wrong answer!” Müller snarled angrily.

Without warning, the pirate chief drew his own sidearm and fired two rounds. Hector and Jorge were dead before their bodies stopped falling. The pirate commander turned toward the open door, where four other underlings waited.

“Remove this carrion!” he commanded angrily, pointing at the bodies of the dead guards.

“*Si, Commandanté,*” one nodded. “The woman, as well?”

“Touch her, and die!” Bonnie snarled.

“I think not,” Müller answered, but it was to the pirate underling’s question, and not Bonnie’s threat. “Leave the woman for her friends to grieve properly.”

He turned toward Dot and Bonnie.

“I am truly sorry for my underlings’ actions. Your friend’s death was an act of foolish bravado, but it was not a thing I had intended.”

“No, of course not!” Elena’s roommate, Gwen, spoke from the corner where she and her friend cowered. “You just intended us all to have a lifetime of hell in some Bangkok bordello, is all. That woman is probably the lucky one!”

“Life is life,” Müeller shrugged. “It is always better than death. Even as a prisoner, one may hope for escape or release. Dead, one may hope for very little, I’m afraid.”

“You haven’t a hope, at all, you monster,” Bonnie snarled.

“You appear to be in no position to make such a statement,” Müeller tossed back at her.

“Things aren’t always what they seem,” Bonnie allowed the faintest trace of a smile to play around the corners of her mouth. “My husband, and hers –“ she nodded at the body still in her arms, “and hers –“ she cocked her head in Dot’s direction, “are on their way, even as we speak.”

“Then, while they might manage to fight their way to your side, they will not find me,” Müeller laughed. In a few minutes, my crew and I will be departing to – as I told you upon your arrival – make history and change the world for the better.”

“They’ll hunt you down,” Bonnie promised, stroking Lois’s face gently. “There isn’t a place on Earth where you can hide from her husband’s eyes. When he finds you, you better pray that God has mercy on your soul, because her husband will have none!”

* * *

Chapter Eleven: “Operation Thunderball”

Longitude 21° 43’ North

Latitude 71° 35’ West

8 August, 2005

The sun was hanging low on the western horizon by the time the twin dots of the Seal Cays hove into sight out the cockpit windows of the C-130 Hercules. Mitch had the right-hand seat, while Kal stood, hunched over, directly behind the pilot.

“Take us in as slowly as you can manage,” he instructed. “Shut down the outboard engines, and feather back on the port inboard. You’ll still manage to keep enough airspeed to maintain lift. Run us in at about thirty feet above the water.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” the pilot responded, having already been instructed by Mitch to defer to Kal’s instructions during the initial approach.

I stood in the door to the cockpit, watching tensely as the islands grew quickly closer. The plane veered to port for a moment, then wheeled to starboard and dipped toward the water as

the pilot complied with Kal's instructions. Nervously, I waited while Kal began to scan the western cove with his x-ray vision.

It was almost terrifying, watching the expression that suddenly settled into place across his handsome features, and I heard a dim popping sound. Briefly, I looked down toward where his hands curled on the back of the pilot's seat. His fingertips had completely penetrated the thick leather and padding. I looked back to his face, to see the first tear roll from his eye.

"NOOO!" the sudden shout from him was loud enough to momentarily drown out the sound of the plane's remaining operating engines, and it brought Clark and Monk charging up from the cargo bay, where they had been helping to ready the assault gear.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked, tension evident in even his voice.

"It's...Lois." Kal faltered for a moment, and then his voice took on a steely edge that matched the look of fierceness in his eyes. "The place looks to be built from an abandoned German sub base. There are still places where there are swastikas painted on the walls. The women are all in one room, under guard. There are two I don't recognize – I'm guessing they're your missing students – and they appear to be unharmed. So are Dot and Bonnie. Bonnie's sitting on the floor, holding Lois. There's blood all over her chest..."

Neither Clark nor I had to ask whose chest Kal was seeing. And there was little either of us could do, until we breached the fortress.

"Time to gear up," Clark ordered tersely.

Monk at his side, the bronze man turned and headed back into the cargo bay. I stayed with Kal.

"Look at your hands, Kal," I commanded.

Wordless, he stared down at his fingers, curled into the thickly-padded backrest of the pilot's seat.

"You don't even have your powers, Kal. That's just your natural muscles and your thick skin working, and look what you've done to that seat!"

"It's only a seat, for cryin' out loud!" Mitch interjected, not taking his eyes off the controls. "I can replace it."

"It isn't the seat, that I'm worried about, Mitch," I told him. It's Kal's *soul*."

"What do you mean, my soul, Perry?"

I let him wonder for just a split-second longer, while I framed the next words in my mind. I was only going to get one shot, at this, and it had to score a bulls-eye.

"We're going to be charging into that hornet's nest, in just a few minutes," I told Kal. "You're filled with anger, right now, because the most important person in your life has been injured, apparently seriously. You've got to control that anger, buddy! Throttle it back, big time, or you're gonna do something you've never done, before."

“What?” Kal looked at me with an almost-dazed expression, and I knew I had to fight to get through his emotion. The rest of his life hinged on it.

“Fingers are a lot weaker than fists, Kal,” I told him. “It’s a simple fact of the physics of human anatomy. You don’t even have your full complement of super-powers, and look at what your fingers did to that seat! Now, if you walk into this place, still letting your anger control you, sooner or later you’re gonna take a swing at one of those pirates with a fist. Connect with his jaw, and you’re liable to literally knock his head off his shoulders. Hit him in the stomach, and you’re gonna see that fist poking out the other side of his body! By that time, it’s gonna be too late to rein in your anger; the damage will already have been done! Do you remember the day when you swore that you’d never let your powers take a human life?”

Wordlessly, he stared at me for a long moment, then nodded.

“But the assault team is going in, fully armed,” he countered after a moment’s thought.

“They’re former soldiers, Kal,” I smiled softly at him, now that I could see some of the anger receding. “Mitch culls his assault troops from the Seals, Delta Force, the British Special Boat and Special Air squadrons, and other elite special-forces commando units. These guys have fought in actions for their countries in dozens of places that have made the nightly news, and dozens more that are utterly classified. They’ve already killed enemy soldiers and terrorists in battle. You haven’t. That’s the important thing, Kal-El! You have never taken the life of another human being. Don’t let that streak end, today! Don’t do something that you know that Jonathan and Martha would disapprove of.”

I shrugged a shoulder and slipped out of the backpack I’d been wearing. Opening it, I took out a folded package that glimmered red and blue in the fading daylight, and handed it to him.

“Perhaps this will help you to remember your oath,” I suggested.

He slit the plastic wrap on the package with a thumbnail, and shook out the cloth items it contained.

“My costume!” he said, in an amazed whisper.

“It was Perry’s idea, actually,” Mitch explained. “It’s made out of the same Paradox-spandex weave that Perry suggested for the standard black combat suits. This one has a second layer of thicker Paradox scales under the cloth, to give you just a little extra protection. It should stop anything up to a fifty caliber round.”

“The emblem looks much different, though,” Kal commented as he studied the garment.

“I could have gone with a flat overlay,” Mitch waved a hand, “but I decided against it. I couldn’t help thinking how much like a bullseye the thing would be. Look at it closely.”

Though I had suggested the idea of duplicating Kal’s ‘Superman’ costume in bolts of red, blue, and yellow Paradox-spandex hybrid, I’d simply assumed that the “S” symbol would either be an embroidered patch or maybe silk-screened onto the base cloth. I leaned closer to examine it. Kal didn’t have to, really – just focus his extraordinary vision on it. It was an astonishing piece of

workmanship. Slightly over a quarter-inch thick, the emblem was carved in relief into a solid asymmetrical pentagon of Paradox. Moreover, every square inch of the upraised portions of the symbol was covered with tiny replicas of the overall emblem, also carved in relief.

“It’s made of Paradox, of course,” Mitch informed the two of us. “The raised edges of all the carvings will provide surfaces to force rounds to ricochet off at an angle, thus decreasing the actual force of impact that he’ll feel, if he gets hit there.”

“Put it on.” I told Kal. “Do what we discussed, earlier. With you walking slowly at the head of the assault team, dressed in this costume, it’s gonna look like the Superman of our world’s comic books has come to life. The bullets will bounce off of you, just like they always have. I doubt, the way you’re feeling at the moment, that you’ll even notice them. Trust me, the pirates will. All they’ll see is the world’s most powerful legend turned flesh, striding down the tunnels toward them. How much would you like to bet that half of them throw down their guns and start looking for somewhere to hide?”

I watched his face intently, watched the play of emotions struggle across it. Then, praise God, I saw the last Son of Krypton take charge of himself.

“Thanks, Perry,” he whispered, pulling one hand out of the pilot’s seat and putting it gently on my shoulder. “I owe you, big-time.”

“Debt’s already paid, brother,” I told him. “Let’s go tackle some pirates.”

Kal left the cockpit first, his costume in hand. I stayed just long enough to tell the pilot to bring the plane around and get ready for the drop pass.

With the exception of Kal donning that familiar costume of his, and then a simple black coverall over it, the rest of us were already in full combat armor, ready to go. At the rear of the hold, just inside the big clamshell doors, the balance of the assault team had the sub-tows ready and waiting.

“By the numbers, gentlemen,” Mitch’s strident tones rang out in the compartment, as he joined us for the drop. “You all know your jobs. Let’s get this done!”

He reached to a panel on the wall, lifted the safety cover, and thumbed the big red button. I flashed a “thumbs-up” to the co-pilot, who touched a button on a small MP3 player jacked into the plane’s audio system. At the rear of the plane, the clamshell doors opened, and the retractable ramp slid into place as the unmistakable opening notes of “Thunderball” wafted through the cargo bay. The first of the sub-tows was run forward and dropped as the plane skimmed less than five feet above the waves.

“GO, GO, GO!” Mitch yelled.

Then, by the numbers, we slipped from the yawning hatch and into the warm tropical waters. The whole drop took less than a minute to execute, and then the plane was wagging its wings as the pilot signaled us. He’d go on to land the craft at the airport near Cockburn Town, and wait for our pick-up signal at the end of the raid.

As we’d rehearsed, we linked up with our individual groups among the assault team. My group included Clark, Monk, Renny, and Kal, while Mitch led another of the groups. We grabbed

onto the tether-lines being paid out from the sub-tows, slipped our scuba gear into place, and sank below the surface. Each of the tow drivers knew the general direction to head. We didn't think that any access tunnel big enough to take a submarine would be all that hard to locate.

We weren't wrong, in that assumption, either. Beneath the surface, we quickly found a deep trench that bore all the evidence of a man-made excavation. From there, it was child's play to follow it until we came to the tunnel entrance. There were huge doors, but they were old steel, well-rusted and encrusted with coral growth and barnacles. My guess was that they'd been open like that for decades, perhaps since the last of its active U-boat fleet left to make a run for the shores of Argentina in the closing days of World War Two.

We surfaced quietly, inside the main bay, taking stock of our surroundings. An old German U-boat sat in one of the docking bays, and we could see the conning tower of another, off in the distance, in a side passage. Two lone sentries patrolled the bay, one on each of the low quays that lined the opposite sides of the cavern. Overhead, another sentry patrolled a high catwalk. I saw Mitch giving commando hand-signals, and three of his people went to work. Two waited, patiently, in the shadows of the docks, while the third made his way up a wrought iron staircase with all the silence of a ninja.

When that operative was in position, the other two move into play. Three silenced pistols chuffed almost inaudibly, and three sentries dropped without a sound as the drug in the mercy bullets hit their bloodstreams. It was over and done with, that quickly.

We waited for another couple minutes, while Mitch studied the huge windows that overlooked the cavern through a pair of binoculars. I heard a click in my headset, followed by his low voice.

"Doesn't appear that anyone else is looking. Maybe they're operating on a skeleton crew, while the rest are out on a raid, somewhere. I saw a girl's face in one of the windows on the third level, so that must be where they're keeping our people. We won't get a better chance, especially if someone comes along and finds those sentries out of commission, so let's move."

Quickly, we crept out of the water and onto the docks, shedding our dive gear as fast as we could. Then, cautiously, we crept toward what appeared to be a ground-level access point to the galleries above. As we reached each floor level, Mitch tasked a crew to remain there, ready to breach the corridors beyond as soon as all of the floors were covered.

"Perry, Clark, take your team and secure that third level!" the command rang out in my headset.

"Roger, that," I answered, and then motioned to Kal.

"You're point-man, on this one, my friend," I told him.

"Roger, that!" Kal said, tight-lipped, slipping out of the black jumpsuit that we'd used to keep the bright colors of his costume from showing until it was time. Tossing the coverall aside, he stepped through the door and into the corridor.

"*Halten Sie!* Stop!" we heard a voice challenge him in a thick Teutonic accent.

"I'm afraid I don't have time for that, gentlemen," Kal's voice rang out in answer.

He took another step forward.

Suddenly, from one of the lower levels, we heard the sound of gunfire. That ended any chance we had, of completing our mission without firing a shot – aside from the elimination of those first three guards.

I slipped out into the hallway in Kal's wake, knowing that Clark, Monk, Renny, and two of Mitch's commandos would be following in that order. Kal strode boldly forward, directly into the hail of gunfire that the pirates unleashed on him.

My heart skipped a beat, just for a moment. Kal was only protected from the neck down by the Paradox fabric of his costume. If someone tried for a head-shot...

I needn't have worried, though. Soldiers and thugs the world over have one thing in common, with regard to firearms. They all know that the chest is a much bigger target than the head, and that – in a firefight – one's aim is often interfered with by the emotions and the mass of adrenalin that are unleashed in their bodies. Only a trained sniper would have the confidence to try for a head-shot, and none of the pirates had the training. One and all, the quartet at the other end of the corridor aimed at Kal's chest. I watched with a bit of a smile as, one by one, they each came to the sudden realization that their bullets were bouncing off of the man in the Superman costume.

"No! It cannot be!" one of them screamed at him. "*Der Uebermensch ist ein Buchstabe in einem Buch!*"

"A character in a book?" Kal growled menacingly. "Sorry to disappoint you but I'm quite real, and – right now – I'm your worst nightmare, gentlemen! If you'd like to live, I suggest you drop your weapons."

I guess stooges and henchmen are all alike, too. None of them complied with Kal's polite request. Each of them, in turn, emptied their magazines at his chest and then, out of ammunition, threw their weapons at him as a last resort. I smiled as he seemed to gently reach out his hands and brush the thrown weapons out of his way.

Arriving at the end of the corridor, he grasped a pair of quaking guards by the scruff of their collars and thumped their heads together, then dropped them to the floor and reached for the other two. One fainted immediately, and I swear the other soiled his trousers in sheer terror before he, too, passed out.

The hallway was clear, as far as we could see. Nonetheless, Monk and Renny took up positions where, between them, they had the entire corridor in their field of fire.

"***Bonnie!***" Clark called out in a strident voice.

"***Dot!***" I screamed, a heartbeat later.

"***In here!***"

I wasn't sure of the voice's location; the corridor was lined with doors on both sides. Kal took another option. He spun slowly, his eyes narrowed. Suddenly, he stepped forward and put

out a hand to one particular doorknob. It was locked.

“One of these guards has to have the key,” I suggested.

“Not necessary, Perry,” Kal shook his head. Then, he called out to the occupants of the room, “Stand clear!”

With one mighty kick from his booted foot, the door caved inward, three-quarters out of its frame. We rushed through, each of us taking our loved one into our arms. I had to share my loved one with her grandfather, but I didn't mind a bit. We were lost in the joy of our reunion, and didn't really snap out of it until Mitch's “all clear” rang out over our comm links.

It was then that we noticed Kal, kneeling beside the body of his wife. I looked at him, and at Bonnie, who sadly shook her head. None of us needed to go feel for a pulse, to know that Lois was dead. The amount of blood in her general vicinity was far too great for her not to be.

My heart ached for my new friend. It ached like I wouldn't have believed possible.

* * *

Longitude 21° 43' North

Latitude 71° 35' West

9 August, 2005

The mop-up operation was over fairly quickly. The few pirates remaining in the complex had all surrendered – those who hadn't received a hit from a mercy-bullet, that is. We'd brought them all together, hands cuffed with some nylon zip-ties, and all zip-tied to a rather long and heavy piece of anchor chain. They weren't going anywhere. In fact, we had them all confined to the base's equivalent of a brig.

Mitch had radioed the United States Naval base at Pensacola, and a detachment of Marines was dispatched from the Security Forces contingent stationed at Guantanamo Naval Base, in Cuba, to take charge of the pirates and hold the base until the local government and the people in Washington could work out some agreement as to who got custody of what. We had all taken a long look at the map in the ringleader's office, with its six Arab capital cities ringed as targets, and we'd all seen the pile of empty shipping cases from the Cruise missiles and the nuclear warheads. We'd pass that information along to the Marines, when they arrived on the scene. I was certain that the navy could hunt down one diesel sub when they knew the course into the Mediterranean it would be taking.

In the process of scouring the base for stragglers, one of Mitch's commandos had located a tunnel that led to a camouflaged exit at the surface level, that led out onto the beach. The sun was just coming up over the ocean, and we were all out of the caverns and seated on the beach, talking quietly among ourselves. Off to one side, I could see Kal, still kneeling beside the body of his dead wife. Even at this distance, the agony was plainly etched on his face, and in the growing sunlight I could just make out the tears as they rolled down his cheeks. As I watched, I saw his lips move in what appeared to be a silent question: “Why, Rao?” It took me a second, before I remembered that Rao was the Kryptonians' name for the god they had worshipped.

By Kal's side, her hands clasped and her head bowed in prayer, knelt Bonnie.

Five times, I moved to get to my feet, to go to Kal's side and try and offer some words of comfort. Each time, either Dot or Clark put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"There's nothing you can do, Perry. Let him grieve, and get it out of his system."

Still, I couldn't escape the nagging feeling that I was overlooking some important detail. At last, I got to my feet and crossed the stretch of sand, dropping to my knees next to Kal.

"I lost her once, you know," he told me, the catch of raw emotion still in his voice. "I lost her, and then I went back in time and I saved her. If I still had my powers, I could do it again. I'd do anything to hear her voice just one more time, but there's nothing I can do! You talk so much about God. Well, if there really is a God, why did he strip me of my powers when I need them the most?"

"I know, Kal," I told him softly, "And I don't know that I really have an answer to your question. At least, not one that will take away the pain you're feeling. All I know is that God says that He's known all along everything that will happen in our lives, and that He works all of those things together for our individual good. We just have to trust that – even in this – He is going to bring something good out of it."

I was still waiting for God to put the right words in my heart. I knew that something was chipping away at a stone wall in the back of my mind, but it hadn't broken through yet. I sighed, wondering if it was the grief I was feeling for Kal's loss, that was hampering my ability to hear the Spirit's whisperings.

"I haven't told you," Bonnie ventured, finally, ending the uncomfortable silence "Her last words... were for you. She wanted someone to tell you to let go of your questions and just accept Christ. She knew that she was dying, and she wants to see you – to be together with you again – when it's your time to go. She knew that it would only be possible if you believed..."

Kal looked at her for a second, and then the tears and sobs hit him again. And something in my spirit told me that those words needed time to percolate through his grief and down into his heart. And his spirit. With a sigh, I rose to my feet and went back to where the others were sitting.

It was about seven in the morning, local time, when Bonnie finally opened her eyes and got to her feet. Pausing for a moment to look down at the woman who had given her life in her defense, she drew a deep breath and motioned for either me – or the group – to come and join her. I crossed the short stretch of beach and dropped to my knees across from the two of them again.

"Perry," she whispered, looking at me through eyes reddened by hours of sobbing, "What does *talitha cumi* mean?"

"Where did you get that from?" I gasped.

"I don't know," she shook her head. "I was praying, asking God why He had to let a thing like this happen, and suddenly it was as if the words just appeared inside my brain."

"What do you think, Clark?" I looked over at the bronze man.

"I don't know, Perry," he mused, rubbing his chin between thumb and forefinger. "I don't

think she's read the Bible enough, yet, to remember the passage, herself. We're still working through a lot of things..."

"Perry, what does it mean?" Bonnie asked again, this time more insistently.

"One day," I began the story, "Jesus was preaching a sermon to his disciples, when He was interrupted by a man named Jairus, a resident of the area Jesus was visiting. Jairus had come to seek Jesus, because his daughter lay dying of something that none of the local medicine was able to cure.

"Jesus finally agreed to go with Jairus, back to his house. By the time they got there, though, the girl had already died, and mourners were gathering. Jesus shook His head, and told the mourners that the girl was only sleeping. Then, He went inside the house to the room where the girl's body lay. Touching her lightly on the forehead, He spoke the words, *'talitha cumi'*, which is Aramaic for 'Little girl, arise'. The girl gasped, and woke up, fully healed. Peter was a witness, and – in one of his later letters – mentions the incident, stating categorically that the girl was dead, not 'sleeping', and that Jesus restored her to life just as He did Lazarus."

I had begun telling the story to explain the words to Bonnie. The thing was, as I let the words fall from my lips, I felt the stirring of a strange conviction in my heart.

The Word says that we have not, because we ask not. Christ told us, *"Ask, and ye shall receive."* A flicker of my time in that white place came to mind – Ham's last words to me...

"On your last time out, God breathed an inspiration into your mind. It seemed like an unbelievable long shot to you, but you acted on it in faith. The result is that I am here, today, having this little talk with you. Before too long, you're going to get another of those inspirations. Act on it with as much faith as you have in you. You wouldn't believe how much is going to be riding on it."

"I remember that story," Kal said. "It's always been one of Mom's favorites. But the histories all say that the miracles ended when the last of the apostles died. At least, that's what the reverend at the church back in Smallville said."

"That's not entirely true," I told him. "I've heard stories from missionaries I know, in the field in places like Africa..."

"What kind of stories?" Kal asked urgently.

"Actually, I've heard a number of them," I explained. "They run the gamut from blind folks receiving their sight, deafness being cured, withered limbs being made whole, and even the occasional raising of someone from the dead."

"Why does it happen in Africa, but not in America?" Bonnie asked.

"Faith, primarily" I suggested. "In Africa, those missionaries are dealing with tribes who haven't had the benefit of a secular education. They haven't had it crammed into their brains that logic and science both say that miracles are impossible. So they still believe in miracles. Thus, they have the faith to ask for them."

There was a long silence, and I watched a tumult of emotions surge through Kal as

thoughts pounded through his brain behind closed eyes.

“You’re a preacher, Perry,” Kal whispered, finally. “Try. *Please.*”

That nagging little detail that I’d been worrying over came into crystal-clear focus. If Kal could bring himself to ask me, it meant that there was just the tiniest mustard-seed of faith left within him, somewhere. Between that, and the warning Ham had given me, I knew what I had to do. Drawing a deep breath, and with an aching prayer in my heart, I reached out to Lois and laid a hand on her forehead.

“*Talitha cumi*” I spoke the words. “Be made whole again, in the name of and by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. Be filled anew with the breath of life and rise, to give thanks to your Creator.”

Talk about a test of faith, this was it. For what seemed like hours, but was probably only a few seconds, Kal and Bonnie and I knelt silently, watching. Then, shallowly at first, we saw her chest begin to rise. A cough, a sputter, a few last droplets of blood spraying from her lips, and then her eyes opened and she sat up.

“Where am I?” she asked hoarsely. “What happened? I remember the gun, and this burning pain in my chest, and...”

“You’re okay, now, Lois,” I smiled gently. “For now, just hug your husband. We’ll talk about it later.”

I almost didn’t manage to get even those few words out; my spirit was so filled with the torrent of emotions. I got to my feet, and wandered twenty yards or so down the beach, where I fell on my face in the sand, weeping and laughing at the same time, and throughout it all giving praise to the wonderful Creator, Giver and Sustainer of Life, to whom be glory and majesty, and praise and honor, forever and ever, Amen!

I lost track of time completely, as I worshiped, but the sun was several degrees higher in the sky when Dot knelt at my side and shook me gently.

“Kal wants to talk to you, honey,” she smiled, when I looked up at her.

Somewhere, she’d found a towel, and I used it to brush the sand from my face and dry my eyes. I looked around, and there stood Kal, his hand reaching down to help me to my feet.

“I need to talk to you, Perry!” Kal looked at me, and I saw the fierceness of his expression. “*Now!*”

“Alright,” I sighed, “What is it?”

“I can’t deny Him any longer, Perry,” he told me, and it was strange – even after what had transpired inside the cavern, and then on the beach – to see tears streaming from those blue eyes of his. These weren’t tears of grief.

“What do you mean, Kal?” I asked him. I knew what his words meant, but I wanted to discern what was in his heart.

“The talk you and I had, and one that I had in Mexico, with Clark and Johnny,” he said, his voice faltering with emotion, “...the things you all said made a lot of sense to me. I’ve been thinking long and hard on it, and I’d begun to see that a lot of my attitudes on the subject have been wrong. Still, coming up with the faith to believe was a hard thing to do.”

“You had the faith to ask me to try to raise your wife,” I smiled. “The word says that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. It starts from a tiny seed, and grows.”

“Maybe that’s so,” he shrugged. “But I can’t deny the reality of what just happened. Lois was undeniably dead, and now she’s alive again, and there isn’t so much as a scar from where the bullet hit her. I can’t deny the reality of what my senses tell me is true. All you did was pray a simple prayer, and she came back to life. And that means I can’t deny the existence of God, any longer. I still have questions, but I can’t go back to turning my back on Him. But, how do I make amends to God, for a lifetime of denying him?”

“You can’t make amends, Kal,” I smiled. “And the fact that you still have questions is okay. All of us have at least one or two questions that we’d like answers to, from God but that’s okay. He understands. And the really strange, really wonderful thing of it all is that He’s never said that we have to ‘make it up’ to him. He knows we can’t. If we could, there’d have been no need for God to come, in the person of Jesus Christ, to die for us and become our savior.”

“So what do I do?”

“You start fresh, today, and walk with Him. That’s all He asks, of any of us.”

“How do I do that, Perry?” he asked, looking at me with wide, wet eyes. His voice, normally so full of power and control, was a trembling whisper.

I took a step closer and put my arm around his shoulder. I remember thinking, then, that those shoulders – shoulders which had lifted incalculable masses and hurled them into the depths space with ease – had never felt such a burden, before. It was high time to put that burden where it truly belonged – deep in the lake of Forgetfulness.

“You’ve already trusted in Him to restore your dead wife to you,” I said, “and that’s a big start. There’s just one more thing He wants, from you.”

“Name it!” Kal intoned.

“He wants you to trust Him as your savior. The Bible tells us that all men have sinned. Now, I know that you’ve tried to live a good life. You never lie, you haven’t murdered anyone. In fact, you’ve kept all the commandments, save one – the one about worshiping God and having no other gods take His place. But the word says, also, that breaking one of the commandments is just as bad as breaking all of them. It leaves us standing as sinners before him. That sin separates us from Him, forever, just as surely as a canyon separates two humans standing on opposite sides of it. There’s a gulf, there, that we can’t bridge on our own. That’s why God left his throne in heaven and came down in the person of Jesus Christ. He lived a life that was without sin, and then permitted Himself to be executed – the sinless dying on behalf of all of us sinners. His blood has cleansed our sins away, and all you have to do is accept that fact.

“How do I do that, Perry?” he asked in a quiet voice.

"We get down on our knees, right here in the sand, and you repeat after me, Kal," I smiled.

Not since that night when I had first met Clark, had I felt so honored by my Lord to lead a man in the Sinner's Prayer. We prayed it - I spoke the words, and he repeated them between sobs, and then it was over. The Last Son of Krypton had become another kind of son: a son of the Kingdom, with a new Father – a Father who truly would never leave him. A Father who would be with him, always, in a way far more real than that of a recorded message trapped in a piece of Kryptonian crystal.

I said it was over, but yet it wasn't. We'd finished the Sinner's Prayer, but Kal was still kneeling, eyes squinted shut against a new flood of joyful tears as he thanked the Father for the restoration of his wife, and for this second chance he'd been given. There was more, but I didn't catch all of it. I'm not nearly so good a lip-reader as Clark is, and there were parts of it where Kal reverted to Kryptonese. The last part of it, though, was crystal clear.

"Father," he whispered the words, "I still don't know *why* it had to happen, but I understand now that you had a reason, and that you also had a reason for sparing me when the rest of my world died. I'm sorry that I took so long to see that. But, now that you've restored me to *who* you intended me to be, is there still purpose in what you first *created* me to be?"

He was silent, for a moment, his head cocked slightly to one side, as if he was listening to a voice that the rest of us couldn't hear. Then, he opened his eyes, stood, and walked to the water's edge.

"Perry, there's something else I need to do," he looked back over his shoulder at me, and then stepped out into the water. "My parents had it done for me when I was still a baby, but I've just realized that it doesn't really mean anything until I make the choice, myself. Will you...?"

"With pleasure, brother!" I smiled, and waded out after him. I turned my head to call for Clark, and saw that he was only a stride behind us, a huge smile beaming on his bronze face.

In the case of most normal baptisms, there's only the pastor and the person who's being baptized, standing in the water. Not so, in this instance. As I reached the point where the water was waist-deep, I turned and faced toward the shoreline and found that every last member of our little 'assault team' had followed us out. I guess they all wanted to be a part of this momentous occasion. Briefly, I instructed Kal to take hold of my left wrist with his hands and slid my right arm behind his shoulders. Clark stood at his other side, his left arm behind Kal.

"Clark Joseph Kent," I began the simple words, "Kal El of the planet Krypton: because you have chosen to place your faith and your trust in the only true and living God, we baptize you in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ."

I placed my left hand against his chest and, Clark assisting in supporting Kal's massive weight, we gently lowered his body beneath the warm Caribbean waters, then lifted him clear again.

"Kal," I spoke again, looking him in the eye, "As your body was lowered beneath the water, so you allowed yourself to be identified with your Lord in His death and burial. As you were raised up again, so too were you identified with Him in His resurrection from the grave."

“Your old, sinful and unbelieving nature has been left in the tomb as surely as water washes dirt from flesh, and you have been raised up to walk in newness of life!” Clark intoned. “Welcome to the Family of God, brother!”

“And now, we’ll never be truly parted again, darling,” Lois told him joyfully. “No matter what happens!”

The group of onlookers began to applaud, and I joined in with them, and then we waded through the surf toward the shore.

“Clark,” Kal moved to the bronze man’s side as we came out onto the sand, “was it the same for you, when you were baptized? Did you come out of the water feeling as light as a feather?”

Clark stood still for a moment, staring at Kal and pondering the question.

“Perry likes to compare the accumulated presence of sin in a man’s life to carrying a box of rocks around on your back. When you let Christ into your life, He takes those sins away, so it’s like getting rid of all that extra baggage. It’s an exhilarating feeling, to know that one’s lifetime of sins has been fully forgiven, so I guess you could say that just about everyone who’s ever been baptized has had at least some of that ‘light as a feather’ feeling,” he smiled. “In your case, though, I think He’s chosen to put just a little more ‘lift’ in your step.”

I guess the Lord has a way of making sure that things happen in just the right way, because – when we followed Clark’s gaze – we were all speechless. All of us except for Lois, that is.

“Darling, look down at your feet!” she urged as she walked toward him.

Slowly, Kal lowered his gaze to his feet, and saw the inch and a half of clear air between his soles and the sand. His mouth gaped open for a second, and then he looked over at me.

“Was it really that simple, Perry?” he asked in a voice choked with emotion.

“You tell me, Kal.” I suggested. “When you walked through life without Him, you grew prideful in your own powers because you believed that there was nobody more powerful than you. In a way, you denied the true God, and set yourself up as a little ‘god’, in His place.”

“Quite often, Kal,” Clark added, “God has to humble us – strip us of anything and everything that we’ve relied on, of our own strength, so that we’re forced to turn to Him. It was that way, in my life; I can tell you that much. We have to get to the point where we understand that – in our own strength – we are really weak, but that we can do all things through Christ Jesus, who is our strength.”

“He casts down rulers from their thrones, but lifts the humble, Kal,” Monk added, paraphrasing Luke 1: 52.

“But, just praying that prayer, and being baptized –?”

“Kal, for many a human, the hardest thing they’ll ever do is to surrender to God. But He promises us that the surrender is not without reward,” I smiled. “Psalm 37, verse 4, probably puts

it best , especially in your case: *‘Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.’* In your case – aside from getting back home – what greater desire could you have, than to get your powers back?”

Kal looked down at his feet, still suspended above the sand, and then raised his arms and his gaze to the sky above.

“Thank you, Father!” he intoned and then, almost more quickly than our eyes could follow, he rocketed skyward.

“Hallelujah!” the cry echoed back to us from him, now only a dot in the blue canopy above us.

I looked over at Lois, who was kneeling in the sand and weeping great tears of joy, quietly praising the God who had – in His own good time – answered a prayer she’d been repeating for years. Dot and Bonnie both knelt next to her, wrapping her in a hug.

“Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength,” “Clark spoke softly. *“They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint...”*”

“Isaiah 40: 31,” I nodded. “Appropriate.”

I think we all chuckled as the single distant thunderclap reached our ears. Somewhere out in the sky above us, Kal had just cracked the sound barrier.

“If you can hear me, brother,” I called out to him, “let’s save the rest of the celebration for later. We’ve still got a pirate submarine and half a dozen nuclear warheads to deal with, if you’re up to it!”

Less than a minute later, Kal was standing on the beach with us again, after having done a “fly-by” at a rate of speed that left him a blue-and-red flash that barely registered on our retinas.

“Let’s wrap this up, and get after the submarine,” he said.

I actually smiled, then. Suddenly, it didn’t seem as though dealing with either the sub, or those missiles, were going to be the big problems I’d been anticipating.

* * *

Chapter Twelve: “Strategies...”

Longitude 21° 43’ North

Latitude 71° 35’ West

9 August, 2005

With things under control at the pirate base, we turned our attention to other tasks. Mitch summoned one of his techs, who set up the satellite phone link with Alpha Base. Five minutes later, Elena was talking with her aunt and uncle, letting them know she was safe and sound. And would be seeing them as quickly as she could get home to them. On a separate line, Gwen was relieving her parents of their worries. We figured that, in a day or two, we could have both of the

girls safe in the arms of their relatives – Gwen first, as Miami was the closer destination, and then Elena, as soon as we could get Gumball to fly her there in one of the inertia-dampened Ospreys.

While we waited for the Marines, we decided to do a little investigating of the pirates' facility on our own. We checked out some of the sleeping rooms, and managed to find a clean shirt for Lois, to replace the one with the blood-soaked bullet hole in it and then, with a trio of Mitch's troops to play guard, the ladies all hit the shower facilities to get cleaned up a bit. Once that was taken care of, the girls offered to spend a little time in the lair's "mess hall" and cobble together some breakfast for us, since it had been a good while since any of us had had anything to eat. Mitch had some of his troops continue with their room-by room search of the base for stragglers lurking around, while another squad marked out a landing area on the beach for the Marine detachment. The rest of us headed for what Elena had pointed out as the "office" used by the pirate chief.

Forty-five minutes later, we were still sifting through stacks of paper documents, while the single tech in Mitch's crew attempted to access the computer system. We decided to take a brief break when Dot wheeled a cart filled with bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast, into the room.

"Dig in, boys," Lois called cheerily, following close behind with another cart filled with plates and utensils, plus glasses and a couple large containers filled with orange juice and coffee.

"Smells good, ladies," Mitch said, sniffing the air over the first cart appreciatively. "My compliments to the mess crew!"

With that, he grabbed a plate and started filling it with food, and the rest of us were quick to get in line behind him. Within five minutes, we'd almost all filled our plates and found somewhere to sit and chow down.

"Gonna join us, honey?" I asked Dot as she stood next to the cart, seeing to dishing out the last couple servings of food to Monk and Renny.

"Lois and I ate down in the kitchen, while we were helping to get this stuff ready for you guys," she smiled back at me. "We figured it'd be easier, that way."

Lois, meanwhile, was standing off to one side, staring at the large map and calendar that laid out on the white-board that hung on one wall of the office.

"What's so interesting?" Kal asked his wife, crossing the room to stand next to her.

"Well, it's this calendar," Lois replied, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "See the date that he had circled, with the notation, '*Der Tag*', next to it?"

"It's German, for 'The Day'," Clark translated for her between bites of toast.

"I know that, Clark," she nodded. "It's just that, well, it's nine days from now. The way that pirate chief talked, they were already in the process of leaving on this mission. It's not like our arrival here interrupted things, or forced them into an early departure."

"They're traveling by submarine," Mitch told her. "If Bonnie's observation is correct, they're using a second-hand Soviet 'Foxtrot' class diesel boat. Pushing flat-out, they might be able to get it up to around thirty knots." He paused for a moment while he opened a pouch on his

equipment harness and withdrew a strange-looking calculator from it.

“I see there’s a line plotted between here and the Mediterranean,” he said. “Are there any latitude and longitude markings at the destination end?”

“The last third of the line marking their trip has been erased,” Lois sighed, shaking her head. “Nothing left to read.”

“I wouldn’t say that, dear,” Kal chuckled.

I watched him, for a moment, and realized that he was using one of the components of his super-vision to scan the Mediterranean section of the map.

“Thirty-four degrees, three minutes, thirty-six seconds North by twenty-six degrees, nine minutes, fifty-five seconds East,” he called out a set of coordinates. “Puts the launch point just south and east of the island of Crete.”

“Figure our present position is about twenty-one degrees, forty-three minutes North by seventy-one degrees, thirty-five minutes West, that makes it about five thousand fifty nautical miles from here to their launch-point.” Mitch muttered, talking in spurts as he punched various numbers into the calculator. “At an average speed of thirty knots, submerged, it’ll take that boat roughly seven days to make the Atlantic crossing, on a straight-line course,” he said, talking in spurts as he punched numbers and worked the calculations.

“Would they make better time, if they ran surfaced?” Monk asked.

“They could,” Mitch said, “and they’ll have to run surfaced in short spurts, in order to recycle their air supply. They won’t be able to stay submerged and get the speed they need, without running the diesels. But they won’t stay surfaced too long, at any one time. They can’t afford to.”

“What makes you say that, Mitch?” Renny got the words out around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“For one thing, all those reconnaissance satellites out there,” Mitch chuckled, pointing a finger upward. “If you went topside and laid a dollar bill on the ground, one of our satellites could make out the serial number on it. Picking up a surplus Russian submarine, with the wake it’d make running surfaced at full speed, would be a piece of cake. Add one other thing, to that. About fifteen minutes ago, one of my people reported in that the sub tried to communicate with this base. My guy tried to fake an answer, but he didn’t know today’s code-word. So the pirates know that someone – they’ll be guessing it’s some contingent of American armed forces – has seized control of this base. That means that their mission has been compromised, at least to the extent that we know about it.”

“So he’ll run submerged as much as possible, and may not run in a straight line between here and the Med,” I nodded. “That’s gonna make him hard to find.”

“We’ve got Kal’s eyes,” Monk suggested. “That oughta count for somethin’.”

“Even I’d be hard-pressed to scan that much ocean,” Kal countered. “The farther we move from their point-of-origin, the area I’d have to examine increases geometrically.”

“Then we’re going to have a very hard time locating him, unless the Navy has a couple of fast-attack subs close enough to get a sonar fix on him,” I concluded.

“Not at all, Perry,” Kal grinned. “They erased part of the map, figuring that would really handicap our search. They couldn’t know I’d be here, to read what they thought they’d totally erased. So, we know where they’re going. We know when they left, at least roughly. And we know it’s going to take him between seven and nine days to get there.”

“And, knowing the rough time, distance, and speed figures, we can come up with a pretty good guess as to when they’ll be passing the one choke-point on their trip,” Mitch added.

“Choke-point?” I asked him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s only two ways into the Med,” Mitch explained, smiling. “Either you go in from the western end, through the Strait of Gibraltar, or you take the long route and go down and around the southern tip of Africa, up through the Indian Ocean, and take a left at the Red Sea. If you do, you can pass into the Med through the Suez Canal. Running the canal, though, would be too risky for our pirates. It’s a hundred miles long, narrows to only about three hundred yards in many places, with an average depth of about seventy feet. That doesn’t give them enough depth to run it submerged. Since a sub is essentially a stealth vessel, they never take ‘public’ shortcuts like canals, so it would cause a major stir if this one did. Plus, it would add days to their schedule. No, they’ll run the Gibraltar Strait.”

“So all we have to do is beat him there!” I uttered, following his logic.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Mitch shook his head. “Since they’re hauling nuclear warheads, I’d rather try and take the sub in a less confined space – somewhere out in a bit more open water. It’ll make things a bit more dicey, in some respects but, if something goes haywire – or one of the pirates decides to go ahead and detonate one of the warheads rather than be captured and face prison – we’re not up against somebody’s coastline as closely.”

“So what we really need to do,” Kal mused, “is spot them when they go through the Strait, and then tail them until they’re out into open water. Then we can nab them.”

“That’s about the size of it,” Mitch nodded. “And, one of my tech groups came up with a nice little gadget, awhile back, that oughta help.”

“What’s that?” Dot asked.

“Well,” Mitch explained, “there have been more and more rumors, the last couple years, of the Russian Navy selling off some of its older hardware. Their economy isn’t in the best of situations, right now, and they’re really hard-pressed for cold cash to pay the wages for their military. Plus, operating a lot of heavy hardware, and trying to upgrade anything, doesn’t come cheap. So the navy has been selling off some of its older ships – surface and submarine – to cash bidders. A lot of third-world nations have been busy beefing up their arsenals with Soviet cast-off equipment. Unfortunately, that process can let hardware get into private hands, as well as those of a country. There’s been some concern about a surplus sub falling into the hands of one of the terrorist groups.”

“Not a very friendly prospect,” Lois interjected.

“No, it isn’t,” Mitch agreed, nodding. “The larger nations haven’t been too concerned, up until recently, because most of the subs were sitting in ports like Polyarny. Even if the boats got auctioned off, our SOSUS nets can track them. The problem is, what happens when those subs get out into the hands of private owners? How do we tell the boats that are still-active in the Russian Navy, from the sold-off stuff?”

“I thought our navy has a pretty good sound-recognition file,” I objected. “I mean, look at ‘*Hunt for Red October*’. The story was a total fiction, but the fact that the American sonar units can identify an individual Russian sub by the specific sound of its engines is a fact.”

“That’s true,” Mitch nodded again. “But, you’re talking about boats that get kept in fairly good shape. Once you get boats in private hands, or in third-world hands, they’re not going to be able to pull into a Russian base whenever the engine needs a tune-up. As parts begin to wear, the engine noise is going to change, so those sound files are eventually going to get outdated.”

“I see,” I told him. “The engine starts to wear a bit, and winds up with its specific sound characteristics changing enough so that our system can’t accurately finger it.”

“You got it, Perry.” Mitch smiled. “And that’s where my techs came in. They came up with a little waterproof transponder about the size of a cigarette pack, that contains a key-coded transponder and a few other things. Drop a handful of those in a reasonably shallow spot – like the Gibraltar Strait – and sit back and wait. We’ll drop another, slightly larger, unit there, to pick up the sub’s engine noise. According to what your two college students told us, this sub is so new to the pirate fleet that they were still painting over the red star on the conning tower, so I doubt that the engines have had time to get too out of tune, yet. The pirates’ own records logged the sub’s original Soviet designation, so we ought to be able to pull its engine-sound file out of our copy of the US Navy’s files.”

“You got a copy of the Navy’s submarine engine sound files!” I whistled. “Nice trick!”

“Yeah, but don’t yell it too loud,” Mitch laughed. “It wasn’t exactly a legal deal, you know. A lot of that stuff is still classified.”

“Okay, so you have it, and we can use it,” I grinned. “How?”

“Like I said, we drop a sound-scanner to the bottom, in the Strait. We also drop a dozen or so of our ‘monitor’ units. They come with a little engine-pod attached. When we pick up the sound of our target passing through the Strait, we activate the closest monitor, and it closes in on the sub. The monitor goes into action, and gets close enough to touch the hull. When it does, the monitor pops loose, attached to the hull by magnets and adhesive, and hangs on for dear life. It also sends out a signal on a narrow wave-band, that our receivers can track. We track it on out into the open water, and then it’s time to do our thing.”

“Seems to me,” Clark suggested, “that we could set up on Caroline Island, and wait for them to get into position, once we’ve taken care of that bit of work in the Strait.”

“That oughta do nicely, Clark,” Mitch flashed a nasty grin. Nasty, that is, if only the crew of pirates could have seen it.

We finished breakfast while running through some tentative lists of things we’d need for

the intercept of the sub. Kal and Lois left, after about the first fifteen minutes, to take care of recovering the Singing Stone from the ocean floor. Lois also had the foresight to ask her husband to rescue the few other personal items from the boat Elena and Gwen had chartered. Kal went a bit out of his way, plucking a few choice trinkets from the wreckage of the galleon that had been the goal of Elena's little expedition. As he skimmed the ocean's surface on his flight back to the island, he noticed the lone figure of Clark, standing on the beach and waving an arm.

"Something wrong?" he asked, alighting on the beach in front of the bronze man.

"Not an emergency or anything, no," Clark shook his head. "I was just wondering if you could spare a few minutes..."

"Let me take care of a couple other things," Kal suggested. "Shouldn't take me more than five or ten minutes. Meet you back here?"

"Good enough," Clark nodded.

"I'll be right back." Kal promised.

Using the surface entrance, Kal descended into the captured pirate lair and distributed the items he'd gathered from the ocean floor. Leaving the crystal with Lois, concealed in a tote-bag, he headed back to the beach and Clark.

"Alright, Clark," Kal smiled gently. "What's bugging you?"

Clark was silent, for a minute, eyes focused on the sand in front of his feet as he sorted his thoughts.

"Earlier today, when we invaded the grotto," he began, "was one of the most frightening times in my life..."

"That's understandable," Kal chuckled. "Your wife was being held prisoner, inside. She's carrying your unborn offspring, and was under threat of bodily harm or maybe even death. I know exactly how you felt."

"I'm not sure you do," Clark admitted. "There was a moment when I caught myself wishing that my gun was loaded with something other than mercy bullets. Only what I know of God's word, and His spirit moving on me, served to check that desire in me!"

"That's understandable, too," Kal nodded. "Again, I know exactly what you were feeling. Remember, my telescopic vision had already shown me that *my* wife was either seriously wounded, or dead. There was a moment, when I saw that, when I wanted to storm in there and start ripping people apart – literally."

"And, with your enhanced skeletal and muscular structure, you'd have been able to do it, even without the rest of your powers!" Clark nodded. "What stopped you?"

"Something Perry told me," Kal admitted. "And, maybe, that was how God moved to stop me."

"What was that?" Clark asked. "That is, if it's not too personal..."

“Great Krypton, no!” Kal laughed. “He suggested that I make an effort to put my temper under leash, lest I do something that would disappoint my parents.”

Clark considered the words silently, for a few moments.

“What are your parents like?” he finally asked.

“Jor-El and Lara, or Jonathan and Martha?”

“Jonathan and Martha, of course.” Clark smiled. “I can’t see where you’d have much memory of your Kryptonian parents.

It was Kal’s turn to be silent for a moment, as he sought the best way to answer his friend’s question. He motioned to Clark to follow him, moving a few yards down the beach to where a few boulders had tumbled from the cliff and half-buried themselves in the sand, making convenient seats. As they sat down on the rocks he sighed softly and, for only the second time in many years, uttered a silent prayer – this time, for the right words to give to a troubled friend.

“Salt of the earth,” he finally said. “I guess that’s how you’d boil it down. Both of them.”

“That’s not quite what I meant,” Clark countered. “Your parents took in an infant who grew up to be the most powerful being in their world. You could have grown up to be that world’s greatest enemy. Instead, you became a savior, of a sort. Most of that had to come out of the influence that your parents were, to you, as you grew up.”

“So this is about what sort of a father Clark Savage, Junior, will be, to his offspring!” Kal exclaimed softly.

Clark managed a weary grin.

“I do have some concerns, in that regard,” he admitted.

“They loved me, Clark.” Kal told him softly. “It showed in a lot of ways, but it all boiled down to their loving me. And, of course, their loving God.”

“Why do you phrase it that way?”

“Because it’s true,” Kal chuckled. “My hearing is genetic, so it was present even when I was a child. Some of my earliest memories are of hearing them, after they’d put me to bed for the night, in their own bedroom. Before they went to sleep, they prayed to God and gave thanks for His having sent me to them when they couldn’t have a child naturally and didn’t have enough money to go through the process of adopting one. They did that every single night, without fail, for as long as I can remember. Matter of fact, they still do. I can still hear their prayers, every time Lois and I fly out to Smallville to spend a weekend with them. Now, they just thank Him for letting them help shape the man I’ve become, and for His having let me be a part of their lives. That, and they thank Him for bringing Lois into the family. Back then, they asked for the understanding and wisdom to raise me to be a good man, whatever I decided to do with my life.

“In later years, the prayers changed. They’d start out with the thanks, but some new requests were added. By then, some of my powers had begun to manifest themselves. As a six-

year-old, I lifted my dad's pick-up to get to a baseball that had rolled beneath it. They both saw me do it and I think that, for a brief time, it had them terrified. They began to pray even more for wisdom – for the right things to say to me, about the sort of things I should, or should not, do with my abilities. They'd pray for His hand to be on me, so that I didn't accidentally use those powers in front of strangers. They were so afraid that the authorities would find out about me, and take me away for observation and experiments. But they were even more afraid that I might begin to use my powers for selfish gains. So they prayed that they might be examples to me of how men and women should live their lives – honestly, honorably, and lovingly – and that I would pick up those values from them.”

“It would seem that you did,” Clark smiled. “Pick up their values, I mean.”

“Just so,” Kal nodded in agreement. “They gave me love, and they gave their values to me. Do you know, as proud as I might be expected to be, to be Superman, I'm even prouder to be Jonathan and Martha Kent's son?”

“They provided you with a legacy you could be proud of,” Clark nodded. “They're good people, obviously, and they passed on their good name to you. I wonder if I can do the same.”

“Just be around for your kids, Clark. Be around for them, take time to spend with them, and love them. I'm thinking that one of the things that has you upset is the fact that, since you were basically raised by that group of scientists, you don't really have the model of a father's love to show you how to love your own children. Don't worry. Jonathan's father wasn't the world's greatest dad, either, yet you can see how well Jonathan turned out, reflected in me. Jonathan made the decision to be the best father he could be, with God's help, despite the poor example set by his own father. Obviously, God didn't let Jonathan Kent down, and I'm sure that He won't let you down, either. Look at what you've accomplished, in your life. All those early adventures – the ones that helped to inspire me. And everything that you've done since accepting Christ. Your children are going to have a pair of loving parents, and a legacy that will fill them with a good sort of pride and inspire them to great deeds of their own. Trust me, on that.”

“I'll certainly be trusting God to help me!” Clark smiled. “It's the 'legacy' bit, though, that really has me puzzled.”

“Why?”

“Right now, I'm Clark Robeson Dent, as far as the world is concerned. Between Perry and me, we've filled you in on the background of what happened between the 'Wail' incident and just a few years ago, right?”

“Yes,” Kal nodded. “And now I see what you're really getting at. The best legacy that you can pass on to your children is one of a man living a double life, as it stands currently. The heritage of all the good things that Clark Savage, Junior, did in his 'old life' lies buried because of that one aspect – the 'Crime College'. You can't come forward and tell your side of the tale and take your real name back without considerable risk – both to your own freedom and to your family's name.”

“That's about the size of it,” Clark admitted. “It's something that's been weighing quite heavily on me, ever since Bonnie told me she was pregnant. It really has me disturbed. On one hand, I want my child – or children, eventually – to know their Aunt Pat as a true aunt, and they can't know that without eventually putting two and two together and coming up with the simple

fact that – if Patricia Savage is their blood aunt – then I’m Clark Savage, Junior. Doc Savage. I also want them to know something of my father, and all of the good works he accomplished in his lifetime, even if they were done without being principally moved by God.”

“And you can’t do that, either, without spilling the beans on your real identity,” Kal nodded sagely. “The old ‘rock and a hard place’ situation, and you’re stuck there.”

“Catch twenty-two, with a vengeance,” Clark sighed. “I can’t see myself raising a child or children, teaching them the meaning of truth and honor as the Scriptures define those qualities of life, and yet having them knowingly living a lie by virtue of the name they use.”

“It’s probably going to sound strange to hear this, coming from me,” Kal chuckled quietly, “since I became a real believer such a very short time ago. But I have the undeniable proof of what happened right over there on this beach, just a few hours ago. My wife, who was dead for a good four hours, according to Bonnie and Dot, was restored to life before my very eyes. My powers were restored a short while later, after a simple act of obedience on my part, to His word and will for my life. I think that the wisest thing you can do, at this point in time, is trust it to God to bring about His will, in His timing. From what Perry has told me, of how the two of you met and what has happened with you over the last few years, it’s obvious that His hand is on your life. Somehow, I simply can’t believe that He won’t make a way for you, even though right now there seems to be no way in sight.”

“It’s going to have to be that way,” Clark agreed somberly. “I’m so torn up inside about it that I’m getting to the point where I can’t see the forest for the trees, and I know it!”

“Then put your trust in the God who’s guided the steps of your life over these last few years, Clark. That’s the most that any of us can do, really, when you stop and think about it,” Kal returned.

The two sat in silence for a moment, until Kal’s hearing caught the distant sound of helicopter engines inbound toward the island.

“Time for me to go change clothes, brother,” Kal grinned. “I’m thinking that nobody really wants to have to explain the Superman costume to the Marines. But we’ve got a couple minutes, yet, before they get into visual range. We have one last thing we need to do.”

“What’s that?” the Man of Bronze asked the Man of Steel.

“Pray,” Kal smiled, sinking to his knees in the sand. “What else?”

Clark dropped quickly to his own knees and the two men joined hands and hearts in prayer.

“Lord Jesus,” Kal intoned quietly, “I have no right other than Your own promises, to come before you and ask this favor. I walked away from you as a youth, and have lived much of my life in sheer disbelief. I should have worshipped you as my hero, the One who saved me when the rest of my race died – the One who came down from His throne and took on flesh to give my own flesh eternal life. Still, You have stayed close to my life all these years, seeing to it that I had people of strong faith to guide me and raise me to walk upright before you, even if I chose not to acknowledge that it was you I walked before. And, in my time of greatest need, You have chosen my one childhood hero to teach me the meaning of belief and faith. For that, I give You thanks

and praise, now and forevermore.

“You’ve already given me back my wife, Lord Jesus, and the powers that you took from me to humble me and teach me the lesson of what it means to trust in You to be my real strength. I come before you – Clark and I come before you – now, to ask that You place Your hand, in all its power, on *his* life. Speak to him, Lord Jesus, in the stillness of his heart, and show him the path that he needs to walk, in order to solve the dilemma he faces. The road ahead may be hard, for him, but show him that he won’t be walking it alone. Remind him that You will be there, at his side, at each and every moment. Remind him, as my parents kept reminding me all the days of my youth, that if God be for us, who can stand against us, and that no weapon formed against us by the Enemy will ever prosper. It may seem to him to be a time of walking through fire, Lord, but you were in the fire with others, long ago, and they walked unscathed through the flames. Keep him mindful of those things, Lord, and lead him to his destiny as You have led him thus far. In Your name, we ask this. Amen!”

“Amen,” Clark repeated.

Kal rose to his feet and offered a hand to his friend.

“Handshakes are for casual friends, Kal,” Clark smiled at him, rising. “A brother deserves more. Thanks, so much!”

The bronze giant drew the Last Son of Krypton into a hug that lasted for several moments, and neither man was dry-eyed when they parted.

“I meant what I said, about the boyhood hero thing,” Kal smiled. “You and Perry have done more for me and Lois than we will ever be able to repay.”

“Who counts debts?” Clark shrugged, grinning. “I figure we’re about even. After all, meeting you has been rather an eye-opener for me, too, you know.”

“Then we’re even, and let’s let the matter rest in God’s hands,” Kal agreed. “Now, I really do have to get under cover, until I get this costume off and get into some civvies!”

The Man of Steel turned, took a half-step, and was gone from sight in an instant, Clark’s bronze hair ruffling in the shock-wave of the inrushing air.

“I’ll catch up with you down below,” he chuckled, knowing that his friend heard every word.

* * *

Chapter Thirteen: “A Pleasant Interlude...”

Turks-Caicos Islands

10 August, 2005

The Marines stormed the beach outside the pirate den within five minutes of the alert, and it took us about twenty minutes to brief their commanding officer – Major Carstairs – on the situation at the base. We managed to talk the major into using two of his big CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters – known among Marines as the “Phrog” – to ferry us to the airfield near Cockburn

Town.

There was a bit of business to take care of, in Cockburn Town, before we officially took our leave of the island paradise. With Elena and Gwen in tow, Dot and I rented a car and drove into the tiny island capital. It took us about an hour to locate the proper offices, and another two hours to get all of the necessary forms filled out. It also took a couple hits on my Institute credit card, at one of the local banks, to get a cash advance sufficient to pay the necessary filing fees and hire a local attorney to make the transactions completely legal under Turks-Caicos law. But, by the time we headed back to the airport, the Hidalgo Marine Salvage Company had been legally formed and chartered, with a duly recognized first-discovery claim to the wreck of the *Esperanza* and all artifacts contained therein. It was late in the afternoon before we finally arrived back at the airport and, within a few minutes of our returning the rental car to the Hertz desk, Gumball had the engines turning and we were airborne. Dot and I handed our cell phones over to the two college students, to let them call their families and update them.

Our first destination was the Waverly Aviation facility at Opa-Locka Airport. Mitch's troops stayed on board until the Hercules was taxied into the mammoth hangar, but the rest of us deplaned while the aircraft sat outside on the tarmac, where Gwen's family was waiting. We hung back during the joyful but tear-filled reunion between Gwen and her family, but then we were summoned over to be given introductions.

"I don't know how to ever really thank you for rescuing our daughter," Terry Saunders told me in a voice that was just barely controlled. His wife, Patricia, had already opened her mouth once, to speak, but the only thing that came out of it was a series of sobs. Dot, Bonnie, and Lois gave her an understanding group-hug, and we just let it go at that.

"She's one of ours," I answered Terry. "We take care of our own, at the Institute."

"But, a military-style assault on a modern-day pirate stronghold?" Saunders raised an eyebrow. Apparently Gwen had given her father a very complete report! "That's going beyond just looking out for a student's best interests."

"We're not your typical school, either," Clark, who was standing just behind me, gave a chuckle.

"So I see," Terry laughed. "So I see!"

At Mitch's suggestion, Gumball was already performing a series of pre-flight checks on a Gulfstream V that was based at Waverly Opa-Locka, for use in the rest of our "reunion flight". We had nearly a two-hour delay while the Saunders family drove back home and grabbed a bit of luggage and their passports, as Elena had stopped just short of demanding that Gwen and her family accompany us on the trip to Honduras. Kal also disappeared for a portion of that delay, on an errand to Alpha Base to exchange the Paradox version of his costume for one made out of simple Spandex. He explained that the Paradox version, with its lining of scale-armor composed of Paradox, would not be concealable under his street clothes, the way a pure Spandex version would. He also entrusted the Singing Stone to Mitch, who promised to lock the relic in his most secure vault until a team could be assembled to duplicate the temple set-up and try to reactivate whatever the artifact truly was.

It was nearly midnight, by the time we all got through the customs checks at the airport in Tegucigalpa, and an effusively thankful Linda and Estebán already had a series of guest rooms

prepared for us in their spacious 'hacienda', together with a brief late-night snack. I never asked how the rest of the crew slept, but I think Dot and I were out like lights the second our heads hit pillows.

* * *

Tegucigalpa, Honduras
10 August, 2005

Kal and Lois had both visited Honduras on a previous occasion, but it was the Honduras of their own world-line. Meanwhile, neither Dot nor I, nor any of the Saunders family, had been to Elena's homeland before. Thus, the morning turned out to be an interesting and enjoyable one. I awoke, at around seven o'clock, to the sounds of the new day beginning in the streets outside our windows. Dot was still asleep, so I slid out of bed as quietly as I could, tugged on a pair of cargo shorts, and crossed over to the huge set of glass-in-wrought-iron doors that led out onto a balcony that overlooked the street.

The sun was already up several degrees above the horizon, and I could tell that the day was going to be a warm one. As I looked up and down the broad Boulevard Morazan beneath the balcony, watching the traffic – both motorized and pedestrian – slowly beginning to thicken, I was reminded of the refrain from a song by 'The Call':

*Here's to you, my little loves, with blessings from above,
Now let the day begin!
Here's to you, my little loves, with blessings from above,
Let the day begin, let the day begin, let the day start!*

There was a small table and a cluster of chairs at one side of the long balcony, and I took a seat and spent some time in prayer. With everything that had happened in the last week or so, and the things I knew would be happening in the next few days, it took me a long while to deal with all the issues and I roused from my communion only when I heard the gentle padding of a set of bare feet on the paving stones that lined the balcony floor. Opening my eyes, I looked up to see Dot smiling down at me.

"Good morning, beautiful," I greeted her.

"Good morning to you, too," she chuckled. "Though I'd hardly consider my unwashed face and 'bed-hair' as being 'beautiful'."

"Eye of the beholder," I told her. "You'll always be beautiful, to me!"

"Thanks, baby," she smiled softly.

"I tried to let you sleep," I told her.

"Then you should have closed the balcony door," she giggled. "The traffic noise woke me. Sorry, though; I didn't mean to interrupt your prayers."

"It's alright, honey," I smiled. "You can join me. There's a lot to pray about."

She did. We really did have a lot to pray about, and we had just barely finished when a

gentle knock at the balcony door alerted us to the presence of one of the household staff.

“*Excuse, por favor,*” the young woman smiled. “*La Señora* Linda asks me to tell you that breakfast will be served on the patio in half an hour.”

“*Gracias,*” I thanked her.

“Well,” I turned to Dot, “Do you want first call on the shower?”

While Dot showered, I took care of shaving, and I showered while she was getting dressed. God bless Mitch’s people, for their efficiency! With all of the “jaunting around” we had been doing, over the last couple days, none of us were really packed for a side-trip to Honduras. Fortunately, Mitch’s people had all our clothing sizes stored in their data-banks, and someone had been dispatched for a quick shopping run to one of the better malls in Miami while we were still inbound to Opa-Locka. Dot and I, along with Lois and Kal, were provided with small suitcases that held just the sort of things we’d need for such a trip, right down to some Teva sandals, Ray Ban “Aviator” sunglasses, and the essential toiletries for each of us. Thus, Dot and I both managed to be washed, dressed, and strolling through the wide doors leading to the hacienda’s patio just as the first trays of foodstuffs were being delivered from the kitchen.

Normally, when you hear the term, “patio”, you think of a patch of poured concrete, maybe ten or fifteen feet on a side – just enough room for a picnic table and the charcoal or gas grill. That wasn’t what we found at Casa Ybarra. “*Patio*” is the Spanish word for “courtyard”, and that was exactly what this was. I didn’t pace it off, but I estimated it to be fifty or so feet wide, by somewhere between seventy and a hundred feet long. It was completely enclosed, in the manner of an ancient Roman courtyard, by the surrounding residence. Looking up, I could see the balconies of two stories above the ground level, followed by the roof-opening. The opening, itself, was open to the air, but not to insects, as wide aluminum frames stretched across it, with swaths of window-screen fabric stretched tautly between them. At evenly-spaced intervals, along the flagstone paving, sat large stone planters in which grew either coconut, king palms, or banana trees.

The aromas streaming off the platters of food had our mouths watering, and it was with some effort that I managed to restrain myself until all of the party had gathered around the table some five minutes later. Elena acted as co-hostess, asking a blessing over the food, and then we were invited to sit down and dig in. It had been quite some time since I’d had *huevos rancheros*, and I dug in with *mucho gusto*!

Following breakfast, Elena took us on a brief guided tour of the city. We left the Colonia Palmira suburb, where the Ybarra hacienda was located, and rode around the city in a well-kept classic 1962 Cadillac convertible. Elena drove and provided a running commentary on the various sites as we passed them. She told us that the city had been founded as the “Real Villa de San Miguel de Tegucigalpa de Heredia” on September 29, 1578. We toured around the city, seeing the Presidential Palace, the Metropolitan Cathedral, several museums, and a few very beautiful, well-maintained parks. I got a lump in my throat as we stopped for a brief walking tour of the El Picacho National Park, near the end of our tour. The park is situated on the slope of a mountain to the north of Tegucigalpa, and provides a spectacular overview of the city. The national zoo is one of the primary features of the park, but Elena guided us to its most notable feature, a huge statue of Christ that looks out over the capital.

El Picacho was the next-to-last leg on our tour, after which Elena drove for some forty

minutes before coming to the mountainside plantation belonging to her family. Aside from the vast acres of tobacco plants, there was the huge compound that housed the various buildings of the cigar factory, all surrounding a picturesque plaza. I know that her intent had been to give us a quick tour of the plantation and the factory, since she had spent so much of her life working at one aspect or another of the business. However, when we arrived, we found the plaza strung with colored pennants and banners. Long lines of tables were set up under canopies near the center and, a short distance away, an outdoor kitchen had been put together. The smells of typical Latin American cooking washed gently over us, accompanied by the happy sounds of some Mariachi-style music coming from loudspeakers concealed in the many little planters scattered around the plaza. There were groups of people, too, engaged in animated conversation. All eyes turned toward us, as Elena brought the car to a stop at the edge of the plaza and we got out to approach on foot. At the sight of Elena, a cheer arose. Uncle Estebán had declared a work-holiday for his employees, and a fiesta had been prepared, all in honor of Elena's safe return to her family and friends.

Elena, of course, immediately started crying, and Patricia Saunders rummaged in her purse and came up with a handful of tissues. We walked across the plaza toward the canopy area, finally locating Estebán and Linda among the groups standing in its shade, and headed directly toward them.

"You didn't have to do this, Tio Estebán," Elena protested between sobs, pulling her uncle into a tight hug.

"But I did," Estebán returned, smiling. "Did not the father, in our Lord's story, call for a celebration when his wayward son returned home?"

"*Si*, Tio Estebán."

"Then how could I not order a feast to celebrate the return of one who is like a daughter to me, when she had been taken against her will?"

Elena had no answer for that. She merely shrugged her shoulders and hugged her uncle even more tightly than before.

"Gently, little one," Estebán gave what sounded as both a chuckle and a groan, all in the same sound. "You're getting very strong, to be doing that to these old bones!"

"These 'old bones' have a long time, indeed, before they truly become too old for me to hug!" Elena retorted lovingly.

"Exercise is a part of the school curriculum, actually, Estebán," a familiar voice cut into the mix. "A sound mind in a sound body, you know."

"Johnny!" Elena squealed, leaning around her uncle's body to see the archaeologist sitting at a nearby table, right next to a smiling Kal and Lois. "What are you doing, here?"

"I didn't get to see you, when you returned to Florida," Johnny explained, "because I was just a tad busy getting things ready to try testing your little 'find'. So I waited until I figured you would have arrived here, to call and tell you how happy I was, to know you're safe and sound. I wound up talking to your uncle – you had already retired for the night, I'm afraid – and he told me about this fiesta he had planned for you. Rather an impressive event, for one put together on

sudden notice, too! I'm afraid I simply invited myself, and took the next – ahem! – ‘flight’ I could get, that was headed to Honduras.”

I had to quickly stifle a laugh, at Johnny’s reference to ‘flight’. With Kal and Lois both present, as well, my guess was that Johnny’s transportation hadn’t involved the use of an aircraft.

“My ‘find’?” Elena repeated the words, drawing a blank for just a second before the realization hit her. “Oh! The – “

Johnny quickly put a finger to his lips in a ‘hush’ gesture, and Elena stopped short of actually mentioning *La Piedra El Cantar*. The aging professor quickly rose from his seat, with a motion to Kal to accompany him, and came around the table.

“May I borrow your lovely niece for a few moments?” he asked Estebán.

“Of course, Professor Littlejohn.”

Johnny draped an arm around Elena’s shoulder and gently led her a few paces away. Kal and I followed.

“Why did you ask my silence?” Elena asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Have you mentioned the Stone to your aunt and uncle, since you returned home?” Johnny asked in return.

“No,” Elena sighed. “There has been so much going on, that I had not had the chance.”

“Then, perhaps, it is best that you do not mention it,” Johnny suggested.

“Why?”

“You were there, on that beach, the other morning,” Johnny began to explain. “Clark and Monk told me what happened, there. So you know what our friend, here, can do.”

“*Si*,” Elena nodded. “I do not understand it, really, but he is like the Superman of your American movies!”

“He *is* Superman, Elena,” I offered. “There isn’t time enough, now, to explain to you how he came to our world, but he *is* here. And the Stone belongs to him.”

“How can that be?” Elena asked, more confused.

“Again, that is something we don’t have time to get into, fully, here and now.” Johnny shook his head. “In fact, we don’t quite understand, ourselves, how this artifact came to our world so many years ago, but do you recall the strange characters that your ancestor traced, from the face of the crystal?”

“*Si*,” Elena nodded. “They were included on the pages from the memoir that I sent to you.”

“That writing is in the native language of our friend’s home-world, Krypton,” Johnny

told her. “In that language, they spell the name he was given at birth. Thus, the crystal quite obviously belongs to him, or was intended to belong to him.”

“But – “

“Elena, I promise you that I will explain it to you completely, when you return to the campus for your next term of school,” Johnny sighed. “I promise! In the meanwhile, please keep silent about the Stone. You can still speak of your ancestor’s memoirs, and of the map you found hidden in the binding, and of the wreckage of the *Esperenza* that you discovered on your trip to the Caribbean. There is such treasure there – our friend assures me of this, because he has surveyed the wreck with his rather unique powers of sight – as will make you wealthy beyond your wildest flights of imagination. Let it go at that, for now, please?”

“But – “

“Do you trust me, Elena?” Johnny asked her, and from the tone of his voice, I could tell that he was about to change subjects.

“Of course, Johnny!” she nodded vehemently.

“Then, trust me in this matter, as well,” he smiled. “I promise you on my honor, and with God as my witness, that I will fill you in on all of the details when you return to school.”

“I suppose,” she gave a long deflated sigh. “After all, it’s only a matter of a few weeks.”

“Actually, it’s only a week and a half,” Johnny told her. “I expect my lead teaching assistant to arrive a week before classes begin, so that I can get her briefed on her duties for the coming academic year.”

“Lead Teaching Assistant?” Elena gasped.

“The position is yours, if you wish,” he smiled.

“Do you really think I’m capable?” she asked him.

“You’ve amassed the best marks I’ve ever given, in the courses you’ve taken from me,” Johnny informed her, “and from the other instructors in the department. I’ve truly never seen a more promising student, in all my years. And you’ve performed excellently as one of my teaching assistants, over the last two years. Of course I think you’re capable. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have offered you the position.”

“I’ll take it, of course,” she whispered.

“Somehow, I knew you would, dear,” Johnny chuckled. “Now, go on and enjoy the festivities, since they’re all in your honor!”

The matter of referencing the Stone settled, at least for the moment, we returned to the head table and let Elena rejoin her family and friends, all of whom were overjoyed to hear of her sudden good fortune in the academic arena.

The midday meal was served shortly thereafter, and the fiesta got fully under way. The

food was excellent, the music and conversation were delightful. Over the course of the long afternoon, Elena made sure that her friends from the Institute were introduced to every single person in attendance, from the parish priest, Father Enrique, to the most junior employees from the cigar factory. Needless to say, Dot and I spent a lot of time shaking hands. Thankfully, we didn't have to memorize the names of everyone we met.

It was a typical fiesta. The foods ran the gamut from mild to heavily-spiced, depending on the nature of the individual dish, and I was grateful for the fact that food was available all during the afternoon and well into the night, or I wouldn't have had the chance to sample all of the various items that had been prepared. Servers wandered around the lines of tables, offering food or beverages – the latter consisting mostly of either *cerveza* (beer) or *sangria*, along with iced tea and a couple of the more popular bottled sodas. Neither Dot nor I had ever been much for beer, so we passed on the local brew. However, when another server came past with the pitchers of sangria, I questioned Elena – who was seated across the table from me – about it.

“So what is this *sangria*?” I asked her. “Just another kind of wine, right?”

“It starts with a red wine that is naturally very sweet,” she explained. “We add some pieces of fruit, mostly citrus varieties, and a little fruit juice, and let it sit for some hours so that the flavors have a chance to blend. Then we fortify it with a little brandy, add sugar and honey to sweeten it even more, and then mix in carbonated water. It is a very refreshing drink. Please, at least try a small taste.”

Wine was another thing that neither Dot nor I had developed a taste for. The couple times we'd ever tried it, we'd been left with a sour taste in our mouths. Though Bonnie had tried to explain that there are sweet wines and wines that aren't too sweet, we'd never really gotten around to testing her advice on the subject. Still, the formula Elena had described left us both curious, and we agreed to a small sample. Which, of course, we found to be every bit as sweet and delicious as her description made it sound. We both ordered a refill.

The food was delicious. We started off with black bean soup, followed by something called '*conch cerviche*', which is a kind of Latin American 'sushi-salad' or seafood salsa made from chunks of conch meat marinated for a day in Key Lime juice, which breaks down the meat protein without heat. To that, they add onion, garlic, two or three kinds of peppers, celery, cilantro, and olive oil. Then they season it with salt, pepper, and cumin, and serve it cold. After the *cerviche* came the *baleadas* – the Honduran version of the burrito – which came in beef, chicken, and pork varieties. I sampled all three – they were small portions – and wanted the recipes.

For dessert, there was something that started out as traditional fried plantains. These banana-like fruit are typically peeled and fried in corn oil until the sugars began to caramelize. In a twist practiced by the Ybarra family women, the chunks of fried fruit are then allowed to chill and dipped in a light, sweetened batter, and then deep-fried. They're served coated with a very light dusting of cinnamon and sugar. Oh – I almost forgot the Honduran-style coffee, very rich, and served with sweetened cream.

The meal actually took about two hours, as there was plenty of chatting going on at our table. Eventually, though, it was over and, after a glass of sangria, two glasses of iced tea, and a big cup of coffee, I asked Estebán to point out the nearest *caballeros* room. As I headed out, Kal called out for me to wait. I looked back to see him rise from the table. To his left, Elena had just lit one of the small cigars she'd been indulging in all day, and Lois was apparently about to try

one, judging by the looks of the skinny brown cylinder perched between her fingertips.

“You gonna say anything to her, about that?” I asked Kal, nodding in the direction of the tables as he caught up to me.

“No,” he shook his head, and there was just the tiniest hint of a smile playing at his lips.

“Huh?” I did a double-take at his response.

“Perry, only yesterday morning, I was sitting on a beach, holding her lifeless body. I thought I’d lost her forever. I’m too glad to have her back, to chastise her for a minor vice that she doesn’t indulge all that often.”

I considered his words. I guess, if I was in his shoes, and it was Dot that we were talking about, I’d have felt exactly the same way.

By the time Kal and I returned from our trip to the restrooms, Dot had vanished, along with the rest of the ladies at our table. Estebán was still there, as was Terry Saunders. Both were lighting cigars as we took our seats.

“I take it the ladies went for a stroll?” I asked Terry, short-stopping one of the servers to get a refill on coffee.

“You know women,” he chuckled. “They can’t go to the restroom except in pack formation.”

“Would either of you care to join us in a good after-dinner cigar?” Estebán asked.

“No, thanks,” Kal smiled, gently shaking his head.

“And you, *Señor Liston*?”

“I thought we got that ‘*Señor Liston*’ business straightened out at the airport, last night,” I grinned, looking back at Estebán. “Please call me ‘Perry’!”

“Forgive me, please,” Estebán asked, with a gentle bow of his head. “Would you care for a cigar, Perry?”

I thought about that question, long and hard. I’d smoked a rare couple cigars, back in my pre-Christian days – usually when a friend or co-worker became a new father – and they hadn’t been all that bad, though I’d never developed a habit. Still, it had been a couple decades since I’d accepted Christ, and I’d vowed to put all that worldly, un-Christian behavior behind me. I was just about to open my mouth to politely refuse, when a couple memories surfaced.

The first was a late afternoon, a few years earlier, at the LaCroix Winery outside of Pine Corners, Washington. Old Jacob LaCroix had welcomed our big rigs there, on the winery grounds, when nobody else in the area could – or cared to – provide for our parking needs.

Further, he’d treated us to a gourmet dinner that night, during which he’d uncorked a couple bottles of his finest vintage. I’d been expecting to see Clark turn down the offered beverage, as Dot and I had done. Thing was, he hadn’t. He’d accepted, tasted the wine and

pronounced it good, then proceeded to have two glasses of it along with his meal, as did Bonnie.

Clark and I had talked about it, later, before turning in for a good night's sleep. I'd asked him what prompted his decision to drink, and he'd done a very convincing job of explaining his reasoning to me.

"You know I've spent plenty of time studying the scriptures, Perry," he began.

I did, indeed. Not only had he read at least four different modern translations, he'd also read the Torah in its original Hebrew, and the New Testament in both the original Greek and Roman Septuagint versions. With his knowledge of languages, he hadn't needed a translator for any of those latter texts.

"Yeah," I'd agreed.

"Well, I found nothing in them to indicate that God ever prohibited the occasional consumption of an alcoholic beverage. There were certain individuals, such as Samson, and John the Baptist, who were prophesied not to partake, and there were certain ceremonies before which consumption was prohibited. However, nothing in the scriptures indicates that moderate consumption is viewed as a sin. Only when alcohol is consumed to excess – where drunkenness follows – do the scriptures object."

"Okay," I nodded. "I can see that, to an extent, but didn't Paul advise the early church to refrain from doing that which would offend weaker brethren?"

"He did," Clark continued, smiling gently. "But, in order to offend a weaker brother, wouldn't you agree that you have to commit the offense in front of him?"

"I guess it would be kind of hard to offend someone if he wasn't there to be offended," I had shrugged. "So, I suppose you can indulge – in moderation – provided you don't indulge in front of anyone who would be offended by your actions."

"Just so. Now, let's look at today's events, since they're at the crux of our debate," Clark had suggested. "When we arrived here at the winery, those three crosses up on the hill were rather hard to miss, were they not?"

"I'll say!" I had chuckled.

"And that sort of display would be difficult to interpret as anything other than a sign that the property-owner is a Christian, right?"

"True enough," I'd admitted.

"And, when Jacob LaCroix entered the tasting room and greeted us, he noticed the cross I wear around my neck, and asked me if I was a Christian. Following my admission that I was, he greeted me as a brother in the faith."

"Okay," I had agreed. "So where is this all heading?"

"The vintner is a brother in Christ," Clark explained patiently, "who does not see the occasional consumption of wine – and, by extension, other alcoholic beverages – as a sin, at least

so long as it does not lead to drunkenness, which the scripture prohibits. If I tell our host that I don't drink – and that I abstain because of my faith – I do a couple different things. The first thing I do is tell a lie. You see, in the past, I abstained from alcoholic beverages, but it was for health reasons – the lessening of split-second reaction times, the clouding of decision-making processes. I had never had the occasion to decide that drinking alcohol was against my religion, because – up until I met you – I never really *had* a faith or religion. Since I met you, well, this is the first time that the subject has really come up. We offered sparkling white grape juice at our wedding, in lieu of champagne, because we had such a large number of brothers and sisters from different walks of the faith as our guests, and didn't wish to offend any of them by presenting them with alcohol to drink, even for the official toast. It wasn't a matter of what we, ourselves, did, offending them."

About that time, I started to see where he was leading with all of this, but I'd let him continue. It's a good thing, too, because I'd have been close, but still not in the bullseye.

"If I'd told our host that I didn't drink wine because of my faith, it would have been an untruth, because I'd never had occasion to make that decision. I also would have run the risk of offending our host. He might have interpreted my 'faith-based refusal' as a commentary on my opinion of *his* walk of faith."

"You didn't want him to feel like he was not really a Christian, because he spends his days making wine for people to drink!" I really caught on, then. "Because of those two reasons, and what you've gleaned from the scriptures, you figured it was acceptable to go ahead and take the wine he offered.

"Exactly," Clark had smiled.

That was lesson number one that popped into my head in a flash, that afternoon in the courtyard of the Ybarras' cigar factory in Honduras. The other one was evident in the man who sat across the table from me.

Estebán Ybarra was Elena's uncle. And Elena, so far as I knew, was a good person. At the Institute, there's a couple of standards that have to be met by anyone in a position to teach or otherwise influence a student, and that includes Teaching Assistants. First, they have to be at or very near the top of their class, as far as their grades were concerned. You can't teach what you don't know. Second, they have to have an innate ability to impart the knowledge in the same way any professor does. You can't teach if you don't have the skills to impart your knowledge to someone else.

The really important aspect, though – at least at the Institute – has to do with a person's walk with Christ. On so many occasions, problems with mastering the material taught in classes can be traced back to problems in other areas of a student's life. You can't learn when you're distracted by problems back at home, or in your own personal life. Often, a Teaching Assistant will develop a rapport with a particular student, and the student will often choose to talk about personal problems with such an individual. Because of that, we wanted our Teaching Assistants to have a good walk with Christ, so that they were more open to the quiet movings and whispers of the Holy Spirit, with regard to the teaching and counseling work they did.

Elena had been one of Johnny's TA's for two years, now, and I knew that he had selected her to become his Lead Teaching Assistant, since his last one had graduated in May. Elena had been through the interviews with Johnny, and with Anthony Blair, our dean of the School of

Theology, and come through with flying colors. And all that, despite the fact that she had spent her youth working in a cigar factory, and was unashamed to admit that she indulged in more than an occasional cigar.

Like I admitted to you, at the outset of this explanation, I'd enjoyed a rare occasional cigar, in my BC – *Before Christ* – days. If I refused Estebán's offer, would I cause him to think that I somehow looked down on him, because he manufactured cigars and smoked them? The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, and it was my guess that, since Elena had been living with them since her early childhood, he and his wife had been a major influence in the girl's having accepted Christ and attempting to live her life for Him. Estebán sat across from me, smoking a cigar and, across the way I could see *Doña* Linda Ybarra standing under the shade of a huge tree, chatting with the parish priest, Father Enrique. Both had cigars in one hand, and a glass of sangria in the other.

“Why not?” I shrugged, opening my eyes and smiling at Estebán.

Elena's uncle reached into one of the pockets in his Guayabera shirt and produced a cigar case, from which he extracted a cigar. As he closed and pocketed the case, I noted that the cigar was just over five inches long and about as thick as my thumb, wrapped in a light-golden leaf that I recalled one of my BC buddies telling me meant that the cigar would be a mild one. With his free hand, he reached into another pocket and pulled out a tool that he used to punch a hole in the end of the cigar, and then handed it across to me together with a lighter.

It took a moment to get the cigar going properly and, in that time, I noted that the puffs of smoke were drifting with the wind right to where Kal was sitting.

“You want to switch places, Kal?” I asked him, handing the lighter back to Estebán.

“Don't worry,” he smiled, waving my offer away with a gentle movement of his hand. “I don't smoke – never have – but that doesn't mean I haven't been around some second hand cigar smoke! Are you forgetting who I work for?”

I raised an eyebrow at that one, and made a mental note to ask him about the comment later on, out of the range of the folks who didn't know his secret. Apparently, the Perry White of his world-line was still healthy and in charge of the Daily Planet.

Our conversation resumed, then, with Estebán asking some pointed questions about the Institute, and about the relationship that Kal and I had, to Elena.

“Actually,” I confessed, “I hadn't met Elena until after we secured the pirate base. I'm on the school's board of directors, but not an active instructor there. As far as the rescue is concerned, well, we'd have gone after just the girls, regardless. The fact that the pirates went and captured our wives, as well as your niece and Terry's daughter? Well, that just made it a little more 'personal'!”

“And you, Kal?”

“I'm new on the staff,” Kal explained, giving the basic cover story we'd worked out for him and his wife. “Lois and I are both career journalists. She's strictly printed media, while I've had experience in newspapers and in front of a television camera. Perry has known us for years, and asked us to head up a new Journalism department at the Institute. Lois went off to the Turks

with Perry's wife and another woman, figuring that her reporter's instincts might help them to snoop around a bit and see if they could uncover any leads as to Elena's and Gwen's fate or whereabouts, and got captured. As a journalist, I've been to some pretty heavy trouble-spots, in my day, to cover a story. I've had some 'rough and tumble' experience, because of that, and a reputation of being pretty good in a fight. So, when I asked to come along on the rescue attempt, they welcomed me aboard."

I had to hand it to Kal! The man thinks pretty fast on his feet, for a guy who says he never lies. I guess my having "known" Kal for years – through the pages of an Earthly comic book – would stand the "truth" test, as far as his statement went. And, as a journalist, he'd been sent on assignment by the Daily Planet into some pretty hairy corners of his own Earth. Thus, that portion of his reply was every bit the truth, as well. And, you just have to admit, Superman – powers or not – has a reputation of being pretty good, in a fight!

"Well, I want to thank you both – again – for rescuing my Elena," Estebán told us – for about the twentieth time since we'd delivered Elena into his arms at the airport. "She is like a daughter to me, and I do not know what I would have done if she had been lost to us forever."

"You can ease up on the thanks," I suggested to him, "or send more of it in the direction of our Lord. Without His protection and guidance, we couldn't have pulled it off, at all."

"And, if you really think of her as a daughter," Kal chimed in, "you might try easing up on this demand that she return to Honduras and spend all day, every day, running this factory."

Apparently, Kal and Elena had managed time for a long conversation, on the flight from Miami to Tegucigalpa!

"What do you mean, *Señor* Kal?" Estebán asked, raising a curious eyebrow.

"Well, I gather – from what she's told me," Kal responded, "that you've not been too happy with her decision to go off and pursue a career in archaeology, as opposed to taking your place as head of the cigar company, when you're too old to work any longer."

"She has the head for the business, *Señor* Kal," Estebán shrugged his shoulders. My son, Ramon, does not. What else can I hope for?"

"Well, there are always alternative solutions," Kal smiled softly. "You're what, forty? Forty-five?"

"Forty two," Estebán sighed.

"Avo Uvezian is in his early eighties," Kal commented, "and Carlos Fuente, Senior, is pushing seventy-five. Both are still deeply involved in the running of their cigar companies on a daily basis. I know. I interviewed both of them, not too long ago, for a series that ran in the newspaper I worked for. Do you see yourself retiring that much earlier than either of those two legends?"

"No," Estebán shook his head. "But it must happen, someday. And death comes to every man or woman, regardless of our desires. What will happen to my company, when that time comes in my own life?"

“I would think that, then, she would step in and pick up where you leave off,” Kal smiled again. “But that time is most probably two, perhaps three decades in the future. That’s a lot of years, when looked at from the standpoint of a girl Elena’s age. She has hopes and dreams that she wishes to fulfill. Why not let her do so, while she’s still young and has the energy?”

“But how will she stay in touch with the business, between now and then?” Estebán asked.

“Valid question,” Kal nodded in agreement. “Do you think that she won’t come home to visit, when she’s able to do so?”

“No.”

“Then, when she does come home for a visit, schedule some time to bring her up to date on what is going on in your business. Keep her updated with monthly e-mails. Forward copies of the necessary reports to her, over the Internet. And then, for important meetings, there is always the potential of video conferencing.

“We do not have such facilities, *Señor Kal*,” Estebán shook his head. “Or the money that it would probably take, to purchase and install them. Ours is a smaller company than that of the inestimable Don Carlos Fuente!”

“I think you’re going to find that you do – or, rather, she does,” I chuckled. “Has she had the time, yet, to tell you what she found in the Caribbean?”

“No, Perry,” he shook his head again. “She has not.”

“Well, I suggest you take some time tomorrow, and talk with her about her adventure. I think you will find that things in the ‘money’ category have changed drastically.” I smiled at him.

He smiled back at me, but his expression changed suddenly, and it took me a second to notice that he was now looking at some point above – and behind – me. Of course, that’s when I heard the sound of my darling wife, clearing her throat.

“*This* is different,” she said, looking intently at me.

“Yeah?” I asked her hesitantly, wondering whether her ‘look’ spelled good or ill, for me.

“Is this gonna become a habit I should know about?” she asked me, then.

“Well, I don’t know if I’m going to rush right out and buy a humidor and stock it full, but this one doesn’t taste all that bad. Once in awhile might be kind of nice...”

I was still trying to figure out the meaning behind her stare when she sat down next to me, plucked the cigar from my fingers, and took a puff. She held the smoke on her tongue for a moment, and then vented it from the side of her mouth. I’m sure my mouth was gaping open in astonishment as she repeated the process, this time finishing off with a trio of perfect smoke rings..

“Not bad,” she nodded. “Just a trifle too mild, for my taste, but definitely the sort of cigar a novice like you should be puffing on, first time out of the gate. Overall, it’s not a bad cigar.”

"Uh, honey?" I stumbled for a way to approach the topic diffidently..

"Oh - you want this back?" she asked, giggling. "You won't share with your darling wife?"

"I'll be happy to share, if that's what you want," I told her. "It's just that, well, I never expected to see you..."

"...puffing on a cigar?" she finished the sentence for me with a mischievous giggle.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"I guess that *would* be a bit of a surprise, wouldn't it?" she smiled understandingly at me. "Part of that is your fault, since you told me, once upon a time, that you didn't need to hear any of the tales from my tawdry 'before Christ' past. Let's just say that this is one side-effect of my often being the lone female federal security guard on an otherwise all-male staff. After a long day, they'd want to go out for a beer or two at one of their favorite local watering holes, and it was good sport to see what they could get 'the girl' to try."

Well, that certainly fit in with the Dot I'd met, seven years ago. There's no way she would have let a little dare, like trying a cigar, get the best of her.

"I see," I told her, grinning, now that I knew I wasn't going to be sleeping in the doghouse.

"You want this back?" she asked, brandishing the cigar at me.

"Is this gonna become a habit I should know about?" I smiled, turning her question back at her.

"Well, I don't know if I'm going to rush right out and buy a humidor and stock it full, but this one doesn't taste all that bad. Once in awhile might be kind of nice...maybe on the back porch after a good dinner, sitting next to my husband on the wicker love-seat..."

"Go ahead, *Señor* Perry," Estebán chuckled. "I will give her one, so there is no need to share."

Three minutes later, Dot and Lois were sitting across the table from each other, puffing on cigars, and Estebán had begged our indulgence while he made a brief round seeing to his other guests. Kal remained true to his word, and didn't say anything to his wife about her smoking, though he did cast a quick side-long glance at her and then turned back to me and rolled his eyes upward in their sockets as if to say, "Oh, well..."

I was looking on with a slight bemused smile. It was still kind of surprising that, in the six years she and I had been married, I'd never stumbled onto that little data-byte in Dot's past, but I was quite willing to accept it. I listened to their chatter for a few moments.

"Men!" Lois giggled, throwing up her hands and nodding her head in the direction of her husband.

“I agree,” chortled Dot. “They’re so... predictable, aren’t they?”

“Too true,” Lois nodded. “But, if they weren’t, how would we ever have managed to control things enough to snare the right one?”

“I guess you’ve got a point, there,” Dot agreed. “You certainly had your work cut out for you, snagging *yours*! How many years did you know him, before you succeeded?”

“Too many!” Lois frowned. “But we met while we were still in our teens, and he was all hung up over this cute little brunette that he knew, in his hometown.”

“Lana,” Dot filled in the blank.

“Yeah,” Lois nodded. Her eyes widened for a split second as she paused to sip at her glass of sangria. Then, “I keep forgetting how much you already know, of our past. It’s kind of unfair, really. I hardly know anything, about your history.”

“Ask away!” Dot invited.

“Well, since we’re on the subject of having found our husbands, how did you and Perry meet? And, was it love at first sight, or something else?”

“It was about seven years ago,” Dot began the tale. “I’d just gotten home from running a few errands, and this guy shows up at my door – Perry. He tells me he’s looking for a ‘Dorothy Brooks’, and pegged my address out of the phone book. Turns out he was looking for my grandma on my father’s side. I was going to put him in touch with my mom. Then he said something about talking in private – he was so awkward, then – and I threatened to bust him if he didn’t tell the truth. So he introduced me to Clark. Once I was convinced that it was really *the* Clark – the one I’d heard all the tales from my grandpa Andy, about – I went nuts! I begged them to let me be a part of their ‘quest’! I put them in touch with my mom, and then we went to visit my other grandfather, Monk Mayfair.

“When it was just the four of us – Perry, Clark, Mom, and me – I wound up getting paired up with Perry. Well, he was a nice enough guy – kind of different from the guys I’d met before, but still really nice – and we had a ‘thing’ for computers, in common. Grandpa Monk gave us a lead on finding Johnny, back east in Vermont, so we headed back across the country again. Perry and I got tagged to do some more research, looking for Renny, and that took us on a trip to San Francisco, that was just Perry and me. We had a good time, together, just as friends. I knew he was a Christian, and he knew I wasn’t, but still he never tried to preach to me. He just kept on being my friend, and trying to present himself as an example of what a true Christian was, and it was really different from all the plastic, phony-baloney, hidden-agenda people I’d ever known who’d called themselves Christians.

“An awful lot happened, while we were out in Frisco. Perry and I got into a dust-up with some gang-bangers. I got injured in the fracas, and Perry was there to nurse me back to health. Then, I went and did some things I’m pretty ashamed of, things that’d make most guys turn and walk away. Perry didn’t. He hung in there with me, and treated it like the things I did were all water under the bridge. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t a Christian; he loved me like nobody else ever had! He put up with my... failings... and came back smiling and still loving me! And that’s what I saw, that finally made me want to be a Christian. It wasn’t long after I made my choice, that he proposed to me. How could I refuse?”

“You’ll have to tell me the in-depth version of that story, when you’ve got the time,” Lois smiled at her softly. “My reporter’s nose says there’s a wealth of interesting details hiding in that capsule version.”

“I’ll do better than that!” Dot giggled. “Perry wrote the whole thing up, just like it was an adventure novel or something! I’ll give you an electronic copy of the manuscript. Does your world have Windows-based computers that can handle a thumb-drive or memory card?”

“Cool!” Lois’s eyes blazed brightly at the prospect of a story. “And, yes, we do. You can use either storage device – provided it’ll stand up to the rigors of whatever process the men work out, to send Kal and me home. But, I’ll read it before we leave. I’ll want to ask you some detailed questions, to get your viewpoint on the story, as well. If Perry wrote the original version of the tale, I’m sure it’s more from his memories and viewpoint.”

“We’ll have time,” Dot nodded. “Once the guys work out how to send you home, I’m sure it’ll be a matter of stepping onto some sort of transporter pad, and having someone press a few buttons. That’ll mean you can leave whenever you want.”

“I hope so,” Lois chuckled. “I’d like to really be able to get out and see some of your world, see how it’s different from ours, without having this whole ‘will we ever get home?’ issue hanging over my - our – heads. So how come you were still ‘free’ for Perry to put a claim on? What about the guys *before* Perry?”

“Not much to say, on that score,” Dot grimaced. “There were a few, I’ll tell you. And none of them were that good. But, then, neither was I, so it was about equal. If I liked the guy at all, we hung for awhile, until one of us got tired of the other. Usually me, getting tired of them. So I’d move along to the next guy.”

“And the guys you didn’t like?”

“My favorite tactic was drinking them under the table,” Dot grinned. “None of the guys I had the luck to meet could deal with having a woman do that to them. Stuck a big pin in their whole ‘macho image’ balloon. Nine out of ten times, the guy would never hit on me again.”

“Mine, too!” Lois laughed. “You’d be surprised at how many sleazy guys a wonderful female journalist like me could run into, back in the day!”

“I’ll bet that trick wouldn’t work, with him!” Dot snickered, inclining her head in Kal’s direction.

“‘Smallville’?” Lois smiled, shaking her head. “He rarely drinks. When he does, it’s because he likes the taste of a particular beverage, like the citrus-salty combination in a well-made Margarita. The alcohol has no effect whatsoever on his metabolism. Nothing does! I tell you, when I first started dating Kal, and I’d go over to his apartment, I’d find all this junk food in his cupboards. He’d be changing out of his suit into jeans and a tee-shirt, and I’d catch sight of those wash-board abs of his, and wonder how he ever managed to keep such a ripped body, with all those empty calories in his refrigerator!”

“That must have been before he let his secret slip,” Dot grinned knowingly.

“Yeah!” Lois laughed. “At least, then, I understood. It’s that metabolism of his. It just won’t process ‘harmful’ stuff, the way ours will! I bet he could empty the cervesa booth *and* the sangria booth, and never feel it. Assuming even he could take in that much liquid, that quickly.”

“It definitely sounds like you and I need to have a serious girl-talk!” Dot suggested.

“Yeah, and there’s no time like the present,” Lois nodded in agreement. “The guys are busy with their own conversations, at the moment. Only, I think we oughtta go somewhere a little more private. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but your hubby has had an ear cocked in our direction ever since we sat down. It just wouldn’t be right to talk about the guys, and our little tricks, in front of them.”

“Well, when I was strolling around, earlier, I saw this little bench behind a screen of shrubbery, over there near the wall,” Dot suggested, pointing a finger in the general direction of the place she’d spotted. “Though, that probably won’t keep it private from your husband.”

“Sounds good,” Lois grinned. “And as far as Kal is concerned, he’ll politely tune me out. It’s hard to believe, I know, but he does it as a courtesy to me. Talking is thirsty work, though, so let me go get us a pitcher of that sangria, to keep our mouths lubricated. Meet you back here in a couple minutes.”

With that, Lois slid her chair back and went off toward the booth where the pitchers of sangria were constantly being refilled. She was back, moments later, with two full pitchers, each of which had to hold at least half a gallon.

“We’ll be back after bit,” Dot informed me, bending down to give me a quick peck on the lips. “We’re gonna go dish, about you guys, behind your backs.”

“So I heard,” I chuckled. “Try to say some nice things, occasionally, please?”

“Of course, honey,” she laughed as she turned to lead Lois off for their ‘summit’. “What is there, that’s nasty, that I could say about you, anyway?”

I sighed softly, and smiled after her, then looked across the table at Kal. He hadn’t needed to read lips to catch the conversation. He sighed and rolled his eyes, though his lips had the slight play of a smile about them.

“You and I are going to have to pour our wives into the car, tonight, I’m afraid,” he said with a quiet laugh, “if they put away the contents of those pitchers.”

“Or we could put our collective foot down and stop the whole thing, right now,” I said.

“Do you really think that’s possible?” Kal shrugged. “Even *I* don’t have the power to stop Lois, when she gets in one of her ‘moods’. The only thing we can do is keep an eye on things.”

What could we do, I wondered. I mean, *really*? Might as well try and stop the wind!

“You’ve done a fair amount of traveling, in your day,” I said to him. “Ever run across a really good recipe for ‘hangover helper’?”

“Yep!” he nodded. “Didn’t even need to go far, to find it! Ma has one that she inherited

from Dad's mom. You know that my Grandpa Kent was a huge drinker, until his first bout with liver problems hit and he had the sense to go on the wagon. Grandma Kent said it was a never-fail concoction, and all of the ingredients can be found in just about any kitchen in the world!"

* * *

Chapter Fourteen: "The Calm Before the Storm"

Opa-Locka Airport

Miami, Florida

11 August, 2005

Contrary to what Kal and I had expected, both Dot and Lois managed to make it to the car, that night, under their own steam. Granted, their movement was a bit on the unsteady side, and Kal and I walked close alongside our wives, ready to lend a steadying arm if needed. Still, I think that we were both pleasantly surprised. That did not prevent Kal from rising early the following morning, raiding the Ybarra family kitchen, and preparing two large glasses of the hangover remedy. He delivered one to the room Dot and I shared, shortly after sunrise. That was a good thing, because Dot woke with a pounding headache and a stomach that was complaining nearly as loudly. It took me a bit of effort to get her to consume Kal's potion, but she eventually did. I was amazed at how fast she bounced back, once the compound was allowed to do its work in her system.

"Don't ever let me do something that stupid, again, honey," she asked meekly, as we left the guest room and made our way downstairs for breakfast.

"And what, pray tell, should I do to prevent that?" I asked her, smiling gently. "You're rather an unstoppable force, when you set your mind on something, you know. That's the main reason I didn't try and interfere, yesterday."

"I know, honey, and I'm sorry for that," she grimaced. "At least, in this instance, I think if you simply mention the Honduran Fiesta, you'll get your point across."

"Filed for future reference, sweets," I grinned at her. "Now, let's go get something to eat. I hope they're serving those *huevos rancheros* with the spicy salsa, again. And some *chorizo* and those Honduran home-fries!"

"Are you trying to upset my stomach on purpose?" she grumbled in a low voice. "I hope they've got something other than spicy eggs and greasy, spicy sausage!"

Fortunately for Dot (and Lois), the breakfast menu included an assortment of fruit, plus a large pot of oatmeal flavored lightly with bananas, as well as the items I'd hoped for. We all ate a hearty meal, spent a little more time visiting with the elder Ybarras, and then loaded ourselves into a couple cars for the trip to the airport. Gumball was ready and waiting with the Gulfstream, when we arrived at the private air terminal side of the aerodrome, and it took a relatively short time – considering the number of souvenirs we'd acquired – to run our baggage through customs and get them loaded onto the jet.

The homeward flight was accomplished without incident and, when we arrived in Miami, we spent a few moments bidding farewell to the Saunders family, and temporary goodbyes to Elena and Gwen. They would be spending a week with Gwen's family, probably doing some of

the Florida theme parks, and then heading back up to the Institute to get ready for another year of school. Johnny, who also made the return trip with us, was headed directly for the Institute, to put the final touches to the coming year's lesson plans for the several courses he taught. And Kal departed – under his own power – for a quick trip to Alpha base.

Once everyone else had departed, we turned our attention to gathering supplies and loading an Osprey for the trip to Caroline Island. Among the numerous containers stacked next to the aircraft, I found one that was marked for my attention. An identical one, marked for Kal, sat immediately below it in the pile. Opening the case marked for me, I discovered the improved and streamlined version of the personal flight unit that Kal and Amy had designed, back at Alpha Base.

I was astonished at the marked differences between this new version and the prototype unit I'd seen Kal testing in the lab back at Alpha Base. The electronics had been reduced to a half-dozen packs, each about the size of a small cellular phone, all of which were attached to a belt that was to be strapped around my waist. Power to run the electronics came from a battery-pack that weighed less than two pounds, and which was mounted beneath a thruster unit that would nestle along my spine between the shoulder-blades. The thruster, itself, was quite compact, all things considered – about the size of a one-liter water-bottle.

Buried beneath the actual flight systems was a suit and a full-head helmet. I was just about to investigate them, when I heard a set of footsteps behind me.

“Don't go digging, just yet, Perry,” the voice identified the newcomer as Amy Roberts Mayfair, even before I turned around.

“Why not?” I asked. “I've got a bit of time to kill, while everything else is going through the last-minute checks.”

“Because I don't want you really touching anything until I can put you through a bit of flight-school,” she chuckled. “This unit is a far cry from that primitive rocket-pack Mitch loaned you, back a few years ago! You'll need a bit of instruction to use it properly, and I don't want any of the controls getting banged around until I've got you fully checked out on them!”

“It's that complex?”

“Yes, and no,” she answered, running her left hand through her hair like a comb. “It's more like it's that sensitive, until you get checked out on it. Take the helmet, for example.”

“What about it?” I asked.

“Well, have you stopped to consider how you'll steer yourself, in flight, without any surfaces like wings and rudders to provide airfoil guidance?”

“Hadn't occurred to me,” I shrugged honestly. “It would have, sooner or later; just not yet.”

“The helmet has some pretty slick electronics built in. Aside from the communications gear, there's a sophisticated package that tracks your eye movement and head movement, and relays information to the steering package. Where your eyes look, that's where you're going to travel.”

“And what happens when I look left or right, to see if Kal is still alongside me?” I asked her.

“If you turn your head to look, that cancels out the transfer of eye-movement data to the flight controller,” she responded. “So remember that there is a difference between what you turn your head to see, and what you move your eyes to look at.”

“Got it!” I nodded. “At least, as much as I can say that, prior to you putting me through your flight school on this gear. I’m ready, when you are.”

“Not here, Perry,” she shook her head. “Not enough room, and not enough time before we head out to the Med.”

“Then, I take it you’re headed out to Caroline Island with us?” I asked her. “That’s rare, that Q-branch ever gets any field duty.”

“True enough,” she giggled at being equated to James Bond’s armorer. “Still, we really can’t spare the time to run you back to the Everglades for flight-training. Even if we did, the swamp is getting to be just too popular a tourist attraction for me to risk having you fly that thing out in the open over the swamps. Some fool tourist or other would be bound to see it, snap a photo, and sell it to the *National Inquirer* or a similar rumor rag!”

“I suppose so,” I nodded. “I can picture the kooky headlines, now! ‘Superman, or Swamp Gas? Man Seen Flying Over Alligator Alley – Without a Plane!’”

“Right!” she agreed. “You and Kal can test them out over the Mediterranean, once we get to the island.”

“I guess you didn’t hear, then,” I smiled at her. “Kal won’t be needing his suit, now.”

“He got his powers back?” Amy’s jaw dropped in astonishment. “How?”

“Let’s wait until we lift off,” I suggested. “It isn’t a story that I can really tell you in five minutes. And Kal should be there, together with Lois, to fill in some of the things from their perspectives.”

Kal returned just a few minutes prior to our scheduled departure for Caroline Island, with another equipment case in hand.

“What’s that?” I asked him as he moved to stow it along with the other equipment in the huge cargo hold.

“Something we’ll need, in order to deal with those warheads,” he answered.

“Care to fill me in?” I pressed the issue. “Since I’m part of the missile hunting party?”

“Well, there are a couple ways to deal with the threat,” he explained. “I can simply catch up to a missile, grab it, and give it a toss toward the sun. You’re not going to be able to manage anything like that. And I don’t trust that I’ll be able to take out all six missiles on my own. It all depends on how quickly in sequence they get launched.”

“So what are you giving me, to deal with my share of the missiles?” I asked him. “Some kind of Kryptonian ray-gun?”

“Actually, you could put it that way, Perry,” he chuckled, opening the case and turning it toward me so that I could see inside. Nestled in foam packing were two strange pistol-like tubes.

“What are they?”

“They’re Phantom Zone projectors, Perry.”

“Oh, wow!” I whistled, putting a hand to my forehead in amazement.

The Phantom Zone. A dimension coexisting alongside our own, in which humans could survive virtually forever as wraith-like beings with no tangible substance. First discovered by Kal’s father, Jor El, it had eventually become used as a prison to house the worst of Krypton’s criminal element. Now, apparently, it was going to see double duty as a makeshift weapons disposal facility.

“All you’ll have to do is get within a couple hundred yards of the missile, aim the unit, and let it lock on and do its thing,” Kal continued his explanation.

“But won’t the detonation do anything in the Zone?” I asked.

“Once a missile enters the Zone, it’ll go inert,” Kal shook his head. “The propellant reaction will stop, as chemical reactions can’t sustain themselves within the Zone. Electricity doesn’t flow through circuits, there, like it does outside the Zone, so the detonator circuits will go dead, as well. There won’t be any explosions.”

“But what about leaving those things lying around in the Zone?” I asked him.

“Once we’ve got everything else wrapped up, I can use the device to retrieve the six missiles from the Zone. The propellant reaction will have stopped, as will any timing and detonator signals, so they’ll be okay to handle. Then, I’ll just scoop them up and give them a heave toward the sun.”

That sounded logical enough, to me, and I nodded and told him so. But one thing still puzzled me.

“Why two projectors?”

“I’m not taking any chances, Perry,” he said, in a quiet, determined voice. “Those are Russian surplus warheads, and – if the rumors of the overall shoddiness of their engineering standards are the same in your world as they are in mine – I can’t guarantee that my actually laying hands on one of those units while it’s airborne won’t trigger the detonation. I can’t risk an atmospheric blast any more than I could risk a ground-level explosion.”

“Why not try another tactic?” I asked him, a new train of thought occurring to me. “Is there any such thing as a ‘disintegrator ray-gun’ in the Kryptonian arsenal?”

“There is,” he nodded, “but your physics is a little sketchy. There’s not really any such

thing as complete disintegration. Even with the capacity of the Kryptonian disintegrator ray, there would still be some radioactive dust left hanging in the air, left over from the plutonium in the warhead. That would be worse than standard blast fallout because, with fallout, the radioactive particles have a much shorter series of half-lives during which they'd be harmful to carbon-based life-forms – usually only around five hundred years. Warheads like these tend to use the Plutonium-239 isotope, which has a half-life of over twenty-four thousand years!”

I thought for a second and recalled a scene from a movie that fairly accurately depicted the history of the first nuclear weapons experiments. A scientist had touched the ball of uranium or plutonium that was the warhead's core – for only a second or two. He died within a week from radiation poisoning, and it was not a pretty sight. Now I understood Kal's desire for utmost caution.

“Well, we better get onboard,” I suggested. “Gumball's anxious to get us moving.”

Kal closed the case and – for safety's sake – zapped four little spot-welds along the metal edges where top met bottom with his heat-vision, and then placed the case into the hold. We made our way up to the passenger area and found seats, Kal taking a few minutes to install the inertial neutralizer and hook it to a power source. Five minutes later, the Osprey was exiting the hangar and ready for its lift-off.

* * *

Caroline Island
The Mediterranean
11 August, 2005

The flight to Caroline Island was without incident, and we passed the time in long conversations, the longest of which brought Amy up to date on how Kal had regained his powers. So involved were we, in recounting the capture of the pirate base on Seal Cay, and what had happened in the aftermath, that we were coming in for a landing on Pat's private paradise almost before we knew it. Normally, the flight would have taken at least eight hours but, running under the increased speed available to an inertia-neutral aircraft, we made it in just over two and a half.

Pat had a buffet dinner waiting for us when we arrived, and that was followed by a lengthy after – dinner conversation that lasted until almost midnight. We retired to our quarters, slept like logs, and were awakened at seven the next morning by Kenji Columbo. Clad all in white, he was playing the roll of “houseboy”, announcing that breakfast would be served in the main dining room in an hour.

Breakfast was an even more-crowded affair than dinner had been, owing to the fact that a second Osprey – carrying Mitch and a few of his first-rate shock-troops and technicians had arrived in the grey moments of dawn, and the new arrivals were dining with us.

The whole southern side of Pat's rambling ‘mansion’ had a covered terrace at the second floor level, and the quarters Dot and I had been assigned had a pair of French doors that let out onto it. We decided to take the terrace route to the main dining room at its other end, to enjoy a bit of the fresh morning sea-breeze. The temperature was already in the upper sixties, and from what we'd seen of the local weather forecast on the television in our room, it was going to be a glorious day, though there was the potential of a storm forming over Libya and moving north into the Mediterranean before week's end.

We arrived at the other end of the terrace after a leisurely stroll, and I found myself experiencing something akin to a form of *déjà vu*. It was a strange thing, seeing the cluster of individuals and knowing their names, yet knowing that I'd never really been introduced to them. Alana Docket and Ellé Cruise were leaning out over the terrace railing, looking at the sun as it rose over the Mediterranean. A small cloud of smoke issued from between Ellé's lips and I noted, almost without seeing, the customary cigarette perched between the first two fingers of her right hand. I recalled that the two women were among the more capable of Mitch's strike commandos, trained to be every bit as capable as any SEAL on the planet.

Seated at a nearby wrought-iron table were several of Mitch's electronics and computer technicians. Bernie Matthews was obviously still trying to maintain his resemblance to the late Jerry Garcia, down to the bright flow of colors in his tie-died tee shirt. To his right sat Kim Soong Ha, followed by plump Harvey Cable, Becky Speed, Laura Sunday, and Randy "Fast" Lane. I looked them over, marveling at how I knew each of them, yet had never "really" met them. At an adjacent table were three more individuals whose faces and names were totally unknown to me, but the presence of so many 'familiar and yet unfamiliar' people had me intrigued.

I paused in my walk and turned to lean against the balustrade, looking out over the ocean as the memory clicked into place. It was in another adventure, months ago, one that had twisted time and space almost as much as the arrival of our Kryptonian guest had twisted the fabrics of two alternate universes. I'd met these individuals in an altered timeline, one in which Clark had somehow become the president of the nation – and in which I had become a hunted terrorist.

Dot and I acknowledged the group with a brief series of good-morning greetings, and then moved on inside the opened French doors to the dining room proper. The big single table of the night before had been removed, and a number of smaller four- and six-spot tables had been set up in its place, to accommodate what Pat had been given as the total number of personnel being brought in for the operation. At one of the four-spot tables sat Mitch Drake, Gumball, and J. J. Judge, the pilot of the second Osprey, together with a fourth man who was unfamiliar to me, all involved in a deep conversation that had something to do with how to run the drop-passes for sowing the batch of sonar detectors to alert us to the presence of the pirate submarine as it drew near.

"Morning, Mitch, Gumball, JJ," I greeted them.

"Good morning, Perry," Mitch grunted briefly. "Sleep well?"

"I'd brag about how great a night's sleep I had, with the patio doors open and the lull of the surf as background noise, but I don't want to rub things in too much. I know that, if you got any sleep at all, it was in the Osprey on the way over, and that couldn't have been comfortable."

In truth, our night's rest had been very comfortable, since the temperatures had hovered in the upper sixties throughout the night, and there had been no storms. One nice feature of Caroline Island is the fact that it is blanketed with the same sort of insect-repelling devices that one can find in the residential sections at the Institute. Hence, there are no flies, mosquitoes, or any other annoying insects to intrude on a peaceful night's sleep, even with the doors open to the ocean air.

"It wasn't as relaxing as yours, but I got enough to keep me going for the day. We'll be setting up shop immediately following breakfast. While you folks were down in Honduras, I had

a crew come over here and put up an air-conditioned Quonset hut near the island's antenna farm, so all we need to do is unload our communications and computer equipment to the hut and get it set up and humming. My crew, out there –“ he waved a hand at the group sitting out on the terrace – “will handle that while Gumball, JJ, Vance Mallory, and I deploy the sonar bugs. My guess is that, by nightfall, we'll be up and running. I'll split the technical crew into three shifts to man the hut continuously. Pat's letting us use an outbuilding near the antenna farm as a barracks for the duration, and her kitchen staff from the orphanage will be providing meals for us.”

“What about Alana and Ellé?” I questioned him. “They're combat, not technical.”

“I brought them in early, so they could get familiar with the layout and the area. The two of them will be heading up the platoons of commandos I have enroute on the Herky-bird. They'll air-drop over the Med when we have the sub pinpointed, and handle boarding and securing it, once we can force it to the surface.”

“How's that going to happen?” I asked.

“We'll leaved that detail to our new-found friend,” Mitch chuckled. “I doubt that there's anything the pirates can do, to keep it submerged, if he wants it on the surface!”

I had to admit, he was right.

“Got everything in hand, as usual, I see,” I chuckled, moving away from the table and heading for the buffet line. The food containers were still empty, but one end of the tables held urns of coffee and juice. I grabbed a large mug of coffee, added the needed cream and sugar, and then poured myself a huge glass of grape juice from one of the pitchers nearby. Dot followed suit, and then she and I claimed another table, a six-spot so that there would be room for Clark, Bonnie, Lois, and Kal. Shortly after we sat down, the four of them entered the dining room from the interior side and passed briefly through the coffee-and-juice line before joining us.

“Morning, all!” Bonnie gave a cheery greeting as she settled into one of the chairs and hoisted the huge mug of decaf to her lips. Tasting it, she wrinkled her brow and lips in a slight disdainful gesture.

“Oh, will I ever be glad when this pregnancy is over!” she lamented. “This stuff isn't bad but, no matter how hard they try, they always seem to take some of the flavor out of the beans when they decaffeinate them! I can't wait to get back to the good high-octane brew!”

“The oils that contain the bulk of the flavor also contain the bulk of the caffeine,” Kal commented offhand. “It's only natural that the decaffeination process will alter the richness of the flavor, somewhat. Of course, roasting and brewing times have something to do with the overall taste of the resultant beverage, too. If you'll excuse me for a couple minutes...”

With that, he stood and strode away from the table, exiting the dining room through the door that led into the kitchen facility. He was gone for some fifteen minutes, returning with a freshly filled, steaming mug of coffee – and a full carafe – that he set in front of Bonnie.

“Add your cream and sugar, and tell me what you think,” he instructed her.

Bonnie left the table for a few moments, to do just that, and we watched as she took a sip on the way back to us. The look on her face as she sat down again was priceless.

“You sure this isn’t ‘regular’?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at Kal.

“Positive,” Kal grinned.

“What did you do?” she persisted.

“If you recall, I told you that roasting and brewing times have a lot to do with the flavor of any coffee,” he explained. “I simply went back to the kitchen – the staff appeared to be taking a break – and rummaged around until I found the canister of decaf beans. I grabbed a small metal container, a thermometer, and some of the beans, and went out onto the terrace through a separate door. It didn’t take much to heat the beans to the proper roasting temperature with my heat-vision, and then it was just a matter of timing the additional roasting process to take it from the ‘mild roast’ they were serving to ‘French Roast’, which is traditionally a much stronger brew. Then, it was just a matter of finding the coffee grinder, grinding the beans, and brewing you a carafe of something a bit stronger than you were sipping when you first sat down.”

“Well, I thank you for this! It’s much better than that first cup! In fact, it’s almost totally indistinguishable from regular coffee, in flavor!”

“My pleasure, Bonnie!” Kal laughed.

A few moments later, the kitchen staff appeared and began filling the serving line with food. There was cold cereal and hot, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage (three kinds!), French toast and pancakes, and an assortment of tropical fruits. The crew from out on the terrace filtered in and we all queued up to fill our plates and tuck in. Something about the sea air filtering in through the ranks of open doors onto the terrace had left us all starving, and most of us went back for seconds – Kal and Clark for thirds – and not much was said in the way of conversation as we busied ourselves transferring food from plate to mouth.

Following breakfast, I noted that some of the folks moved back out onto the terrace once again, obviously to grab a smoke before Mitch convened the expected after-meal meeting. Lois went to join them, as did Dot. I rather expected that move, believe it or not. Before we left the airport in Miami, to head to the Mediterranean, Elena had gifted Dot with several tins of small cigars called ‘Doña Elena’, and I’d seen Dot tuck a tin into her purse before leaving the room that morning. Clark and Kal excused themselves to go and confer with Mitch, and I made my way out to the terrace to join my wife at the balustrade.

I wasn’t really chomping at the bit for an ‘after-breakfast cigar’, but I let her hand me one anyway, lighting up as I stared out over the Myrtoan Sea toward the Sea of Crete.

I’ve said that Caroline island is located in the Mediterranean, but the geography (or, if you want to get technical, *oceanography*) gets a little dicey in this part of the world. The Med is actually divided into a number of other “seas”, some of which are recognized by current treaties at the international level, and some of which are simply holdovers from ancient maps.

Beginning with the strait of Gibraltar, one moves eastward into the Alboran Sea, which lies between Spain to the north and Morocco to the south. Moving further east, you pass to the south of the Balearic Sea. To your far north is the Ligurian Sea, near the northern portion of Italy. South of the Ligurian Sea is the Tyrrhenian Sea, which flanks most of the western coast of Italy, all the way down the ‘boot’ to the ‘football’ that is Sicily.

East of Italy is the Adriatic Sea, which is composed of several lesser seas: the Sea of Marmora, the Thracian Sea, the Myrtoan Sea, and the Sea of Crete. If you do a Wiki search on “Mediterranean Sea”, you’ll eventually stumble on a reference to several sets of islands that dot the Aegean in the rough triangle bounded by Greece, Turkey, and the big island of Crete to the south. One of the clusters is called the Cyclades. While most of the islands in this large cluster are technically prefectures of Greece, Caroline Island is a small dot on the map, almost invisible unless one is looking at the local fishermen’s charts, that lies about midway between the larger resort islands of Naxos and Santorini.

If you got lost in the geography lesson, I apologize. Those of you who didn’t may find themselves with a bit better knowledge of the Mediterranean, and the location of Caroline Island. I’ll caution you not to attempt to go there, though, unless you’ve got legitimate business to conduct with Pat, and have a certified appointment. The folks from Lobo Negro still maintain their excellent run at handling security for the island, and trespassers are treated as such.

We had about fifteen minutes for the ‘smoke break’, and then Mitch moved to the front of the dining area, dragged an empty table over and laid out some folders on it, convening the meeting portion of the agenda.

“Alright, people, listen up!” he said. “Most of us have a busy day ahead of us, and we need to get to work. So let’s go over things, just so everyone is clear on what your tasks are.”

He took a minute to introduce the passengers of the second Osprey to us, and even though I had figured out how I knew them, I still found it a little strange to be introduced to them ‘for the first time’, at least officially in this time-line.

The three faces I hadn’t recognized belonged to Viktor Alexeivitch Krumilovsky (affectionately dubbed ‘Viktor Krum’ by his friends), Dieter Schultz, and Hassan Achmed Al-Faisal (“Hassan Bin Izi”, to his teammates.). These three were to serve as the team specialists in communications and linguistics, owing to the presence of Russian and Arab naval units in the Mediterranean. Dieter’s specific job was to act as interpreter once we found the pirates, since most of them apparently spoke German as their primary language. Additionally, Hassan had been raised in the Arab Quarter of Tel Aviv, and thus spoke fluent Israeli, as well as four Arab tongues. If we ran into any Israeli naval units, he could act as interpreter for those transmissions, as well.

We spent a few minutes shaking hands, and then moved on.

Introductions completed, Mitch began laying out the day’s tasks. As I had hinted, earlier, the technical group was responsible for outfitting the tracking station that would handle the output of the sonar and sound-sensors once Mitch and his aerial crew deployed them. The crew of commandos would be arriving via air-drop from the Hercules, at about sunset, and would have just about enough time to get their bivouac set up and re-pack their ‘chutes before the orphanage dining hall served an additional evening meal for them. Then it would be ‘lights out’ and sack-time for all but the two-person duty crews who’d drawn the night watches in the sensor hut. That installation would be manned 24-7 by skeleton crews until the pirate sub was detected. At that point, and during the daylight shifts before contact, it would be all hands on deck, in order to sort out any other sub-surface contacts. We were certain that there were one or two submarines from the US Sixth Fleet that were currently operating in the Mediterranean. Not to mention the probable existence of a Russian sub or two, and maybe even some British craft.

“Well, that’s the orders of the day, people!” he concluded at last. “Let’s be about our business, shall we?”

The meeting broke up, except for our little group, as we wanted to know if there was any way in which we could lend a hand in anything. Clark voiced the question, and Mitch waved a hand at us, with a bit of a grin.

“Got it all covered,” he smiled. “My people can handle everything. They’re trained in what to do, and you folks really aren’t. As I understand it, Clark, Perry and Kal will handle the actual missile interceptions, while you will be going with the commando crew to board the pirate craft, subdue the crew and officers, and take possession of the boat. You folks really don’t have a lot to do, until we locate the pirate sub, so you might as well try and enjoy some beach time. I do think that Perry and Kal ought to take some time and head over to the northeast end of the island, where it’s nice and rocky and pretty much uninhabited, and try out that suit that Perry will be using. He ought to get in some practice with it, before the time comes when he actually needs to use it!”

“I was planning on that for this afternoon, Mitch,” Kal chuckled in response. “This morning, he can strap into the lightweight version, to get a gentle feel for things, while I honor a promise I made to somebody.”

I smiled, remembering his promise, and to whom it had been made. Kenji was in for a most interesting morning. In fact, I was really surprised that he hadn’t hung around the dining room after giving us our wake-up calls.

“I’m surprised he’s not here, right now,” I commented to Kal.

“He would be, but I made him promise that he’d wait for me to come to him,” Kal said. “He purposely chose to make us the last of his wake-up announcements, just so he could hang around and talk to me. When I finally got him to agree to making himself scarce, he decided that he’d grab a bite of breakfast while we showered and dressed, and then haul himself out to the beach and do a little morning surfing. I figure we can find him there, easily enough.”

He dug a hand briefly into the pocket of his cargo shorts, retrieving a small pill vial. Opening it, he shook a tablet loose and handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I asked him.

“Compazine,” he informed me. “It’s an anti-nausea drug, light-duty. Used mostly for patients undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. It should keep your stomach at bay, considering how much food you packed away at breakfast. Can’t have you getting sick while you try out your new wings, can we? Especially when you’re wearing a full-head helmet!”

“Any side-effects?” I asked him, a trifle apprehensive. I’m really not one to take drugs if they’re not necessary.

“None, in the case of this dosage,” he shook his head vehemently. “I grabbed these at the pharmacy at Alpha Base before we left Miami, when I made the flight to pick up the suit for you.”

I thought about the whole deal for a long moment. I hadn’t really experienced any of

what might be called ‘air-sickness’ when using Mitch’s rocket pack for that flight to Caroline Island, years ago. But, I had to admit, that flight gave me plenty of acceleration sensation in the pit of my stomach, owing to the power of the engine strapped to my back. The new flight suit was equipped with both an inertial neutralizer unit, and a Kryptonian anti-gravity generator, which...

“I’m gonna be flying in essentially zero-gee, with inertial neutralization to boot, right?” I raised an eyebrow as I put the question to him.

“It won’t be totally zero-gee,” Kal advised. “We don’t want you sailing off into orbit. But it will be set for around twenty percent of Earth’s gravity, and that’s enough to slow the reaction-time of the semicircular canals in your inner ear, which is where your body’s sense of balance is generated. Combined with the effect of the inertial neutralizer, the potential exists for some strange sensations in the pit of your stomach during aerial maneuvers.”

“Thanks for the warning, and for the preparation,” I smiled up at him. “How long does this stuff take, to start working?”

“Considering the fact that we’ll be testing you out in an hour or so, I’d take one pill right now,” Kal told me. “It’ll hold you for four to six hours.”

I nodded, opened the vial and tapped one tiny orange pill out into my palm. Popping it into my mouth, I washed it down with a gulp of coffee. Losing breakfast into that full-head helmet filled with electronics was not a prospect that enthralled me in the least!

“I guess I’ll be ready to go, by the time we get the suit out of the Osprey and get it hauled down to the beach,” I grinned.

It turned out that it was a good three hours before I really got into the air. Toting the suit down from the Osprey wasn’t a challenge, because Kal did the hauling of the heavy cases – the suit and the Zone projector – for me. No, the challenge was the hour or so of “ground school” that Amy put me through, just sitting on a low ledge of rock while she outlined the suit’s electronics and all the functions of the control circuitry. I had to do a lot of quick memorizing of the various control switches, not to mention get the helmet’s circuitry to recognize my voice and learn my vocal patterns for calling up the various heads-up display modes with which it could overlay the actual face-screen.

Following the ground-school, Kal rammed a thick anchor-bolt into a huge boulder sunk deep into the sand of the beach, and then paid out around three hundred feet of stout nylon rope, attaching one end to the anchor.

“Best you be tethered, for the initial tests, Perry,” Amy advised as Kal fastened the free end of the rope to a belt around my waist with a mountaineer’s quick-clip.

“That’s not really true,” Kal whispered into my ear as he made sure that the clip was secure, “because I can still out-fly that suit, but let’s humor her, shall we?”

I nodded to Kal, and Amy took the gesture as her cue to proceed.

“Activating suit circuits,” she informed me as she leaned in and touched a button on the pod attached at my left wrist.

I felt the surge of power through the suit more as a lessening of my weight, and spread my stance to adjust the sudden feeling of imbalance. Lifting up, slightly, on the balls of my feet, I found myself suddenly drifting a couple inches off the sand. Amazing!

I'm going to skip over the next couple hours. Basically, it was a lot of confined test maneuvers, a number of which took me several attempts to get right – several embarrassing attempts, which I really don't feel inclined to elaborate upon. Suffice it to say that, at the end of the three hours, Amy pronounced me reasonably proficient on the devices, and I actually felt as though I had gotten the hang of flying. I'd probably never be as adept at it as Kal, but then he'd had a lifetime of practice. Plus, his abilities were all thought-controlled. He had no need to be constantly adjusting controls, either manually or by voice command.

The training session completed, Kal cut me loose from my tether and we lifted gently into the mid-morning air. Banking slightly, we adjusted our course for the same beach where, only a couple weeks earlier, Kal had saved Kenji and his sister from a shark attack. As we neared the beach, we could see Kenji just coasting in to shore on the last gentle rollers of a once-large wave. As the board's skeg (the little fin on its underside, for you non-surfers) began to dig into the sand of the beach, Kenji alighted from the board and bent to pick it up. He was dragging it up onto the beach for a few moments' rest between wave-attempts, when we touched ground behind him.

"Ready for a little sky-surfing, Kenji?" Kal asked him.

"*Si, Señor Kal!*" Kenji turned, whooping with glee. He dropped the board to the sand and ran toward us as fast as his legs could carry him, to stop only a couple feet away from where we stood. The surfboard lay, totally forgotten, on the sand behind him. I walked over and dragged it a few yards farther up onto the sand, just to make sure that the waves didn't wash it away.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Kal asked him, extending a hand.

Kenji stepped forward, turning under the arch of the Man of Steel's extended arm, and Kal draped it around the boy's waist. Then, with a gentle push, he lifted from the ground and was off. I waited a couple seconds, activating the video camera and recorder built into my gear, before following them aloft.

* * *

It was at times like this when Kal could feel the thrill of flying for the first time again ... the experiencing of the wind in his face, the joy of having the open sky ahead of him and the pull of gravity surrendering to him. Most of the time, he took the experience of flying for granted, like a commuter driving to work. But hearing Kenji whooping as he took them through a few low clouds ... it was magic. And despite the shortness of the flight, the experience would be more than words could ever describe. For both of them.

He took the youth through loops and barrel rolls and Immelman twists – all the various maneuvers he knew – and Kenji whooped and howled with joyous abandon. Thickening the aura that surrounded the both of them, he arced high up above the clouds and passed the speed of sound, letting just a little of the shock-wave through so that Kenji could feel it. Then, coming in low over the water, he slowed his speed drastically. Reaching up to his collar, he detached his cape one-handed, slipping briefly over the beach to hover while he allowed it to flutter to the sand. Then he looked down at the boy hugging him tightly beneath his right arm.

“Climb up on my back,” he suggested.

It took Kenji a few seconds to wriggle around and take the offered position.

“Now get your balance, and stand up slowly, just as though you were on your board,” Kal urged him.

Again, it took Kenji a few moments to gain his balance in a position standing with one foot between Kal’s shoulder blades and the other on Kal’s waist.

“Now, you’re ‘sky-surfing’!” Kal chuckled as he gently moved back out over the water and began to pick up speed.

They soared over the water, parallel to the beach, for several moments, with Kal slowly effecting a gentle bank that took them farther out to sea in a slow curve. Kenji maintained his balance with relative ease and, when they were about a half-mile out, Kal turned toward the shore once more, skimming lower and lower until he was only a couple feet above the tops of the waves.

All too soon, from Kenji’s point of view, the experience was over. Kal cruised to a gentle halt, only inches above the sand of the beach.

“All ashore!” he told Kenji.

Kenji stepped down to the sand and Kal moved to a standing position beside him.

“Thank you so very much, *Señor* Superman!” Kenji effused, taking Kal’s hand and shaking it briskly but warmly. “I will remember this time, always!”

“My pleasure, Kenji,” Kal smiled, ruffling the boy’s hair.

“And here’s a little something to help,” I said as I alighted on the beach beside them. Popping the mini-DVD disk from the recorder mounted on my belt, I handed it to Kenji.

“There’s only three people allowed to watch this,” I instructed him. “You, your sister, and *Señorita* Patty. Nobody else. Ever! Understood?”

“*Si, Señor* Spook!” Kenji laughed. “I can keep a secret!”

“That’s good.” I nodded.

Kal and I then bade Kenji a temporary goodbye, and returned to the section of beach where I’d practiced my maneuvers. There, I removed my flight-gear, packaging it up in the protective case while Kal doffed his costume in exchange for cargo shorts and an Aloha shirt, and then we headed back to the orphanage compound. Aside from an afternoon practice-session with the full armored flight-suit, we had the rest of the day, basically, to lounge around and wait.

The opportunity for rest turned out to be a good thing, at least for me.

* * *

Chapter Fifteen: “Mediterranean Meleé”

Caroline Island
The Mediterranean
15 August, 2005
12:30 hours, local time

There's an old saying that there's nothing constant, in this universe of ours, except change. That was eminently

Four long, uneventful days had passed. The last of the underwater sensors had long since been dropped, and we'd settled into a somewhat tense state of waiting for the pirate submarine to make its appearance. We'd detected it a day earlier, as it cruised underwater past the Pillars of Hercules, the 'official' western boundary of the Mediterranean, and now we were just waiting for it to work its way deeply enough in to be well-clear of coastal areas.

Unfortunately, nature was not cooperating with us. Or, perhaps, God was adding His own forces to the impending battle. I'd like to think the latter because, in the end, it was the weather that changed the entire course of events for us. 1 Samuel 17:47 tells us, *And all this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hands.*

They don't often have storms of hurricane proportion in the Med. And, even when they do, they don't call them hurricanes and they don't give them names. The English-speaking locals and tourists call these freak storms as 'Medicanes', while scientists refer to them as 'Levant storms' or 'tropical cyclones'. Regardless of the name, they can pack heavy rainfall amounts and devastating winds, just like their named Atlantic cousins.

That's what we faced on the morning when, based on our sonar-net estimates of their course and speed, the pirates should have been at their optimum launch point. We'd been dealing with the heavy weather for a day and a half, already, and it showed no signs of letting up in the next day or so. It was at this point that Mitch sauntered up to Clark, Kal, and me, just after lunch.

"I think we have an opportunity, here," he suggested, "but we'll need to shift the plan around, a bit."

"What have you got in mind?" Clark asked him, raising one eyebrow at the eager expression on Mitch's face.

"Let's grab that empty table in the corner, and talk it over." Mitch responded.

We grabbed a fresh drink apiece, and then quietly walked over to the empty table that Mitch had indicated.

"So what's the new plan?" I asked, once we were seated.

"According to our sensors," Mitch began, "the sub changed position overnight. They've moved out of deep water to a shelf that surrounds one of the nearby islands. Currently, they're sitting on the bottom in about a hundred and eighty feet of water. I'm guessing that the surface winds are just too heavy for them to launch their missiles and expect them to stay on target."

"That's a logical assumption," Clark nodded.

“Well, what I was wondering is, if we have a pretty good position-fix on them – down to about three hundred yards or so – and we outfit Kal with a small GPS unit, can he locate the sub?”

“I would think so,” Kal nodded, smiling.

“And you could slap a few quick spot-welds on their outer torpedo-tube doors, with your heat vision?” The security director lowered his voice markedly, leaning forward.

“Not a problem.” Kal’s smile grew broader as he began to anticipate Mitch’s daring scheme.

“And, can you forcibly move the sub here, and push it aground on a section of beach?”

“Again, not a problem.”

“Then, gentlemen, I suggest that we have a good chance of bagging these pirates and not letting them get off a shot!” Mitch concluded, smiling and running a hand through his buzz-cut.

“Any details we need to work out?” Clark moved for clarification.

“Not much,” Mitch shrugged. “We’ll need to select an out-of-the-way section of beach, somewhere here on the island, and have the boarding squads standing by and ready. It’d also be a good thing to have Perry go along with Kal, since he’s already checked out on that flight suit, and plant a magnetic transducer on the hull of the sub.”

“What’s a transducer?” I asked.

“It’ll essentially turn the hull of the sub into a loudspeaker system,” Mitch explained. “Slap it on the hull, press the activation switch, and then speak into a com-link. Whatever you say, they’ll hear throughout the submarine. All you need to do is tell them to heave to and prepare to be boarded. Once Kal shoves the bow of the sub up onto the beach, our people climb aboard, open the hatches, and start rousting the pirates. If worst comes to worst, we can always lob in a few canisters of Monk’s knockout gas. We’ve got some, as part of our supplies.”

“Sounds workable,” Kal nodded. “And it’s actually a much simpler plan than the ocean assault we were looking at.”

“Will the pirates be able to figure out what’s going on?” I asked Mitch.

“Only in part,” Mitch shrugged. “If they try to launch, they’ll get warning read-outs that their outer torpedo-tube doors aren’t opening. Depending on what model sensor-suite they have, they may realize that they’re moving, but it’s not in response to their efforts. And they’ll most certainly hear the noise when the hull bottoms out on the beach as Kal pushes the sub ashore. Still, they won’t be able to do anything about it.”

“How long will it take to rig the flight suit to operate underwater?” I asked.

“I already checked with Amy,” Mitch grinned broadly. “The suit is airtight, already, with its own onboard air supply, for operating at high altitudes. The control modules and all of the electronics are already waterproofed. You’re good to go, as soon as you suit up.”

“Then, when do you want to go for it?” I chuckled.

Mitch glanced at the Doxa dive-watch on his wrist. “Give me an hour and a half,” he responded. “I’ll need to lay this out for the rest of the troops, and get my assault team suited up and into position on the beach.”

“Let’s go for it, then!” Kal told him, enthusiastically.

Mitch rose to his feet and strode to the front of the dining hall.

“Okay, people; listen up!” he commanded sharply.

The dull buzz of conversations faded almost immediately, and all eyes turned to face him.

“We’ve got a little change in plans,” Mitch began the briefing with a chuckle. “We’re gonna make use of the weather and bring this thing to an end early. If it goes the way I think, we’ll bag these pirates without a fight.”

He paused for a minute, to let the enthusiastic response die down, and then raised a hand for silence.

“And, since it’s essential to this strategy, you’re all about to get read-in on a very closely guarded secret. Kal, would you come up here for a moment?”

The demonstration was quick and simple. Mitch borrowed a Glock-9 from one of his troops and fired five rounds point-blank at Kal. Our Kryptonian friend caught every single one of them, dropped them on the table, and then held up his hands palms-outward to show that they were uninjured. There was a muted buzz of amazement from the assembled soldiers and the few technicians not currently on duty in the sensor-hut, and I heard the word ‘Superman’ from at least five different individuals in the room.

“You’re right,” Mitch smiled at the assembly. “It’s Superman. Unfortunately, I don’t have the time or the luxury to go into the back-story on how a comic-book character has come to life. You’ll just have to trust me when I tell you that the rest of his powers are no different from what you already surmise. Now, let’s get to the mission strategy. I want to move on this, within the hour, people!”

The remainder of the briefing was short and sweet. It took Mitch all of ten minutes to outline his new strategy, assign the troops to their specific functions, and dismiss them to go and get geared up. Once he’d dismissed his people to go about their duties, he returned to our table with one of his assault troopers following in his wake..

“Clark, I want you to go with the assault team,” Mitch suggested. “Paulsen, here, will see to getting you suited up and ready. Perry, let’s get you into your flight suit.”

And that was it. We were off and running. Clark left with Paulsen, to get outfitted with a full Paradox body-armor suit, and Kal and I headed off to grab the flight-suit and his costume.

*Caroline Island
The Mediterranean
15 August, 2005*

13:45 hours, local time

Kal and I arrived at the beach well ahead of the rest of the troops. It helps, when you can fly, instead of having to slog along in the sand. Having a Kryptonian on your assault team is a wonderful thing.

We'd picked a rocky, deserted section of beach where the island soared upward in a sheer cliff about eighty yards from the surf-line as our operating theatre. As is the case with many of the islands in the vicinity, the island that Pat had chosen for her little paradise was honeycombed with caves, and there was a small one that fronted on this stretch of beachfront real estate. The entrance was short and narrow, but Kal's x-ray vision detected that the cavern behind it was quite spacious, and it took him less than two minutes to widen the entrance to four meters wide by three meters high.

"There's no sense in the assault team crouching on the beach in this wind and rain," he grinned over at me as he brushed the rock-dust from his hands and wrists.

Wind and rain, indeed! The wind was clipping in excess of seventy-five miles per hour, and I was grateful for the protection of the Paradox-coated flight suit. Even though there was a light, wind-driven rain falling, the wind was picking sand off the beach and flinging it simply everywhere. I could hear the individual grains pinging off the suit's fabric like tiny machine-gun bullets, and I looked over at Kal and smiled my thanks as we stepped into the shelter of the large cavern. The troops would thank him, too, for not having to wait outdoors in that nature-made sandblaster.

The rest of our assault force arrived some fifteen minutes later, and we all did the routine checks to make sure that our equipment was ready.

"It's time," Mitch prodded us, and both Kal and I nodded.

I was completely ready, except for twisting the valve that would cut me off from outside air and activate the suit's air tanks. Kal took a minute to don the two pieces of gear that he was to use, on this mission. The first was the wrist-mounted GPS indicator, which Mitch had already programmed with the approximate location of the pirate submarine. The second was a full-head helmet that sealed against his neck, coupled with a set of air tanks. I know; you're thinking that Superman can hold his breath for hours at a time, so what's with the air tanks? The thing is, you can't hold your breath if you have to talk, and Kal would have to talk to me, to let me know when he had welded all of the torpedo tubes shut. Hence, the air tanks. The helmet contained the gear he'd need in order to communicate with me.

Gear in place, we were ready to go. Mitch handed me the limpet transducer, and I hooked it to a clip on my belt. I snapped him a loose salute, and we turned and left the cave.

"Are you ready, Perry?" Kal asked me as – once again – we stood in the sandblaster that was the beach in this 'Medicane'.

"You promised to take me flying with you, once your powers were restored," I chuckled back at him. "You're not getting out of it that easily!"

It had been decided that, rather than have me try and fight the storm under the flight suit's

power, it would be simpler for Kal to take me under an arm and fly me to our destination. After all, he had the experience with flying in heavy storm winds, and I didn't. It made perfect sense, to me, the longer I spent out in the hurricane-force winds.

He put his arm around me, and I started to crouch, anticipating that he would do the same in order to push off into the air.

“What are you doing, Perry?” he chuckled at me through out suit link-up.

Hastily, I explained my actions to him.

“It's not really physical, Perry,” he laughed back at me. “Look down.”

I did. We were already twenty feet above the beach and rising slowly.

“It's all telekinetic,” he explained as we leveled off and headed out to sea. “There's no muscle-power involved, remember?”

Sheepishly, I nodded and responded in the affirmative over the radio-link.

Following the guidance indicators on the GPS unit, it took us about eight minutes of rather leisurely – at least, considering the speeds of which Kal is really capable – flying, to reach the sub's estimated position. Then we lifted upward a few hundred feet to give him a better field of vision for scanning the ocean depths below us. It took him three minutes to pinpoint the sub's exact location, and we spent another minute or so in getting there.

“Ready?” Kal smiled at me as we slowly approached the surface of the Med.

I lifted a hand and twisted the valve that closed the external air intake and activated the regulator on my air tanks.

“Suit secure and on internal air,” I nodded, flashing him a thumbs-up gesture.

“Then, it's time,” he replied, and we slowly sank below the waves.

Even though the skies above us were dark and dismal, the shadowy silhouette of the sub was visible once we got within a hundred yards of it. Prior to that, our navigation was guided by Kal's eyesight, because mine would have been useless. As we approached the sub more closely, Kal let go of me and I started moving under my own power, trudging along the ocean bottom in the direction of the sub's mid-section. I figured that the best place to attach the transducer would be somewhere directly below the conning tower, or sail, of the sub. After all, the periscope is on the sub's 'bridge', and it goes up through the sail. Meanwhile, Kal moved forward and began zapping tack-welds along the edges of all six of the sub's forward torpedo tube doors.

“Doors secured,” he called back, some five minutes later.

I crossed the short distance between my position and the sub, leaned in, and slapped the transducer against the hull. Then, stepping back a couple of paces, I thumbed a switch on one of my wrist-bands that would activate the transducer's radio-link.

“Ahoy, the submarine!” I called loudly. “This is Perry Liston, of the American assault

team, Broadsword. Heave to, and prepare to surface and be boarded. This is your only warning!”

With that, I thumbed the wrist-switch again, cutting off the transducer, and called out to Kal.

“It’s all yours,” I told him. “Grab hold and aim it for the beach.”

Kal quickly moved below the submarine, reaching down and lifting it slowly from the ocean bottom. Meanwhile, I kicked off and swam for the small well atop the conning tower, to ride the sub shoreward. Less than a minute passed before the sail broke the surface.

* * *

Aboard the pirate submarine, pandemonium reigned briefly as captain and crew alike heard the challenge from the American combat team and then felt their boat lurch from the bottom as if of its own accord.

“Engines, full reverse!” Rutger Mueller snapped the command.

“Engines full reverse, aye,” came the response. Then, “Still making headway.”

“Helm, steer us hard to port!”

“Helm, hard port, aye,” the helmsman replied.

Desperately, Mueller fastened his eyes on the compass, waiting for the needle to move in response to the course-change. Despite his intense stare, the needle remained steadfast in its prior position.

“Sir, helm is hard to port. Course change is ineffective!” the helmsman cried out.

Shoving the boat’s executive officer roughly out of the way, Mueller moved around the plotting table and picked up the microphone.

“Torpedo room,” he shouted. “Open outer doors! Flood tubes one through six, and prepare to launch on my mark!” *“I’ll give those verdamt Americans something to worry about!”* he told himself.

“Captain!” the urgent cry came over the control room’s loudspeaker a moment later. Outer door controls are unresponsive! It’s like they’re jammed shut! We can’t fire!”

Something flickered in the back of Mueller’s consciousness and he stalked out of the control room in frustration. His craft was in the control of some unknown American anti-sub warfare invention, his tubes froze shut and unable to launch their deadly cargo. The odds were that his base had been discovered and invaded, as well. His long run as a pirate was over. Soon they would be forced to the surface. The ship would be boarded and its crew taken into custody. They had committed far too many killings in and around the Caribbean islands and, with only a few notable exceptions, hanging was the universal sentence for piracy and murder.

He reached his cabin, kicked open the door, and strode to his desk. Unlocking one of the drawers, he extracted a small canister with a valve at one end.

He would be performing a kindness, for his shipmates and crew. Of that, he was certain.

* * *

The distance between the sub's position and Caroline Island was roughly forty miles and, owing to the sheer mass of the submarine and its resistance to wind and wave in the tempest that raged around us, it took even Kal a full half hour to cover the distance to the beach where our force of assault troopers waited. Once we arrived, he shoved hard against the tail of the boat, forcing its bow well up onto the beach. The assault teams stormed out of the cavern and went about their tasks.

Kal cracked the hatch open and, almost immediately, a concerned expression appeared on his face.

"What's up?" I asked him.

"I smell almonds," he answered.

"Could be cyanide," Mitch suggested. "All team members stay buttoned up and on internal air until further notice! That's an order!"

We had anticipated at least some pockets of resistance, once we cracked the hatches and entered the sub. What confronted us, however, was a deathly silence, save for the constant rapid pinging of the still-active sonar unit.

And it *was* a deathly silence, for that's what we found throughout the boat – death. Not one of the pirate crew was left alive. All were mysteriously dead, with a froth of foam on their lips.

"Definitely cyanide!" Mitch grunted to Kal, nudging one of the pirate corpses with a heavy boot. "Your having smelled almonds was a good clue. This foam on their lips clinches it."

Mitch was right, in his assessment of the situation. We confirmed that, about twenty minutes later, when one of the search teams found the pirate captain dead in his desk-chair, in his cabin. A small cylinder, marked with the chemical formulation for cyanide gas, had fallen to the floor at his feet.

* * *

Caroline Island
The Mediterranean
19 August, 2005
17:30 hours, local time

The last of the weighted body-bags slipped from the deck and into the water some twenty miles out from Caroline Island. Giving eighty nine pirates a Christian burial at sea had been a long and heart-wrenching task. Granted, some of Mitch's troops who assisted us might not have felt that way. However, for those of us who knew the Lord, the undercurrent of emotions was much different. Had any of the eight-eight crewmen had a relationship with Christ, at any time in their lives? More to the point, had any of them known of the cyanide gas, before they drew their

fatal breaths? Had they had any time to look back over a life of piracy and murder, and even think of repenting and calling on Jesus Christ for forgiveness? Or had they gone to their deaths virtually unaware, until the last second?

None of us would ever really know the answers to those questions, and it saddened us to think of eighty-nine more souls setting off on a one-way journey to Hell.

The storm had taken another full day to abate, and we had spent part of the time bagging the pirate corpses and stacking them in the cavern, for want of any other place to store such a morbid cargo. We'd also used the time to ventilate the submarine, making sure that the last vestiges of the deadly cyanide gas had been cleared from it before attempting to work inside the hull without breathing gear.

Once the pirate crew's bodies had been removed, Mitch set about having two of his people – both of whom spoke and read fluent Russian – start at the bow of the boat with a couple of Dymo label-makers, and translate all of the control labels into English. Meanwhile, he'd sent out a call to Alpha Base for a team of twenty four ex-Navy submariners to be transported to the Med to form a 'prize-crew' to sail the captured sub back to its base in the Turks-Caicos Islands.

With the eventual arrival of the prize-crew came one piece of good news. Before we left the Turks, we had appointed an agent to conduct negotiations with the government there, on behalf of the Institute. For a price – one that, I was sure, was going to require another gold-laden pack-train to wend its way out of the Valley of the Vanished – the Turks government was willing to sell the land above the pirate base to the Institute. We had a brilliant young professor, Colin Nelson – whose grandfather Harriman was an old navy submariner, himself – heading up the department of Marine Sciences at the Institute. Unfortunately, we'd been unable to establish a working relationship with any of the major institutions – such as Woods-Hole – that would give us access to underwater exploration. On the ground above the sub pens, we planned on erecting the Nelson Institute for Marine Research.

Mitch, meanwhile, had been busy plying his contacts by radio and telephone, and we had already received six offers for the two U-boats the pirates had been using, as museum pieces. The sale of those subs would offset the cost of the construction of the surface buildings – and a major renovation of the sub-pen area – to some degree.

It had taken us two days, using Pat's small yacht, to conduct all of the funerals, as we had to make several trips back and forth to carry all eighty-nine of the pirates out to their final resting place. By the time we had finished, most of the other work of dismantling the detector station and packing things aboard the Ospreys had been accomplished by Mitch's remaining people. We were finally ready to leave Caroline Island and head back home.

Except, we weren't really going home; not quite yet. A major effort by some of Mitch's best technicians and crafts people, led by Professor William Harper Littlejohn, had finally put together a room in one of the labs at Alpha Base, where the conditions inside the temple that had housed The Singing Stone were duplicated precisely. Kal was needed, there, to translate the voice that spoke while the images were displayed. The rest of us were going out of sheer curiosity. If nothing else, it was a chance to see what a Kryptonian city looked like.

As our boat touched the dock, Clark and I alighted onto the pier. There, we were met by a driver who ferried us to the top of the island's mesa, where the Ospreys were already warming their engines. We were met almost at the plane by Kal, who had spent the morning stringing a

brand new heavy-duty shark-net into place across the lagoon where Kenji did his surfing and the rest of the orphans and staff did their swimming.

“Lagoon all shark-proof?” I asked him as we climbed aboard the Osprey.

“There won’t be any danger to the swimmers, now, aside from their own horseplay!” Kal assented.

One by one we slipped into our seats. I gave Dot a quick kiss as I slid in beside her and reached for the seat belt.

“Clear to go, Gumball!” Clark gave the word to our pilot as he slipped in beside Bonnie.

Monk’s eldest son revved the engines, the turbo-props caught air, and we lifted from Caroline Island for the trip homeward.

Chapter Sixteen: “The Stone Sings a Tune...”

Alpha Base
The Florida Everglades
20 August, 2005
09:30 hours, local time

We’d left Caroline Island pretty late in the day. The time-difference between there and Alpha Base is seven hours, and we battled a headwind that limited our speed on the nearly six thousand mile trip. We managed it in just under four hours, which put our body-clocks at just about 9:30 at night. All we really felt like doing was grabbing a meal in the base’s dining hall and then getting some sleep. Kal, of course, didn’t really need any sleep. He did, however, catch a meal with us and then, after tucking his wife into bed for the night, he made straight for the lab that held the crystal with his name carved on its face.

When he joined us again for breakfast, the next morning, he was strangely quiet. I asked him if everything was okay, and he uttered a very noncommittal reply. When I badgered him for a clarification, he gave me a stern glance.

“Let it wait until we get to the lab, Perry,” he sighed. “You’ll understand, once you’ve seen what I saw last night.”

Now, I was really curious, but I gently bit my tongue and settled in for the wait. Luckily, the wait wasn’t really that long. We were all anxious to see what Johnny and the technicians had managed to accomplish with the crystal, so we wolfed down our food as fast as we could. When we arrived at the lab, we were met by Johnny, the techs, and – surprisingly – Elena, who had just arrived on an Osprey from Miami where she’d been visiting with the Saunders family.

“I hope you don’t mind my having invited Elena to be a part of this,” Johnny apologized hastily as we were shaking hands with the young woman. “After all, it is largely due to her, and to her ancestors, that we were even made aware of this artifact’s existence.”

“Of course not, Johnny!” Kal answered the apology for all of us.

With that, Johnny ushered us into the lab.

The first thing that struck me was the fact that the room was relatively small and square, not circular as the temple in the Mexican jungle had been. The next thing I noticed was the fact that there were no parabolic mirrors lining the walls of the room.

“No mirrors?” I commented to Johnny.

“Quite correct,” he nodded, smiling. “After a brief debate, the technicians and I found them to be absolutely superfluous to the task at hand.”

“It’s been a long week, Johnny,” I grinned at the gaunt archaeologist, “and I forgot to bring my thesaurus this morning. So, would you mind trying to keep the vocabulary as simple as you can?”

“Sorry,” he blushed slightly. “What I meant was, the only purpose that the mirrors in the original temple served was to concentrate beams of solar energy on the twelve gold points that line the edges of the crystal.”

“Once we took a look at the holographic diagram that the professor made, of that temple,” one of the technicians – his name-tag read ‘Stew’ – took over, “we were able to run some numbers.”

Stew stepped over to a computer console and tapped a couple keys. A large flat-panel monitor on the wall lit up with a three-dimensional diagram of the temple. Stew slipped his right hand into a glove, picked up what appeared to be an amber billiard ball, and the image began to rotate along all three of its axes on the screen. His left hand continued to tap computer keys as he continued his explanation.

“Using the professor’s holographic map, and the precise distance from the walls of the pedestal which had held the crystal, and the distance above the niches for the light-holes, we were able to do quite a bit of calculating. We determined where – exactly – the mirrors had been placed, and what sort of curvature they had, in order to focus a beam of light precisely on the discs on the sides of the crystal.

“The professor was also mindful enough to use a photometer and take readings of the light that streamed down through one of the holes in the roof at high noon. Knowing how strong the light was, when it hit the mirrors, allows us to calculate the intensity of the concentrated beam by the time it impinged on the crystal. From there, it was merely an exercise in electronics to rig a set of fiber-optic cables that would transmit the necessary light-intensity to the discs on the sides of the crystal.”

As technical as that all sounds, it was accompanied by the illustration provided on the monitor, and we all understood it enough to get to the next part.

“Once we had the ‘power source’ ready, it was just a matter of turning it on and seeing what happened,” Johnny took over the narrative. “In one essence, it was magnificent, and yet in another, it was rather frustrating.”

“Why so, Johnny?” Clark asked.

“Because the crystal seemed to do nothing but show the same thing, over and over again, like a broken record,” the old professor spat. “The view of the alien city was magnificent, but it was repeated over and over again, and nothing we attempted could ‘un-stick’ the recording.”

He paused for a moment, taking his glasses off and wiping them on a corner of his lab coat.

“That all changed, late last night, however,” he concluded. “It changed the moment its apparent ‘owner’ laid a hand on it.”

We turned and looked to Kal.

“I walked up to the crystal and laid a hand on it, just ‘enjoying’ the feeling of actually touching something that had come from my home planet,” Kal explained. “I’d held it in my hands when I rescued it from the ocean floor, but it was still partially encased in that coating of old clay that that conquistador, Ybarra, placed it in.

“This time, though, there was nothing but the crystal itself. I walked over to the pedestal and gently laid my hand on it. I felt a sudden pulse flow up through my arm and across my entire body, then vanish. The next thing I know, the image being displayed by the crystal had changed. Instead of a city being displayed, there was the image of a man – my birth-father, Jor-El.”

“You recognized him?” Bonnie asked.

“It’s not like I hadn’t seen images of him, before,” Kal shrugged. “Remember the movie you folks showed me? I had the set of crystals that accompanied me in my spaceship.”

“That’s right!” I nodded. “But, please – continue.

“The image began to speak, explaining the function and purpose of the crystal. It’s really a combination computer and recording device, combined with an amazing sensor array and an amount of memory space that is measurable – in human terms – in billions of terabytes. Once I understood the function of the crystal, I figured out a way to tie it into the computers in this lab. Once I had that managed, I...”

He faltered, at that point, looking down at the floor in what appeared to be a major case of embarrassment.

“Go on, Kal,” I prompted him gently.

“Sorry,” he said, looking up at us again. “It’s just that, well, Earth – the Earth of my world-line, at least – was not unknown to my race.”

“I think we figured that one out, already, Kal,” Clark chided softly. “If Jor-El hadn’t known about Earth, how could he have sent you there?”

“Well, you’re going to see some things, in a few minutes, that...” he sighed and let the sentence hang. Striding across the room, he touched his hand gently to the face of the crystal, which began to pulse briefly.

“The crystal contained a complete translation matrix for Kryptonian and Earth English

languages,” he commented. “You’ll understand why, shortly. Meanwhile, I’ve rigged the crystal to use that matrix to directly translate the voice-track of its recordings into English, so that you can all understand what’s going on.”

With that, he lifted his hand from the crystal. The room lights dimmed automatically, as though the crystal was controlling them, and an amazingly crisp three-dimensional image began to solidify in the air in front of us.

It was a scene that was, at once, both familiar and alien. We were looking into a large room that could have been any family’s living room, provided that family lived on an alien planet. On one side of the room there was something that resembled a couch, upon which sat a beautiful woman nursing an infant. Nothing was really exposed, but the activity was obvious to anyone who’s seen a nursing mother even once.

“My mother, Lara Jor-El., and me,” Kal clarified for us.

As we watched and listened, Lara softly made cooing sounds into her son’s tiny ear as he nourished himself at her breast. Then, across the room, a panel hissed aside and a tall man came into the room. His pace was rapid, and his mannerism indicated a very agitated state of mind. As he crossed the room, he looked up toward the couch and the woman upon it. Whatever device was serving as a camera caught his face, and none of us needed to be told that this was Jor-El, the father of our guest. I looked at Jor-El’s face, and then at Kal’s. It was like looking at identical twin brothers.

“I noticed the resemblance, long ago,” Kal smiled at me.

In my mind, the paraphrase of a passage of scripture came to me. *The Son is the expressed image of the Father in Heaven.*

“You’re home early,” Lara greeted her husband.

“The meeting didn’t last all that long,” Jor-El responded soberly. “The scout-ship has returned.”

“And the report?” she asked. “They’ve been gone nearly a year...”

Kal leaned forward and touched the crystal and the image paused briefly.

“The scout-ship my father mentioned is a vessel equipped with the star-drive that he invented. It had been sent out nearly a year – almost two Earth-years – earlier, by the council, that ruled my world, to explore the area of space nearest to Krypton.”

He lifted his finger from the crystal and the playback resumed.

“The reports are almost too fantastic to believe, Lara,” Jor-El sighed. “There are stars out there, around which circle planets not too unlike our own. Some are even inhabited by races who have intellects like the Kryptonians of hundreds of years ago. And a strange thing was discovered, quite by accident. Exposed to the light of a milder sun than ours for a prolonged period of time, our people began to develop amazing abilities. Their strength increased, and their speed, and they could even fly! According to one of the medicos from the mission, it was because their bodies took in the energy from these alien stars and stored it, like an accumulator, and then channeled it

into these abilities to amplify their bodies.”

“That’s wonderful news, is it not?” Lara asked him.

“No,” he told her, shaking his head with a saddening look. “It is the worst thing that could have happened. The council has become convinced that – based on the predominance of these milder suns in the cosmos – it is our people’s destiny to go out among the stars and rule the worlds that we find there.”

“Rao-mesh!” Lara gasped.

Again, Kal halted the playback.

“Rao…” he began, hesitating for a second.

“It’s the Kryptonian name for the Supreme Being,” I finished for him. “We know that one, too – or, at least, the really dedicated Superman fans know it. My guess is that your mother just uttered the Kryptonian equivalent of ‘My God!’”

“Good guess, Perry,” Kal nodded. “My parents were Raoists – believers in Rao. But they were in the minority, as far as their civilization was concerned. A very small minority.”

“Why didn’t the crystal translate that, then, honey?” Lois asked her husband.

“Apparently, the Kryptonian-English database was compiled by the crew of the scout ship, none of whom were Raoists, and they didn’t bother cataloging deific references.”

He touched the crystal again, and the playback continued.

“How soon…” Lara began, then faltered and held her infant son tightly to her chest.

“How soon does the conquest begin?” Jor-El finished the question for his wife. “In a matter of months. Apparently, the council appropriated the necessary funding for building the first ten large-scale ships months ago, in secret session, and they’re very nearly finished.”

“Some of the worlds will surely resist,” Lara suggested.

“And they will fall harder than the rest,” Jor-El informed her. “No world that the scout ship discovered has a technology that can match ours. Their best efforts will be in vain. There is only one glimmer of hope, and even that one has a dark side to it.”

“And what is the hope, husband?”

“You know the quakes that we have been experiencing, these last several months,” he told her with a long sigh.

“Yes.”

“I finished my computations based on them, and on the solar-flare activity that always seems to coincide with them, this morning, at the Sciences Center. Krypton has, at best, only a few months to live. Our sun is pulsing, contracting and flaring. It’s an uncertainty whether the

star itself will explode first, or whether the gravitational stresses from its expansions and contractions will tear this planet apart.”

“We could use the ships to escape,” she suggested.

“They’re too closely guarded,” he shook his head. “The only ones lucky enough to escape will be the conquest-crews, if the ships actually launch before the world ends. For the sake of the rest of the galaxy, may Rao grant that such a thing not happen!”

The recording dimmed at that point, and Kal spoke.

“What you just saw was recorded by what you’d call the ‘household computer’ in the home of my parents. There’s more to the recording, but you’ve seen and heard the essential part of it. There was a date-code on the image-file. The time-lapse between what you just saw, and this next recording, is about half an Earth year.

The center of the lab brightened once again, and we were looking into the same room as before. In the center of the room, Lara sat on the floor, playing with her son, who was now able to toddle around on his own two legs. Once again, only a moment after the scene opened, the panel in the far wall hissed open and Jor-El strode into the room. Lara looked up at her husband expectantly.

“It’s no use,” he told her, answering her unvoiced question.

“The meeting went badly?”

“Only the second half,” he sighed. “The first session went as I expected it to. Zod and his hirelings were judged as traitors to the world, after their aborted attempt to take over the council last month. They were found guilty and exiled to the Phantom Zone. Then, after the break, it was my turn to make my presentation to them.”

“And?”

“I laid everything out for them – all of my observations and recordings, all of my most detailed calculations. They laughed in my face and called it ‘Raoist nonsense’!”

“So there is no hope for making use of those ships to take even some of our people safely to another world?”

“Hardly!” Jor-El snorted derisively. “The squadrons are to board the ships and leave on their missions within the week! If the planet lasts that long, that is!”

“Perhaps if you entreated them in another way…”

“It won’t happen,” he shook his head. “I’ve been banned from the Council chambers. They wish to hear no more of my ‘doomsday warnings’!”

“And what of the escape ship?” she asked him. “Will you have it done, in time?”

Jor-El paused, lifted his son from the floor, and walked to the couch. Lara followed closely in his wake.

“I’ve been stripped of my fellowship at the Center,” he informed her with a defeated sob. “I no longer have access to my lab, there. The escape ship won’t be ready in time to save us, as I had hoped.”

“Then, husband, we will meet our fate bravely, if it is our fate to die as our world tears itself apart around us. At least we know where we will go next, on life’s journey.”

Jor-El was obviously about to respond to his wife’s comment, but something across the room and out of camera range caught his eye. As we watched, his face took on succeeding looks of bewilderment and then awe. He stood, and the camera followed him as he crossed the room in the direction of whatever it was he’d seen.

Finally, the camera angle changed, and the whole of the room was in view. About five feet in front of Jor-El, a ball of blazingly intense white light hovered in the air. As we watched, it pulsed slowly, three times, and then gradually coalesced into the form of a humanoid being. It stretched a hand forward and a new voice was heard in the room.

“Jor-El of Krypton!” said the voice.

“Who are you, and how came you into my house?” Jor-El demanded heatedly.

“Silence!” the stranger commanded. “I am he who stands to the right of the throne of the mighty Rao, even Meekhai-El.”

Jor-El silently stood before the being for several seconds and, as I watched and waited for whatever was going to happen next, my brain made the connection: Meekhai-El...Michael!

I guess, if I’d been Jor-El at that moment in time, I’d have shut my mouth, too. It’s not everyone who receives a visit from an archangel!

“I have been sent from the throne of the Most High, with a message for you,” the angel continued after a brief pause. “Know that you have been judged by Rao and found guilty...”

“I have worshipped Rao since childhood,” Jor-El protested, “and have always kept His laws and statutes as the priests give me guidance to!”

“It is not a thing you have willingly done, that condemns you, Jor-El,” Michael told him in a quieter voice. “It is that you know the people of your world, and their vast refusal to believe in Rao and worship Him, and still you gave them the tool that would allow them to take their arrogance out among the stars and imperil other worlds – other peoples – which Rao created to nurture and love. For the sin of arrogance and pride, your race must be destroyed before they can destroy other races. For your own sin of ignorance, your punishment is that you shall die along with your world. Rao will take you as His own, but you will not see the greatness that is the destiny of your son.”

“But our son will die, here, with us!” Lara wailed.

“He will not,” Michael countered. “Thus says Almighty Rao: “Behold, I have called your son while he was yet unborn, and have purposed him for great deeds as a champion of a people he does not yet know. It is I, Rao, who put it in your mind to name him Star-child for, in a

language you do not know, on a world far away, the same name means Hand of Rao! He will be mighty among the people where I send him, and he will become a champion of truth and righteousness. He will defend his people from great perils, even at the peril of his own life. His name will be great, and his lineage long and prosperous after him, inheriting his power and might and purpose. I, Rao, have spoken it, and I will bring it to pass.”

“The test-probe!” Jor-El drew a sudden, hissed breath. “There’s just enough room inside it, for the child!”

“Go! Make it ready!” Lara urged him.

Jor-El started to move, then looked back at the visitor.

“Go,” Michael gave him a slight smile. “My time here is at an end, and your world’s time grows short as well.”

As the angel spoke, the image began to shake, and suddenly I realized that the camera was recording one of Krypton’s massive planet-wide earthquakes.

“Go!” Michael snapped the command at Jor-El, who still had not moved. “You will not live to see the sun rise again!”

At the urgency of that command, Jor-El disappeared from the image. The figure of the visitor collapsed into the glowing ball of light again, and faded from view. The image we saw faded, as well.

“There was more,” Kal offered quietly, “but it’s not really all that important, compared with the two scenes you watched. Following the visitor’s departure, my parents bundled me into the little test-ship that Jor-El had used on his initial star-drive tests. There was just enough room for me, wrapped in a cocoon of baby-blankets. They said their final goodbyes, sealed me inside, and sent me off into space. The crystal was then attached to another little star-drive test-unit, and launched as an afterthought, after Jor-El downloaded into its memory everything he could from the household computers and the ones in his lab.

“Somehow, the crystal got caught in a nearly exact duplicate – judging by its appearance in the recording – of the vortex that sent Lois and me into your world. As it moved through the vortex, it recorded everything it could about the vortex itself, and the stresses that it was being subjected to. I’ve been doing a little number-crunching with the data and, if we can find a source of power large enough, and build the right sort of field-coils, I think that Lois and I can get home.”

“Then, I hope it will take you a few more months to figure it all out and build what you need,” Bonnie interrupted.

“Why?”

“Because you need to stay until the baby arrives!” she stated flatly. “This child is going to have two sets of godparents. You and Lois are one pair. It’s because of Lois that I’m still here to actually have the baby, after all. And it’s because of Kal that my husband didn’t walk into a submarine filled with cyanide gas without wearing an air tank. Dot and Perry will be the other set of godparents, because Clark and I owe them big-time for things that would take too long to

explain.”

“We’ll be happy to stay, Bonnie,” Kal smiled. “And we’d be honored to be godparents. It really wouldn’t matter how long we stay here. The equipment I need to build will have to be capable of sustaining a field that warps across time and space, and inter-dimensionally, as well. No matter when we leave here, we’ll arrive in our world only seconds after we left it originally.”

Time and space! I mused. An immense power source. The right sort of field coils..

My mind dropped into gear, churned the data, and came up with an image of a long, spiral tunnel and two men emerging from it.

“I think I know where we can find those field-coils, and a whole nuclear reactor to run them,” I offered, smiling.

“Where?” Mitch demanded to know.

“West of here, out in the middle of the Arizona desert,” I told him. “Dig around a bit in your ‘ultra-classified projects’ database, and see what you can find on ‘Project Tic-Toc’.”

If I was right, as eager as the government was to get rid of white elephants, we could probably get the facility for a song. And I knew just where to find a few key scientists to head up the project, too!

But those things would fall into place in the days and weeks ahead. Now, there was a more immediate item on my mind.

“You still haven’t explained why it was so important that we watch those two scenes, Kal,” I told him.

“I would have thought it obvious, Perry,” he smiled back at me. “At least, after you saw the second scene. You and Clark both voiced some theories, in your conversations with me about faith in Christ. You each had a part of it right, just different parts. I wanted you to see that second scene, to let you know just how right you both were. And I also needed to let you see that scene so that you’ll understand me when I tell you that *nothing* I can say or do will *ever* be able to sufficiently repay you for having had the patience to minister the Gospel to me until it finally sank in. When I saw that scene for the first time, the only thing I could think of was how perilously close I came to walking away from something that was ordained for me before I was born.”

“It couldn’t have happened, Kal,” Clark shook his head. “When God has *that* sort of a call on your life, nothing you can do will take you far enough away that his arm can’t reach out and pull you back. It may take time – and it did, in both your case and mine – but God’s will and purpose on a life cannot be denied.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “When God’s the one you’re running from, resistance really IS futile!”

“Well,” Kal said, his face taking on a mischievous look, “I think I do know one way in which I can give back to you.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“For now, it’s my secret. Trust me, you’ll know it when you finally get to see it. It’s going to take me awhile to get things together, for it.”

And that’s all I could ever get him to say, on the matter.

Epilog

I have to confess that it’s taken me a lot longer to put this story down as words on paper, or at least on a computer screen. As an excuse, I’ll simply plead that there have been quite a number of things going on that really prevented me from spending much ‘quality time’ with my keyboard.

There was the fascination of looking at all of the data culled from the Singing Stone. Clark had to order a shipment from Hidalgo, just to cover the cost of the computing equipment it took to download and house a measly percentage of the billions of terabytes of data stored on that chunk of Kryptonian crystal. We had to go through reams of information, just to decide what was essential and what we could do without.

Then, there was the procuring of a certain parcel of land in the Arizona desert. We were fortunate in the fact that a long-gone political administration had done its dead-level best to bury the project in the hope that it would *never* be uncovered. Mitch’s best efforts failed to uncover any record of Project Tic-Toc. The land had been officially reclassified as having been an abandoned missile-silo complex, though, and we actually did wind up getting it for a song. Okay, nobody really sang. But it cost more to put up the buildings that house the Nelson Institute for Marine Research, down in the Turks-Caicos Islands, than it did for us to buy those few thousand acres of government-surplus land under which Project Tic-Toc’s remnants lay waiting for us.

Once we had the deed to the land, there was the effort of getting into the facility, and making it operational once again. After all, it had been put into mothballs back in the late 1960’s. The reactor was a major problem, as a few of its fuel-rods had decayed past the point of usability. Fortunately, Kal was able to locate the proper materials and fashion us some new rods. Did you know that you have to get a federal license in order to buy nuclear material on the open market?

Staffing the facility was another issue. Fortunately, when Kal and I paid a visit to them, Dr. Tony Newman and Drs. Doug and Ann Phillips were elated to be invited to play a role in reactivating and repurposing the facility. Under their supervision, and with their knowledge of the facility and its original purpose, they quickly recruited enough qualified people to get it up and running once again.

Almost as an afterthought to the cover-stories we had invented for them, both Kal and Lois dug into getting the Institute’s School of Journalism off to a good start. Kal served as the temporary department head, and both he and Lois taught classes for one semester, until we could replace them with other – though nowhere near so eminently qualified – instructors.

The folks at the Complex (for thus we had dubbed the former Tic-Toc facility) managed to finally get the portal between Kal’s world-line and our own opened, four months after the reactivation was completed. Kal went through and made a brief reconnaissance trip to make

certain that we had the correct world-line as a destination, and returned with a satisfying report. On a related note, they tell me that it's going to be possible to set up a communications link through the portal, so that we can at least periodically keep in touch once they go home.

And, all along, there's been one other thing. Kal keeps disappearing on us, sometimes for days at a time. When he returns, all that he will say is that he's been working on a 'little project', and we'll get to see it in due time. I don't know what he's up to but, as much time as he's been spending on it, my guess is that 'little' will be the *last* word one would think of, to describe it!

A little while back, an Internet friend who knows I'm a big fan of Superman sent me an audio file of a song by a Christian Rock band called *Jacob's Trouble*. The song was entitled, "If Superman Got Saved". I played it for Kal and Lois (and for the rest of the crew who are in on the secret of their true identities!) and everyone's gotten a big chuckle out of listening to it.

And you probably will, too, now that you know the full story!

It's like I say, sometimes you never know what God has in mind for you, until you get there. One thing's certain, though – the journey will never be boring!

The End

Dedications

There are so very many people, without whom this story would never have been written, that I'm probably going to miss one or two along the way. If I've missed you, or someone you can think of, I hope you'll understand...

Les, who thought that the world of the 1930's needed a savior, someone who'd fight for truth and justice, and fashioned one out of bronze...

Jerry and Joe, who thought that bronze wasn't strong enough, and carved the image again – out of steel – and gave him a name that means "Hand of God"...

Clayton ("Bud"), who gave that image its first voice.

The men who brought those images to life on screens big and small: Ron. Kirk and George, and Dean, and Brandon, who all demonstrated that a mild-mannered exterior can conceal astonishing strength and courage and be capable of amazing things. And Chris, who made us believe that a man can fly. I hope he came to believe that a Man can rise from the dead, and that One really did, before he had to leave us....

Phyllis, Noelle, Margot, Terri, Erica, and Kate: who modeled love that endures all, will wait for as long as is needed, never truly dies, and can sometimes be very, very blind...

Glenn and Phyllis, Eve, and K and Eddie, and John and Annette, who unknowingly modeled two other parents, two thousand years ago, who had to raise a special child who was not of this world, but who was destined to save it...

Jeff and Tom, who helped us to understand the tiniest fragment of what it might have been like, to *be* that special Child: different from everyone else around him, coming to grips with the knowledge of the great Purpose that brought him to this backwater planet...

Gene and Kevin, who personified the twisted nature of Evil so well for us. And Michael, for demonstrating that, sometimes, the road that leads to Hell really *is* paved with the best of intentions...

The legion of writers, artists, editors, and others, who collaborated to make these characters-on-paper and characters-on-screen so real, and so truly memorable, that their legacy has survived seven troubled decades...

Mark and Karen, who took an old world and decided to give it a brand new spin, and then cordially and graciously invited me to come and play in their sandbox...

My wife, April, whose patient understanding endured lots of solitary time while I sat at the keyboard to write this...

Most of all (and saving the very best for last!), this story is dedicated to the All-Wise, Almighty, and Everlasting God, who inspired all of this over the years and breathed life into every mortal who played even the smallest part in the Great Story. Every tale ever written by the hand of Man is, in reality, at once both a Love story and a story of Redemption, in some facet or other. How fitting, since the story of the entire Human Race is also a grand tale of Love, and of Redemption...

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