

# The Return

by Marcus Rowland

© 18-Feb-10

Rating: T

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Many thanks to everyone on TTH forums and LiveJournal who helped with military details etc.

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## I

### ***USS Seahawk, off Iran, August 2008***

Tony DiNozzo was asleep when the alarms started, and cracked his head on an overhead locker as he woke.

*"This is not a drill, this is not a drill: General quarters, general quarters, all hands man your battlestations. Incoming missile, ballistic trajectory, ETA: three minutes."*

A ballistic trajectory meant big trouble; most of the ship's defences were set up for attacking aircraft or cruise missiles, ballistic missiles came in faster and at a steeper angle, and were a lot harder to stop. Tony pulled on his clothes and ran for his duty station in the island as the first Sea Sparrow missiles launched, and hoped that they had the range and accuracy to take out the attacker.

*"Sixty seconds. All hands, brace for impact."*

Volleys of Standard missiles spewed into the sky from the *Seahawk's* escorts. After thirty seconds there was an explosion high overhead.

*"All hands, incoming debris, brace for impact."*

There was a large explosion forward, followed by the boom of something travelling faster than sound, and the whole ship lurched.

*"Damage control teams, main hangar deck forward. Damage control teams, second deck forward. EOD team, second deck forward."*

That sounded bad. To get to the second deck a missile would have had to penetrate the flight deck and the four decks below it. Over the next few minutes there were more calls for damage control teams and corpsmen, then his phone rang. Tony answered, and heard the Captain's voice; *"DiNozzo, there's a situation on Deck Four, Mess Deck Two. The Admiral thinks it should be handled by someone who isn't in our direct chain of command. Get down there, assess the situation, and take charge."* Tony headed forward and down at a run.

The second deck was dark, lit by flickering emergency lighting, and one of the Marines on damage control led Tony forward towards the noise of drills, hammers, and fire extinguishers. "What have you got?"

"Something came through the decks above, ended up in Mess Deck two. The EOD guys found a body; corpsmen are looking after her now."

"Her? Any ID?"

"You'll have to see it to believe it."

Broken glass crunched underfoot. Tony looked down and frowned. He realised that the fragments were thick shards, unlike anything likely to be used aboard ship.

"What the hell is this stuff?"

"Some sort of crystal. Blew out from the mess. Just through there." He pointed to a jagged hole in the bulkhead. At least a dozen men were standing there, staring into the mess.

"What the hell...?"

Tony pushed past the watching sailors. Most of the deckhead above was missing, with cables and steel plates dangling down from the hole. Under the hole was a... a thing. It looked like half of a crystalline sphere covered with long spikes, the central sphere about ten feet across, shattered to one side. Corpsmen were gathered around the broken side, and one said "Set five thousand joules... clear!" There was a loud buzz. Tony moved behind them to see the focus of their attention. A beautiful blonde in her late teens or early twenties, wearing a costume a little like a cheerleader's - a figure-hugging blue garment something like a leotard, with a yellow waist, short red skirt and red boots. Then he noticed the red cloak, and the stylised 'S' logo above and between her breasts. The corpsman touched a stethoscope to her chest, listened, and said "I'm getting a heartbeat. Faint, but it's there."

"Is she... real?" Tony asked incredulously.

"I've broken three needles on her skin so far," said another corpsmen. "We've given her enough voltage to kill an elephant, and the scissors broke when we tried to cut her clothes to get at her chest. She's real, all right."

"What the hell do we do next?" asked another corpsman.

"Get her to sickbay," said Tony, thinking rapidly, "as gently as you can, and find out how to test for kryptonite."

"There's a detector in the radiology lab," said one of the damage control techs. "They've been standard issue since Luthor tried to take out Superman last year."

"Excellent! Okay, get this crystal stuff cleared up on all decks, bag it and make sure that nothing goes into the sea. We don't want to start building another continent. And get someone who knows what they're doing to handle the cleanup; I'm making this up as I go along."

The corpsmen gently lifted her onto a stretcher, and Tony followed them towards sickbay.

### **The White House Situation Room, 11.20 PM**

"I always thought Supergirl was a hoax," said President Santos. "Doctor Glenn?"

The National Security advisor moved to one of the display screens. "She was previously on Earth seven years ago; a few months after Superman disappeared. She was apparently looking for some sort of Kryptonian artifact, and had much less contact with the public than Superman." Behind him the screen showed a series of photographs; Supergirl fighting some sort of shadowy monster, flying to catch a falling man, smashing through a wall. "Most of these pictures were taken by James Olsen of the *Daily Planet*. By the time the rest of the media began to take it seriously she'd evidently found what she wanted and disappeared again." The screen switched to the same woman, looking only slightly older, lying on a stretcher, apparently unconscious.

"So how did it happen?" asked Santos. "General Alexander?"

"The *Seahawk* was preparing for air strikes in support of today's ground operations in

Iraq. The strike group was at maximum readiness, which included full radar coverage, and under Rules of Engagement which permitted counter-missile fire. Just over two hours ago, at 01:13 Zulu, that's 05:43 Iran time or 21:13 hours in Washington, the *Seahawk* and two of her escorts detected an inbound ballistic track at an altitude of a little over two hundred miles, speed Mach 5, on trajectory for the middle of the task force. Mach five is relatively slow for a ballistic vehicle, which suggested a relatively short-ranged missile with a big payload such as a nuclear or chemical warhead. It took about a minute to verify the trajectory; they immediately initiated countermeasures and launched Sea Sparrows at 01.15 Zulu, with her escorts launching Standard missiles about a minute later. One of the Standard missiles detonated on or near the target; unfortunately the explosion nudged it towards the *Seahawk*. We were incredibly lucky; there were some minor injuries and structural damage to the ship, but so far as we know, nobody was seriously injured or killed. When the dust settled, they found a capsule, with the crystalline structure we've come to expect from Kryptonian technology. One side was cracked open, it contained Supergirl; she was unconscious, and hasn't come round as of a few minutes ago."

"Okay," said Santos. "First thing, we commend everyone involved."

"Commend?" asked Josh Lyman, the Chief of Staff.

"If that had really been a missile they would have taken it out," said Glenn. "And going from detection to an intercept in four minutes is worth commending."

"Works for me," said General Alexander.

"Let's hope Superman and Supergirl are equally understanding," said Josh.

"Good point," said the President. "Arnie?"

The Secretary of State shrugged. "Until Zod and his friends invaded everyone thought that Superman was the last of his kind. A couple of weeks after he defeated them, Superman left on a six-year journey to look for other survivors. We have to assume that it's pretty important to him. He missed meeting Supergirl the last time she was here, now we've shot her down. I can't see him being too happy about it."

"Your recommendation?"

"If we try any sort of cover-up it's sure to backfire; we need to contact him before the story gets out, and make sure that he sees we're doing everything in our power to help."

"That works for me. How long can we keep a lid on this?"

"Maybe another three or four hours," said General Alexander. "There's currently a communications blackout, but we can't keep an entire strike group silent for long. Sooner or later we're going to have to let people start talking to their families again, after that word is bound to leak out. Apart from anything else, there are three civilian reporters aboard the *Seahawk*, and there's a BBC TV news team aboard one of the British ships in the area. They must have seen the strike group launch counter-missiles."

"What about Supergirl? What's her condition?"

"We're still waiting on that," said General Alexander, "last word was that there are no obvious injuries, but she seems to be in a very deep coma."

"Kryptonite?"

"Apparently not. They've checked her and the debris but there isn't any detectable radiation."

"Could be suspended animation," said Josh. The others looked at him in surprise.

"Superman has the technology; he said he used it for his trip to Krypton."

"That's plausible," said Glenn. "Maybe we damaged the capsule before it could revive

her."

"We can make endless guesses," said the President, "but there's only one expert. How do we contact Superman?"

"Shout 'Help, Superman?'" suggested Josh.

"If he's in Metropolis it would take nearly half an hour for him to hear you," said Glenn.

"Call the *Daily Planet*?"

"That wouldn't be my first choice," said the President. "All other considerations aside, Superman might want to handle this without press involvement."

"General Lane," said General Alexander. "His daughter is a reporter at the *Planet*, in the past she's agreed to help him by contacting Superman without going public."

They discussed it for another twenty minutes, then President Santos said "Make the call."

### **Metropolis, 12.00 AM**

"Okay, I've got that," Lois Lane said sleepily. "It might take a while to get hold of him, but I'll do my best." She switched off her cell, sat up in bed, and blew in her new husband's ear.

"Mhhmmph..."

"Rise and shine, Clark."

"Gahhhhh..."

Lois reached under the sheets and tweaked a sensitive part of his anatomy.

"...Lois?"

"Sorry, Clark, I know you wanted to get an early night, but duty calls."

"What happened?"

"Dad called, he needs to contact Superman."

"Where is he?"

"The Pentagon. Give it a few minutes; he'll get suspicious if you turn up a minute after he calls me."

"Okay. Any idea what he wants?"

"Probably the usual sort of military nonsense, a tank stuck in a swamp or something. It didn't sound like it was more urgent than usual."

"Okay." Clark listened for a second then said "Metropolis seems quiet enough, but Jason's awake."

"He must have heard the phone. I'll see to him."

Clark pulled on his costume while Lois donned a robe, and said "Do you want some coffee?"

"That'd be nice."

He went out to the kitchen, and came back a couple of minutes later with a tray and two mugs, brewed with his heat vision at super speed. Lois came back from Jason's bedroom, took a sip, and said "Just the way I like it. There are definite advantages to being married to you."

"I guess. Is Jason okay?"

"Like I said, he heard the phone. I think we may need to soundproof his room, his hearing is getting pretty good."

"I'll take care of it at the weekend, while he's visiting Richard. With luck he'll learn to control his hearing pretty quickly."

"I've got an idea - use my phone, tell Dad I shouted for help, maybe whatever it is can wait until tomorrow."

"Okay."

Lois speed-dialled the number, and said "Dad? I got lucky, he's here; I'll put him on."

In his deeper Superman voice Clark said "General? What can I do for you?" He listened intently for a moment, then said "I'll hold for him." There was a short delay, then Clark said "Yes, Mister President?" Lois began to pay much more attention. He listened again, then said "I'll be there in a few minutes" and pressed the disconnect button. He sat on the bed, with a shocked, puzzled expression, and eventually said "Why didn't anyone tell me I have a cousin? The President seemed to think I know all about her."

"A... oh, yeah, I'd pretty much forgotten, it was just before Jason was born and I never met her. Jimmy got the story. She said she was from another dimension that some Kryptonians had escaped to, it sounded like a more comfortable version of the Phantom Zone. She came to Earth looking for some sort of power source they'd lost, found it, and went home again. Said her name was Kara something." She took her phone, activated the web browser, and searched Wikipedia. "That's it... Kara Zor-El."

"Then she really is my cousin. Zor-El was my father's younger brother." He still seemed to be shocked as he said "I have relatives."

"I guess so. Congratulations, it's a cousin. What about her?"

"She's back, and the US Navy just shot her ship down."

"I want the exclusive."

## II

### Off Iran

Clark looked around, checking his approximate location. He scanned the horizon, couldn't see anything resembling an aircraft carrier, and flew upwards until it finally appeared over the horizon.

Aboard the USS *Seahawk*, one of the radio operators said, "AWACS reports high altitude target, speed Mach 18... Mach 3... Subsonic. Sir, it's come to a dead stop, bearing 053, distance 190 miles, now climbing very rapidly. "

"That has to be Superman," said the watch officer. "Keep tracking him; let me know if anything changes. Alert air traffic, and pass the word to the Captain, the Admiral, and sick bay."

Clark accelerated towards the carrier, keeping alert for aircraft and missiles. At five miles he slowed to ensure that they could see him coming, and noticed sailors repairing a wide hole in the flight deck. As he touched down, a group of officers hurried towards him.

"Superman! I'm Captain Owens. Thank you for getting here so fast. The Admiral will be here in a moment."

"I don't want to seem rude," said Clark, scanning the ship with his X-ray vision, "but I'm really more interested in seeing my cousin."

"That's understandable," said Owens, "If you'd like to come this way I'll show you to the sick bay. This was a regrettable accident, we're anxious to help in..." With a 'swoosh' noise Clark vanished at super-speed. A second later he was in the corridor outside the sick bay, where he was challenged by two marines.

"Let's see some identification, sailor."

"You've got my cousin in there," said Clark.

"You're the second guy to come down here dressed as Superman, and it wasn't funny the first time."

"Will this do?" asked Clark, floating into the air.

"Uh... Yeah. Sorry to hold you up." The other guard knocked on the hatch and shouted "it's the real deal this time."

"Sorry about that," said the dark-haired officer who opened the hatch. "Special Agent DiNozzo, NCIS. I've been assigned to investigate this incident and supervise the protection of your cousin. Word's got out; we've had four sailors and a reporter try to get in so far. What I can't figure out is where Midshipman Hayes got the Superman costume..."

Clark ignored his outstretched hand for a moment, concentrating on the slow heartbeat of the blue-costumed girl on the examination table, verifying that she really was Kryptonian, trying to tune out the noise of the monitors that surrounded her, and scanning her body for injuries.

"This is Doctor Nguyen," said DiNozzo, introducing an older Oriental man in surgical scrubs.

"Examination has been difficult," said Nguyen, "but I don't believe she's injured. I think she's in some sort of stable trance state, perhaps artificially-induced?"

"It's possible," said Clark, most of his attention elsewhere. "What have you done with her ship?"

"It's still in the mess deck forward," said DiNozzo, "what's left of it. There's a big hole in one side, and a lot of the spikes came off."

Clark looked forward, mentally winced at the damage he saw, and said "I think you're right. The equipment that would have revived her has been destroyed."

"Can you fix it?"

"No. But I have similar equipment; it ought to be suitable."

"All right," DiNozzo said enthusiastically, "if you can get it here we're in business."

"It can't be moved easily," said Clark. "I'll have to take her there."

"Can she be moved safely?" Clark thought that there was genuine concern in DiNozzo's voice.

"I can't see any injuries." He gave it a moment's thought. "Do you have something I can carry her in, a strong airtight container with an oxygen supply?"

"I can't think of anything," said Nguyen.

"You need a mobile decompression chamber," said Tony. "There isn't one aboard, but oil rigs carry them, or most navy bases will have one. Get a big one so the doctor can ride with her and make sure she's okay."

"That ought to work," said Clark. "I'll be back shortly." He vanished as quickly as he'd arrived.

"Are you out of your mind?" asked Nguyen, "you have no idea where he's planning to take her! I don't want to fly in a steel cell!"

"My guess is Metropolis; the hospital there treated him for kryptonite poisoning. Look at it this way, if you fly with her the least you'll get is a few days' leave in the good old USA."

"So who looks after my patients here while I'm gone? These things have to be planned properly."

"Good point... okay, maybe one of the corpsmen could fly with her?"

"That would work."

"I'll let the Captain know what's happening. You'd better get her ready to travel." Tony made the call, while Nguyen and his corpsmen moved Supergirl onto a gurney and prepared an oxygen cylinder and other supplies.

Clark returned twenty minutes later, carrying a bulky cylindrical pressure chamber borrowed from a drilling rig in the North Sea. As he approached loudspeakers blared "*Attention Superman, please use the aircraft elevator on the aft deck, we've moved your passengers to the hanger below.*" Clark realised that the elevator was down, which let him fly the chamber straight down to the hanger deck. DiNozzo was waiting for him.

"The Doctor needs to stay aboard," said DiNozzo, "but Corpsman Cook will ride with her," he gestured to an attractive red-headed woman wearing Marine uniform and medical insignia, "and I'll ride shotgun and lend a hand if needed."

"I don't think we need a shotgun," said Clark.

"I've got two jobs to do here," said DiNozzo, "I've got to investigate this incident, and I've got to make sure nothing more happens to hurt your cousin. The easiest way I can do both is to tag along, make sure that Doc Cook doesn't go berserk or something, and ask a few questions once sleeping beauty's awake."

"All right," said Clark, "I'll try to make it as comfortable a trip as I can."

"We've got her strapped to the gurney," said Cook, "Can you secure it inside there?"

Clark lifted it effortlessly, manoeuvred it through the hatch and into the pressure chamber, and welded it to the floor with quick bursts of heat vision. He repeated the process for the trolley. "Please leave your cell phones, and anything else containing a transmitter, GPS receiver, or camera."

Tony reluctantly gave his cell to one of the Marines, while Cook handed over one of the radios used for internal communications aboard ship. "Something tells me you aren't taking us to Metropolis," said Tony, climbing into the chamber. Cook followed him inside.

"We'll be coming back that way," Clark said evasively, "but we'll have to go somewhere else first. Meanwhile I'd suggest you fasten your seat belts."

"How long will it take?" asked Cook.

"About half an hour." Clark closed the hatch and spun the locking wheel.

"Half an hour?" said Cook, "he must be taking us to the Moon."

"My guess is Mars," said Tony.

Clark lifted the chamber onto his shoulder and accelerated up into the air and north towards the Arctic, taking care to keep the flight smooth, and to make sure that the capsule didn't get too hot or cold for its human occupants.

### **North of the Yukon**

Tony and Cook looked around in awe as Superman lifted the gurney out of the pressure chamber and flew it to one of the upper galleries of the Fortress of Solitude.

"This is amazing," said Cook. "It looks like ice but it isn't cold."

"I guess the Kryptonians used these crystals for everything."

"That's right," said Superman, flying down again with a small crystal in his hand. He threw it to the ground, and a graceful crystal stairway grew from the floor. "They knew I'd be able to fly here, so they didn't bother with stairs. If you'd like to follow me..." He led the way up to the gallery, where the unconscious girl now lay on a slab of blue crystal, and moved to a crystalline console, shaped like a pillar with the top sliced off at an angle, and touched his hand to the surface. A ghostly head appeared, speaking a language Cook and Tony didn't understand. Superman said "Ehwor Ehngiuo."

"*Very well,*" said the head. "*English it shall be. I see you have brought guests, Kal-El.*"

"Agent DiNozzo, Corpsman Cook, this is a simulation of my father, Jor-El. You might want to think of him as a very advanced artificial intelligence. He'll be helping with the revival process."

*"Who is the patient?"* asked Jor-El.

"I think she's Kara Zor-El, your niece."

*"It's possible,"* said Jor-El, *"a Kryptonian claiming to be your cousin visited Earth seven years ago, but we never met."* Tony thought that he sounded a little annoyed.

"I was away at the time," said Superman, "she may not have been aware that the Fortress existed."

*"As you say."* Tony stifled a giggle as he realised that the AI definitely sounded peeved.

"I think that she used the suspended animation system you developed for the flight to Earth. Unfortunately her ship was damaged before it initiated the revival process."

Blindingly bright lines of light criss-crossed her body for a moment, then Jor-El said *"That is correct. How do you wish to proceed?"*

"I think I need to re-create conditions inside the capsule then simulate re-entry. When the process is complete she should revive automatically."

*"I concur."*

"This is going to look a little alarming," said Superman. "Don't worry, it shouldn't endanger her. Initiate encapsulation."

Crystals began to grow from the slab, surrounding the girl and arching over her until she was hidden completely. They slowly fused together to make a smooth cylindrical shell, which began to sprout long crystalline spikes.

"Encapsulation complete."

"Lock it down." Two glowing orange bands appeared around the capsule. "That ought to hold it. Now stand well back over there, this will be rough." Tony and Cook moved back, and he began to blow on one end of the capsule, his super-breath soon reaching hurricane force. Simultaneously his eyes and the ends of the spikes began to glow, dimly at first then brighter, and the spikes bent back and began to shrivel in the heat. Tony and Cook were standing twenty feet to one side, and even there it felt like the open mouth of a furnace, combined with the blast of a powerful jet engine. The noise was deafening, and they both covered their ears and opened their mouths to protect their hearing. Suddenly Superman stopped blowing and struck the end of the capsule with his fist. The crystal began to crack, the upper part splitting from the lower like the halves of a peanut shell. There was an eerie silence for a few moments. Then a small fist smashed through the upper part, and it shattered into thousands of pieces.

The girl slowly sat up, looking around her. Superman stepped forward and said "Khuhp threv Kal-El."

The girl looked at him and said "Khuhp threv Kara Zor-El."

"Do you mind if we speak English? I have guests here. What brings you back to Earth?"

Kara looked around the immense chamber, said "I came to help here. We thought you were dead..." and started to cry.

### III

#### **The Fortress of Solitude**

"You know," said Tony DiNozzo, "the usual things you say when a relative comes into

town are 'hello' or 'welcome,' not 'why are you here?' That tends to give the impression that you're not entirely pleased to see them."

Clark frowned then said "You're right, of course. Kara, I'm sorry if that seemed less than welcoming. The last three Kryptonians I met tried to kill me, and I never expected to see another. Please forgive me."

Corpsman Cook patted Kara's back and glared at them, and said "Give the poor girl a minute or two. Are you okay, honey? Any nausea, weakness?"

Eventually Kara managed to say "I... I think I'm all right, but I could really use some water and a shower." Clark blurred into motion, reappearing a second later with a jug of water and a glass, and said "there's a bathroom through the arch over there. Do you need a hand?"

"I'll help her," said Cook. "You guys go talk football or monster trucks or something." She helped Kara out of the remains of the capsule and towards the archway. Clark heard her mutter "Men!" and suspected that her opinion of him had nosedived.

"Monster trucks?" said Clark.

"I prefer sports cars," said DiNozzo. "Got any coffee?"

"There's a kitchen on the lower level. Jor El, please guide Agent DiNozzo." A line of glowing dots appeared on the floor, leading to the new stairway.

"You look like you could use some yourself," said DiNozzo, "and maybe we should give her a little privacy, and find something for her to eat."

"You're right," said Clark. "I'm sorry; I'm not very good at this. Three hours ago I didn't even know I had a cousin." He started down towards the kitchen at human speed.

"You didn't *know*?"

"I was en route to Krypton when she was here. When I got back I think everyone had either forgotten her or assumed that someone else had told me. The first I knew was when the President told me tonight."

"Jesus."

The kitchen was large and well-equipped, with appliances and utensils that could have come out of any hardware store in America. Clark opened the refrigerator and found a half-used carton of milk, obviously unfit to drink, three eggs, and a packet of bacon well past its sell-by date. "I don't eat here very often," he said apologetically. "The coffee's in the cupboard over there, if you'd like to start the percolator I'll be back in a few minutes. There's a 7-11 in Anchorage that should still be open." He blurred into motion.

Tony thought about exploring, then realised that the computer was probably still watching him, and decided to concentrate on coffee and some sort of meal.

### **Anchorage, Alaska**

It wasn't the first time Clark had visited the 7-11 as Superman, and the sleepy clerk barely raised an eyebrow as he paid for his groceries. "If you could look after them for a moment," said Clark, "I need to make a call." He dialled his home, waited for Lois to answer, then in his Superman voice said "Miss Lane... oh, my apologies, Mrs. Kent... I've called to confirm that the information I gave you earlier is correct. I'll be back in Metropolis in a few hours and will give you the rest of the story then."

"*Thank you, Superman,*" said Lois. "*I'll look forward to seeing you.*"

Clark hung up, thanked the clerk, and flew off towards the Fortress. In Metropolis Lois punched the air, said "YES!" and started to make calls.

### **The Fortress of Solitude**

Kara and Corpsman Cook came downstairs to the smell of coffee and bacon. Kara was

wearing a bathrobe and slippers, manufactured by the Fortress, and walking without help, but still looked pale. Both men stood up as they came into the kitchen.

"How are you feeling?" asked Clark.

"She's been in that capsule for nearly two years," said Cook, "how do you think she feels?"

"I'll be all right," said Kara. "I just need to get some food and some real sleep, and a few hours in the sun."

"What can I get you, Kara?" asked Clark. "Tea? Coffee? Orange juice? Bacon and eggs, or some soup? Some fruit? What about you, Corpsman Cook?"

"Tea if you've got it," said Kara, "but anything will be fine."

"I'll have coffee, bacon, eggs, and toast," said Cook. "And you should watch what you eat for a while, young lady."

"Don't worry," said Kara, "I'm really okay. I can eat pretty much anything without it harming me."

Clark busied himself with bacon and eggs, tomatoes and hash browns, while Tony made tea and coffee and did his best to avoid wondering if Kara was wearing anything under the bathrobe.

Kara ate silently for a few minutes, demolishing a large plate of food then said "I'm sorry for all the trouble I'm causing, Kal-El. I never realised that you didn't know about me."

"It's not trouble," said Clark. "It's just surprise more than anything else. You've been travelling for two years?"

"It's a little complicated," said Kara. "As you know, I come from Argo City. My father, your uncle, was one of the few Kryptonians to believe Jor-El when he predicted the end of the world. When the quakes began he activated a device that moved the entire city into another dimension, which we call the Survival Zone. It's a little like the Phantom Zone that used to be used as a prison."

"Yes," said Clark, "I've had to deal with some escapees."

"Seven years ago the portal between dimensions was fairly close to this planet; my father had used the power of a device called the Omegahedron to move it there so that we could watch this world and observe Kal-El. There was an accident, partly my fault, and the Omegahedron fell to Earth. I followed it in an experimental ship, but when I arrived I learned that you had left for the stars."

"I'm so sorry," said Clark, "if I'd only known that you were there..."

"It wasn't your fault," said Kara, "the Elders didn't want to interfere with Earth's development, so there was a policy of silence. We watched your world, and your television and radio, but gave you nothing in return"

"Like the Prime Directive in Star Trek," said Tony.

"Exactly," said Kara. "When I returned the Omegahedron things seemed to be back to normal, but the anchors holding the portal near to Earth had been severed by its loss. The portal accelerated away, slowly at first then with increasing speed. And as it did so we realised that you were gone, Kal-El, and that the Earth was suffering. We saw disasters, terrorism, crime and destruction. And within another year or two we would have been beyond any hope of returning to this world. Someone had to do something and I'd been restless since my visit; Argo is beautiful, but it's an artificial world, I missed the wildness of Earth, and the diversity of your people. So I petitioned the Elders to be allowed to return here and continue Kal-El's work. My parents tried to change my mind, but I'm stubborn, and eventually it was agreed."

"And the journey took two years?" asked Clark

"By Earth reckoning. If I were to try to return today it would be much longer. If I wait six months the journey will be impossible."

"My guess," said Cook, "my best medical opinion... if you were to try to return today, or any time soon, you'll be dead by the time you get there. You're still pretty shaky."

"Why return?" asked Clark.

"I'm not needed," Kara said sadly, "you're here."

"I'm pretty sure that Earth can use more help. I've been back for more than a year now and we don't exactly have a utopia. Together we may be able to make more of a difference."

"It's kind of you to say that, but it feels like I'm intruding on your... your territory. And I damaged your poor ship, Agent DiNozzo."

"Don't worry," said Tony, "it'll be fixed in a few days, and nobody on board is ever going to have to pay for drinks again. It's the ultimate sea story."

"Didn't you want to ask some questions about that?" asked Clark.

"Just a couple," said Tony, getting out a notebook. "Were you aiming for the ship?"

"Of course not," said Kara. "It was supposed to land in Antarctica, something must have gone wrong."

"Okay... were you transmitting any sort of identification signal?"

"No... I'm afraid we didn't think of it."

"End of questions. Not your fault for hitting the ship, not our fault for shooting you down, just an accident. No fault, no foul. If you could sign a statement to that effect it's the end of the enquiry. No rush, a verbal statement will be fine for now, we can do the paperwork the next time you're in Washington."

"If there's really nothing else," said Clark, "I'd better fly you both back to the *Seahawk*."

"Could you make that NCIS headquarters in Washington?" asked Tony, "I need to report in, and we should be able to score a few days' leave if we're there."

"Kara, will you be all right here if I leave for a couple of hours?"

"I'll be fine. Now that I'm full I think I need sleep more than anything else." She indicated her empty plate.

"Jor-El, please prepare a bedroom."

*"It is already prepared."* Again the AI's voice sounded reproving.

"I'll help you up," said Clark, lifting her gently and flying up to the bedroom.

"Now that we're alone," said Clark, "are you sure that you're all right?"

"It's... well, I think that Miss Cook was right. I'm not sure that I could survive a return journey. I love this world, but it isn't home... and... and I'll probably never see my parents again... and I think that I would have liked to have had children one day, and there are no other Kryptonians here for me to marry."

"Okay," said Clark. "Then I think I've got some good news for you. The differences between humans and Kryptonians are a lot smaller than Jor-El thought. I have a wife, and you have a cousin once removed."

"That's impossible."

"When you wake ask Jor-El to show you the baby pictures. Now get some sleep."

**Washington, 6.15 AM**

Clark landed the decompression chamber in the visitor's car park outside NCIS headquarters and helped its occupants out. "What should I do with your equipment?"

"Leave it here," said Tony, looking around. He wasn't surprised to see Jethro Gibbs

standing in the entrance to the building, a cup of coffee in his hand. "That gurney's probably going to end up in the Smithsonian or the Superman Museum in Metropolis, same for the rest of this stuff. It might as well wait here until we've worked out the details."

"Works for me," said Clark, unloading them. "Then if you'll excuse me, there are some Norwegian divers who would probably like this back, and I have to pick up the remains of Kara's ship from the *Seahawk*. Thank you both for your help, it's appreciated." He lifted the chamber and flew off with it, a good deal faster now that it was empty.

As soon as he was out of sight Gibbs knocked on the door, and Abby Sciuto and half a dozen technicians came out and carefully transported the trolley and the gurney to Abby's laboratory.

"What have you got?" asked Gibbs.

Tony gave him his pen, which concealed a tiny digital camera, set to record one frame a minute over several hours, and took the heel off his left shoe to give Gibbs a tiny GPS tracker. "This ought to show where he took us. And if the camera was aimed the way it should be I think I got some good shots of his base."

"How about you, Corpsman Cook?"

"You know that this is a violation of medical privacy."

"I know. But if she ever does anything hinky we'll need to know it fast."

She sighed, and pulled a plastic envelope from her pocket, containing a Q-tip. "This should be a sample of her DNA, if that's what Kryptonians use."

"And with luck we'll never need to use it," said Gibbs. "Now get to work writing up your reports."

In the laboratory Abby removed a hastily-installed false bottom from the instrument trolley and began to unscrew the inertial tracker that was concealed underneath.

### **The White House, 8.30 AM**

"Well," said Josh Lyman. "The good news is that Superman's given the *Daily Planet* an exclusive absolving the Navy of blame, it's already on their web site, and he's said that Supergirl will probably be ready to help out within the next couple of weeks."

"And the bad news?" asked President Santos.

"As instructed our people took a camera, a GPS, and an inertial tracker to Superman's 'Fortress,' " General Alexander gestured the quote marks, "none of them worked. Memory cards are clean, don't even have the factory formatting any more, and the tapes from the tracker are blank. They don't even have a DNA sample; the swab's so clean it might as well have never come out of its wrapper."

"Never mind, I had a feeling it wasn't going to work, and if Superman ever complains I'll apologise profusely."

"Then why did you tell me to go ahead?"

"To be honest," said the President, "I thought it might be a good idea to remind Superman that he needs to be careful of his security. It's a year now since Luthor tried to build his continent, in all that time Superman hasn't come close to catching him. By now he must be done licking his wounds, my guess is he's getting ready for the next round."

"Now there's a cheery thought," said Josh.

"Look at it this way," said Alexander, "with two superheroes we've got a much better chance of catching him."

## IV

### Metropolis, a Week Later

"Last time I was on Earth I pretended to be Clark's cousin," said Kara, "but that might be too risky at first. For one thing, I met Jimmy Olsen and your sister when I was using that identity, it wouldn't be good if they remembered meeting Linda Lee the first time Supergirl was around, and I reappeared at the same time as she did. Maybe I can visit as Linda at Christmas, by then Supergirl will have been on Earth a couple of months."

"That sounds like a good plan," said Lois. "They aren't idiots, and we really pushed our luck when Clark and Superman showed up the same day last year. So what did you have in mind?"

"Jor-El is setting Kara up with a couple of identities," said Clark. "Linda Lee will be the long term identity, of course, but the paperwork for that needs to be perfect, everything from birth certificates and school records through to social security and credit ratings. The computer side of things isn't a problem, Jor-El can get into the system easily, but it needs a good deal of preparation on the ground. Everything ought to be ready by the New Year, then if anyone asks Linda is touring Europe before she starts college in September."

"Who's going to be paying the bills for that?"

"There was a really sweet guy called Ethan," Kara said sadly, "I saved his life a couple of times seven years ago. I thought I'd catch up with him and find out how he was, but it turned out he died last year; he was a gardener and he made some sort of mistake with weed-killer. I guess he must have figured out that Linda was Supergirl, because he remembered her in his will. It's not a huge fortune, but it'll cover two or three years of college tuition and board, by then I ought to have something worked out. Eventually I'll pass on the money to charity or set up a scholarship."

"Meanwhile I'm going to spend a few months getting to know the world; just hang out and meet people, visit some of the big cities, soak up more rays on the West Coast or in the Sahara, lend a hand if I'm needed. Most of the time I'll be calling myself Karen Sewell; it sounds enough like my real name that I shouldn't have trouble remembering to answer to it, and it's an expendable identity, if I make any mistakes it won't matter in the long term. I've got ID for that but it won't stand up to a huge amount of scrutiny. Clark's loaning me a few hundred dollars to get started, after that I'll take a job if I need a little cash."

"Yes, Clark told me about that," said Lois. "It doesn't sound like enough money."

"I can always find some buried treasure or something if I run short."

"Then you've definitely decided to stay here... on Earth, I mean?" asked Lois.

"I think so," Kara said sadly. "I miss home, but if I set off tomorrow, everyone I knew in Argo City would be about six years older by the time I got back. If I leave it another couple of months it'll be more like ten years. Six months, and even if I survive the trip, everyone I know will be dead by the time I reach Argo."

"Well, you've got family here," Clark said gruffly, "I hope that makes up for it a little."

"It'll have to," said Kara. "I just hope you won't mind me spoiling Jason rotten come Christmas."

"It's what older cousins are for," said Lois. "So... when's the big day?"

"Big day?"

"When Supergirl starts saving the world?"

"I figured I'd make a start this weekend," said Kara, "That gives me tomorrow, Thursday, and Friday to get things moving as Karen and take care of a few things. And maybe you'll be able to get a quiet weekend for a change."

"And finish soundproofing Jason's room," said Lois.

"Do you need me to introduce you or anything?" asked Clark.

"I think it might be better if I show up on my own. It's not like they're going to mistake me for anyone else."

"He's going to spend the next three days fretting that you'll get it wrong," said Lois.

"Would I do that?"

"Yes," said Lois and Kara in unison.

**NCIS Headquarters, Washington Navy Yard, Thursday 12.30 PM**

"Agent DiNozzo? Reception here, there's a visitor for you. A girl; says her name is Thrace."

"Thrace?"

"It's what she said. Kara Thrace. Doesn't want to show any ID, it has to be a phony name. She says she's here to make a statement."

"Kara... oh, got it. I'm coming down." Tony rushed to reception. As he'd half expected, Supergirl was standing there, wearing a brown wool coat and red scarf over a knee-length pleated skirt and sensible shoes with white socks. Her long blonde hair was tied back in a neat pony-tail, and she looked about fifteen years old.

"Issue a visitor's badge," said Tony, "my authority."

"Kara *Thrace*?" he said incredulously, as he led her back. "You've been watching *Battlestar Galactica*?"

"The name got my attention."

"You're looking a lot better. How are things going for you?"

"Pretty well," said Kara, "I'm more or less back up to full strength."

"So when are we going to see you on the news?"

"Kal-El wants some time to... meditate this weekend, so I'll probably be handling any emergencies that come up. This looks nice," she added, looking around the office. "Very... efficient."

"I feel like I'm a stranger here," said DiNozzo, "most of my team were moved to other assignments a couple of months ago, they've got me doing paperwork while they decide whether to send me back to the *Seahawk*. Which reminds me; I've got a draft statement on my computer, if you'd like to come this way I'll..."

"DiNozzo!" someone shouted, "where are the drug test reports?"

"They're on your desk."

"About time," said Gibbs, walking through with the inevitable coffee in his hand. He did a double-take as he saw that DiNozzo was talking to Kara and added "And this would be..?"

"Kara Zor-El," Kara said quietly.

Gibbs raised an eyebrow and said "I've met your cousin a couple of times. Welcome to Washington."

"Thank you, agent...?"

"Gibbs. Jethro Gibbs."

"I've come to write my statement for Agent DiNozzo, and I was hoping to ask a favour..."

"...and this is our forensics lab," said Tony, shouting a little to be heard over the rock

music. Oblivious to their arrival, Abby danced between the mass spectrometer and the DNA sequencing unit, and watching a complicated chemical reaction bubble on one of the benches. Tony reached over and hit the "off" button on the player.

"Tony!" said Abby, "I was listening to that."

"I know you were," said Tony, "but I wanted to introduce someone."

"Don't tell me, you're the new agent on the team?" Kara shook her head. "Okay then, not an agent, you're the new computer guy which boy do we need since McGee got transferred to cybercrimes and if you could start with the mass spec once this run is finished I would be so grateful, it's... Okay, not the computer guy, the intern, I thought you weren't starting for another week... no? Okay, I..."

Kara smiled, held her finger to her lips, held up one finger, then tapped three fingers to her upper arm.

"One word, three syllables," said Abby.

Kara touched the three fingers to her arm again.

"Third syllable."

Kara pointed to herself.

"Um... Me? I? Body? Boobs? Person? Woman?"

Kara fanned her hand to indicate Abby was in the right general area.

"Female? Girl?"

Kara touched her nose and pointed at Abby.

"Okay, something something girl..." Abby's eyes widened. "Holy crap. This had better not be one of Tony's jokes."

Kara smiled, picked up an empty beaker, and stared at it. After a few seconds it melted, and she squeezed it between her hands, blew on it, and handed Abby a small chunk of warm quartz. "Not this time."

"I've got like a million questions about how it all works because most of it doesn't seem to make any sense at all and... oh my god, are you out of your mind, Tony? Get her out of here!"

"What?" said Tony; Kara echoed him.

"We've got a kryptonite sample in the safe, you idiots."

Kara looked around, spotted the safe, and with her X-ray vision discovered that there were several lead-lined boxes inside it. "If it's in a lead box it can't hurt me. If it's one of the tiny boxes I can see in there it probably isn't enough to do me any serious harm anyway. Why do you have it?"

Abby calmed down. "Every now and then we're asked to identify something that might be kryptonite, that's a test specimen we use for comparisons. Usually what we've found turns out to be a fake, there's plenty of that around. Some people use radioactive glass from the 1950s A-bomb test craters, that's naturally the right colour and it's radioactive but it doesn't glow much, then there's glass with a little copper oxide and fluorescent dye added, that looks good too and if you fit it with a concealed ultraviolet lamp it's got a wicked glow. The real stuff is pretty rare; I've never seen more than a couple of grams at a time."

"But who would buy kryptonite?"

"Mostly it's fanatical rock collectors, a couple of times it's been terrorists and criminals. No sign of Luthor, if that's what you were wondering."

"What do you do with it?"

"It's a prohibited substance, the penalties are worse than for possessing or dealing heroin. When we've finished using it for evidence it gets sealed in lead, embedded in concrete, and

shipped to Metropolis, Star Labs have got some sort of disposal process. You'd have to ask your cousin about that, it's pretty hush-hush."

Kara suspected that some was kept by the government, but didn't say so. She knew enough about the damage Zod and the other Phantom Zone escapees had done to understand why it might be considered necessary.

"Anyway," said Tony, "we're just waiting to hear back from Gibbs on something, after that I thought I'd treat both of you lovely ladies to lunch, if you're hungry."

"It's kind of you," said Kara, "but I've already put you to a lot of trouble."

"Right now nobody knows exactly what you look like," said Tony, "dressed like that you look younger than you did when the old photos were taken, and people will be expecting an older woman. But some time soon someone will get a good picture of you, and after that you'll never be able to eat in public without a dozen fans interrupting. I'd say make the most of it while you can."

"If you put it that way," said Kara. "I am a little hungry. And thanks for the compliment."

"I could eat a horse," said Abby, "but a burger will do. Just give me five minutes to shut down the chemistry."

Gibbs came in a moment later, glared at Tony, and said "The Director pulled a few strings. It's on for tomorrow morning, 08.00 hours at Quantico. One condition - they want Superman there too."

"Why?" said Kara. "I don't need his permission to do anything; I'm nearly twenty-four. Well, twenty-two if you don't count time in suspended animation."

"You don't look it, and you can't prove it, as far as I know. That's the deal they're offering. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," said Kara.

"What's that about?" asked Abby.

Going back out, Gibbs looked over his shoulder and said "She wants us to shoot her."

## V

### **Smallville, Kansas - Friday 1.20 AM**

A mile above the town, dressed in black, Clark scanned the building that housed the county court and offices and decided that nobody was there. In a bigger city there might have been a watchman, here there simply wasn't enough crime to justify it. He floated down quietly, landed on the roof, and used a lock pick and his X-ray vision to open the access panel for the elevator shaft - it was fortunate that one had been installed for disabled visitors. After that it was easy to work his way to the registrar's office, checking all the way to ensure that no cameras had been installed in the last three days, and find the dusty boxes that held records from 1949, the year he'd selected for the birth of his non-existent aunt Joan, Linda Lee's mother to be. She was going to be home schooled, run away from home at fifteen, marry young and spend most of her adult life in Chicago. It was unlikely that anyone would ever bother to check back that far, but Jor-El believed in thoroughness. On his previous visit Clark had borrowed a selection of birth certificates from the period; he put them all back, adding an undetectable fake, artificially aged by technology so advanced that even carbon dating wouldn't reveal the substitution. He made sure that all of the papers were suitably dusty, but not excessively so, put the box back, and cleaned up all traces of his work before moving on.

Over the next hour he repeated the process at the high school, church, library and newspaper archive. If anyone ever bothered to check - and there was no obvious reason why they should - Joan Lee, nee Kent, now had a paper trail.

### **Quantico, Virginia, 7.55 AM EST**

"Okay, Gibbs," said Gunnery Sergeant Mansfield, "you've got the rifle and machine gun ranges for the next two hours, as many Marines as you need, and unrestricted ammunition. Now would you mind telling me what this is about?"

"Just waiting for a couple of guests to arrive."

"Who, exactly?"

A polite mid-western voice said "Us, I think." Superman and Supergirl floated down to land a few feet from them. Mansfield began to salute, then remembered that they weren't officers and stopped himself.

"Thank you for arranging this, Agent Gibbs," said Supergirl. "It can't have been easy at short notice."

Tony DiNozzo tried to pinpoint the changes from the girl he'd eaten with the previous afternoon. She wasn't disguised, but he would have been hard-put to recognise her; her clothing was different, of course, her hair was now loose, and maybe it was the way that she carried herself, the air of confidence and power. Suddenly he had no trouble believing that she was an adult. He wished that Abby was there to witness the transformation.

"This is Gunnery Sergeant Mansfield," said Gibbs, "he'll be in charge today. If you'd like to tell him what you want..?"

"It's very simple," said Kara. "If I'm going to be any use on Earth, I have to assume that from time to time people will be shooting at me. It didn't happen much the last time I was here, but this time I'm going to be more... more public. Bullets can't hurt me, of course, but I need to be sure that I can handle myself under fire, and protect others. My cousin is here to make sure that I get it right, and ensure that there aren't any accidents."

"You want us to shoot at you?" said Mansfield.

"Yes please. I thought that we could start with handguns then move on to rifles and automatic weapons."

"Superman, are you quite sure that this is safe?"

"It's completely safe for my cousin. But she's right; we need to be sure that if she's ever attacked she can contain the situation and prevent harm to others. I made a couple of mistakes just after I returned to Earth, I was lucky nobody else was hurt. If you could start with me, I'll demonstrate some of the techniques before she tries it for herself..."

"This is an M-16 rifle," Mansfield said an hour later, "there are several million in use around the world. On full auto the cyclic rate is up to 950 rounds a minute, that's just under sixteen rounds a second, with up to forty rounds in the magazine or a hundred if a drum magazine is fitted. Range is around five hundred yards. We've got ten of them here, five of them with drum magazines. If you'd like to get into position..."

Kara flew down the range and watched as the marines took their places at the firing positions and Mansfield gave the order to fire. Clark was watching from the side as they began to fire, short bursts at first then sustained automatic fire. As instructed, Kara walked towards them, snatched most of the bullets out of the air before they hit her, caught most of the rest as they ricocheted from her body, and vaporised the remainder with heat vision before they could get very far. The bullets she'd caught showered to the ground as twisted scraps of metal.

"Cease fire," shouted Mansfield, when she was twenty yards from them, "make all weapons safe... Okay, Supergirl, what did you do wrong this time?" "I'm not sure," said Kara. "I think I dealt with every bullet that came close to hitting me."

"And what about the ones that didn't?" shouted Mansfield. "Take a look behind you."

Kara looked back, and realised that the targets at the end of the range were in tatters.

"Your objective here is to protect everyone around you. While my marines were keeping you busy, Gibbs and I did a little sniping. Anything to add, Superman?"

"You missed one ricochet," said Clark, "the one that hit your nose. It went upwards at about seventy degrees, could have hurt someone coming down if I hadn't intercepted it."

"I'm sorry," said Kara, "I think I must have blinked when the previous round hit me in the eye. It was a little startling."

"We'll try that again," shouted Mansfield, "and this time let's get it RIGHT!"

**NCIS Headquarters, 1.20 PM EST**

"You should have seen it, Abby," said Di Nozzo. "They finished off with a 25mm chain gun; she caught every round without missing a beat. Ended up with a ball of bullets about the size of... oh, a beach ball. A big one. Superman said he'd never done better."

"I think Tony's in lurrvvv," said Abby.

"Well, I feel... responsible, I guess. Proud. I helped out a bit when she arrived, after all."

"And I'm sure she's very grateful," said Doctor 'Ducky' Mallard. "So, when do I get to meet the lady in question?"

"Damned if I know," said Tony. "From tomorrow she'll be busy doing the superhero thing..."

"Superheroine," Abby interrupted.

"Is that even a word? Okay, the superheroine thing, doubt she'll have time for mere mortals like us. She's out of my league, and to be honest she kinda scares me. She gets shot in the eye and apologises for blinking?"

"I once saw Superman eat a pipe bomb," said Ducky, "then apologise for belching. That's strange, admittedly, but it's better than being blown up."

Gibbs came in with a tray of coffees and a Caff-Pow for Abby. She grabbed it and drank it blissfully. DiNozzo eyed his suspiciously. "What's the occasion?"

"There needs to be an occasion?" asked Gibbs.

"Not necessarily," said Tony, sensing a trap.

"Well, there isn't one. But I thought you'd better know that your orders have come through."

"And?"

"Wednesday morning you're flying back to the *Seahawk* to resume your duties as Agent Afloat."

"That is so unfair!" said Abby. "Not now he's found true love!"

"Crap," said Tony, "I was really hoping that there might be some way to get myself assigned back here, my talents are wasted on the *Seahawk*."

"You have talents? And true love?"

"It was a joke, Gibbs," said Tony, "Abby was saying I'm in love with Supergirl. Is there really no way I can get myself assigned back here?"

"Well, I agree that you're wasted on *Seahawk*, " said Gibbs, "you need someone to stand over you and smack your head occasionally to keep you on track. But Vance doesn't want to do anyone any favours."

"Great."

"Finish off any remaining paperwork, then you can take the rest of the day off; you're on leave until 08.00 Wednesday, when you check in at Andrews."

"Terrific."

### **Long Beach, California, 11.15 AM PST**

Wearing shorts, Nikes, a running top and sunglasses, her hair in neat pigtails, the girl who called herself Karen Sewell looked around the inexpensive room she was renting, making sure that there was nothing lying around that could give anyone a clue to her identity, and decided to make the most of Supergirl's last few hours of relative obscurity. It was a beautiful day, and although the boarding house was nearly three miles inland from the beach, that wasn't really much of a problem to someone who could break the sound barrier without working up a sweat. Jogging would take a little while, of course, but she wanted to mingle and meet people.

Four hours later, lying on the beach and reading the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, she decided that maybe people were over-rated. So far she'd had to fend off three frat boys and a drunk, and failed to find much of interest in the paper. She was keyed up, without the release of action, and a little... the word, she eventually decided, was bored.

Her cell rang, with the special tone that told her the call was being routed via one of the Fortresses' untraceable relays. "Hello?"

*"Hi, is that... Kara?"*

"Hi, Abby." It wasn't really surprising, so far only the Kents and Abby knew the number. She'd decided that it was worth trying to keep in touch with any interesting people she met on her travels, and the Goth's eclectic interests had struck a chord in her curiosity about Earth's society.

*"I hope you don't mind me calling... we just heard this afternoon that Tony is going to have to go back to the Seahawk on Wednesday. I want to give him a farewell party but the only time people seem to have free is Monday night. I wondered if you'd be interested in coming. My place, any time after seven."* She gave Kara the address.

"It depends how things go over the weekend," said Kara. "that's when everything changes. By Monday I may be in disgrace, or on the run from aliens or something."

*"You're going to be awesome - trust me on this."*

"I wish I shared your confidence."

*"You'll be fine - and if you're not, we can commiserate or mock you, depending on what happens."*

"But do you really want me there? It's Tony's party, not mine."

*"It will be - come dressed the way you were on Thursday, nobody will recognize you except Tony and me, and Gibbs if he's there."*

"Tony seemed to think everyone would recognize me once I went public."

*"Hey, they'll know what you look like when you're being Supergirl, but I'll bet you've already thought of a few disguises. If you want to have any sort of life, that is."*

"It might be fun to pretend once in a while," said Kara, as though the idea had never occurred to her before. "Thanks, I'll give it some thought." They chatted for another minute or so. A few minutes later she came to a decision, and called Lois. "Just thought I'd let you and Clark know; it's already Saturday morning on the other side of the world, I'm going to make an early start."

### **Arkham Asylum, Gotham City, 5.00 PM EST**

"This next patient's a real weirdo," said Charlie Blaine, the ward supervisor. "Paranoid

schizophrenia; thinks he's Lex freaking Luthor."

"He does look a little like him, I guess," said the new psychiatric nurse, looking through the small grille in the cell door.

"Believe me, he isn't. The FBI checked and his fingerprints are all wrong, X-rays show that he's had reconstructive plastic surgery to look like that, and he isn't really bald, he shaves his head a couple of times a week. We let him have computer access for a while but it made him too agitated; he kept trying to prove that he was Luthor by getting into Swiss bank accounts, but every time the banks said that the accounts didn't exist."

"How does he explain it?"

"He says that Superman kidnapped him and used super-science to change his fingerprints, a super hair-restorer to start his hair growing again, and a super-computer to wipe his bank accounts."

"So who is he anyway, and what's he in for?"

"Nobody knows who he really is; the original charges were drunk and disorderly and indecent exposure, he was wandering around the streets stoned and naked, but then he started to claim that he was Luthor and assaulted a couple of cops when they said the fingerprints didn't match. He gets violent any time Superman is mentioned. We have to keep him in solitary, if we let him go near the other prisoners with that attitude they'd eat him alive. God help him if the real Luthor ever hears about it..."

Inside the cell, the prisoner listened to his radio and a breaking news story from New Zealand. Presently he began to scream...

## VI

### **Here Is The News...**

"Speculation about the return of Supergirl ended today, when the superhero appeared in New Zealand to rescue..."

"...definitely not a hoax..."

"...intercepted the aircraft over Beijing, and successfully brought it in to a safe landing..."

"...repaired the bridge before the arrival of the next train..."

"...flew eighteen burn victims to Walter Reed hospital..."

"...broke all records for searches on Google and YouTube..."

"...helped the whales to return to the sea..."

"...handed over the pirates to the Somali government..."

"...returned the satellite to a stable orbit..."

"...delivered vaccine to eighteen hospitals in the affected area..."

"...found time to rescue this kitten from a tree in Berlin..."

Flying ice-packed transplant organs from London to Montreal, Kara finally remembered to call Clark on the secure channel.

*"Kara! We've been keeping an eye on the news. Well done with the landslide and the train crash!"*

"I hope you don't think I've been showing off."

*"It's just been one of those weekends, I've been pretty busy too; I doubt I could have handled everything on my own. Well, I wouldn't have finished Jason's room if I had."*

"It's been fun so far."

*"Watch your energy; if you feel tired get some sun. Anyone call for help just to get a chance to meet you?"*

"A couple. Well, six or seven..."

*"It happens... but don't worry; sooner or later the novelty will start to wear off."*

*"I'm not so sure, " said Lois, on another phone, "you're a beautiful girl, the internet is going crazy. There are already four sites claiming to have nude photos of you. No, make that nine."*

"Really?"

*"Don't worry; none of them are really you."*

"Then why would anyone say that? Maybe I should have my own site so they can see the real thing."

*"That's really not a good idea, " Clark said hastily. "I don't know what they do in Argo City, but here on Earth..."*

"I think the phrase is 'just kidding, '" said Kara.

*"Smallville takes these things too seriously, " said Lois. "You're doing good work, honey. Be careful, and try to take a break, you've been on the move for nearly thirty hours."*

"I will"

*"And if you can, find time drop round in the next few days. I know you can't be Linda in public yet, but Jason is dying to meet you. You ought to meet Richard too; he's a useful guy to have on your side in a crisis."*

*"I can vouch for that, " said Clark. "Oops, there goes the getaway car... gotta go."*

"I'd better go too," said Kara, spiralling down towards Montreal and trying to locate the hospital she was after, "talk to you both soon."

### **The White House, Monday 12.55 PM**

"I'd say she's got off to a flying start," said President Santos, walking towards the Press Room.

"You could say that," said Josh Lyman, "but I think it might knock three points off your approval rating. It's a cheap joke."

"I'm not so sure," said Annabeth Schott, the diminutive White House Press Secretary, scurrying to keep up, "it won't work in your formal statement welcoming her to Earth and the USA, we already decided that, but if anyone asks something that calls for a personal opinion it might play reasonably well. But if you use that line, it needs to be followed by something with more substance."

"What about the international repercussions?" asked Josh, "She seems to be spending more time overseas than Superman. What's your response on that?"

"I'm assuming that as a newcomer to Earth she's still settling in, taking time to see the sights and help out where she can."

"Good response," said Annabeth, "try to avoid any suggestion that we're in any way critical of the international aspect of her activities, it plays well with conservatives in the US but foreign governments really won't like it."

"And stay clear of anything that suggests that she's less of a patriot than Superman, or in that or any other way superior or inferior to him," said Josh, "we really don't want to upset either of them."

"And don't mention Zod first, but don't be afraid to respond to any questions that mention him," said Annabeth, "Zod and his supporters were criminals sent into exile long before the destruction of Krypton, there's no comparison with a cousin of Superman who has evidently

been brought up to respect life and fight for 'truth, justice and the American way.'"

"Forget the American Way part," said Josh, wincing, "she hasn't said it yet, and it didn't play well with foreign governments when Superman allegedly said it his first day on Earth. I'm half-convinced the *Daily Planet* invented that line anyway; you'll notice that they didn't quote it when he came back last year."

"Anything else?" asked the President.

"The *Seahawk*," said Josh, "I know you're going to mention it in the statement, but if there are any questions on that front you could mention that astronomers now suspect that the course of her capsule was deflected slightly by the gravity of New Krypton, Luthor's artificial continent."

"Any evidence for that apart from your over-vivid imagination?"

"There's a NASA computer simulation, but they're still working on eliminating sources of error."

"Good enough. Annabeth, if you'd like to introduce me, I think it's time to extend a warm welcome."

**NCIS Headquarters, Washington 2.40 PM**

"It's really sad," said Abby; "I think Tony really likes Supergirl, and he's going to have to go back to sea."

"Looks like it," said Gibbs.

"I think maybe she likes him too," said Abby, "there was definitely a spark there."

"It's possible, but I hope you're wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Think about it; what happens if DiNozzo does get into some sort of relationship with her?"

"Romance?"

"Maybe. What happens to his career?"

"With her powers she could give him all sorts of help."

"I'm sure that would be very useful in whatever desk job they eventually gave him."

"What?"

"He's a Special Agent, Abby. Do you really think that would go well with being Mister Supergirl? He'd lose most of his usefulness to NCIS, the Director would probably end up putting him into the safest PR job he could find. There is no way on earth they'd let him go in harm's way."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"The other thing you might want to remember is that she's an alien. I know what the President said this afternoon, but she isn't an American national; hell, she isn't an Earth national, and the majority of Kryptonians to visit Earth so far have literally been enemy aliens. What would that do to Tony's security clearance?"

"Oh. Maybe I shouldn't have invited her."

"Invited her? To DiNozzo's party?"

"Yes," said Abby, in a very small voice.

"Well, you can't *uninvite* her, that might end up being a diplomatic incident. Let's hope that she doesn't come, and if she does come let's hope that you can curb your matchmaking instincts."

**Metropolis, 6.45 PM**

"...and that's why it has to stay our secret," said Lois Lane.

"It won't be very long," said Kara, "I'll be over for Christmas, after that you can tell your friends all about your cool cousin. Only you don't mention the special things that I can do."

"Like Daddy Clark?" asked Jason Kent.

"Just like Daddy Clark," said Lois, "only prettier." She smiled at Clark as he came back into the living room and added "Wouldn't want you getting a swollen head."

"She is prettier," said Clark, "can't argue with that."

"Definitely," said Richard White, following him into the living room. "The photos that are coming in don't do you justice."

"Daddy Richard!" shouted Jason, and ran over for a hug.

Kara stood, and said "it's nice to meet you at last; Lois and Clark have told me a lot about you."

"Daddy Richard can fly too!" said Jason, "and he can take passengers and land on water!"

"That's good," said Kara, shaking hands with Richard, "if I try to land on water I get all wet, and I have to dry my hair."

"When are we going to get an interview for the *Planet*?" asked Richard.

"When we can arrange for a reporter who isn't me or Clark to meet her," said Lois.

"Sooner or later people are going to meet Kara in her Linda identity, which links to us. We can pull it off if nobody associates either of us with Supergirl, but if we're also the reporters who got the Supergirl story it gets a little too close to home."

"How about Ron Troupe?" asked Richard. "I know that he and Lucy are married, but they've been separated for a few years now. It's not such a close relationship."

"I like Uncle Ron!" said Jason.

"Jason," said Lois, "maybe you can go play with your Lego for a few minutes; we've got to talk about grown-up stuff, it's going to be pretty boring."

"Okay." He went out towards his bedroom.

Clark watched him until he was sure the door was shut, then said "The trouble with that is that they'll both be here at Christmas and meet Linda."

"Why is that a problem?" asked Kara.

"Neither of them knows about Clark," said Lois. "And if Ron recognizes you and tells Lucy they'll figure out who he is."

"Ron can be trusted," said Richard.

"Ron could never keep secrets from Lucy, and she's always been under Dad's thumb. I'm not sure that she wouldn't spill the beans to him. And he's not a huge Superman fan; he thinks he should be under military control."

Kara frowned. "This is getting complicated, maybe making Linda a relative of Clark is a bad idea."

"You're my cousin," said Clark, "and I want you to be part of this family." Lois nodded her agreement.

"How about Jimmy Olsen? I met him the first time I was on Earth, he seemed okay."

"He's... well, he's drinking a lot these days," said Clark, "and he's primarily a photographer anyway."

Lois clicked her fingers; "Cat Grant! She'll spend half the interview trying to find out who you're sleeping with, but once you get past that she's a reasonably good journalist."

"And she won't try to seduce Supergirl," said Clark, "unlike Superman."

"You're kidding," said Richard.

"I wish," said Clark. "She cornered Superman at the Mayor's ball last year, it was like

trying to dodge an octopus; I had to play the 'bank robbery in Ecuador' card to get away from her."

"I'll give her ten out of ten for chutzpah."

"How do we set it up?"

"Simple," said Lois, "next time you come by the *Planet* as Superman we'll ask you to arrange it for us, then a day or two you give us a date and time that isn't convenient for either of us, and Cat has to fill in for us."

"That ought to work," said Richard, "Cat will jump at it, she's been pressuring Perry to give her more responsibility. If I suggest that a Supergirl interview needs a feminine touch and Lois isn't available he ought to go for it."

"Okay," said Clark, "I think that's the adult stuff out of the way, let's get Jason back in here and decide what we want to eat."

"You'll have to guide me," said Kara. "I'm still figuring out Earth food. One thing, I promised I'd drop by a party a little later, so I'd better not eat too much."

"As Karen?"

"Actually no, as Kara Zor-El. I made friends with a girl called Abby who works with Agent DiNozzo, he's going back to his ship so they're giving him a farewell party; Abby invited me to drop by. I thought I'd try to get there about nine."

"Wasn't that the guy who tried to bug the Fortress?" asked Lois

"Everyone tries to bug the Fortress," said Clark, "I wasn't expecting anything else. The Jor-El AI took care of it. He seemed like a nice person apart from that."

"I guess," said Kara. "Anyway, it sounded like a good opportunity to meet people in an everyday setting, and she's promised that there won't be reporters there, so why not?"

"So long as they're not expecting you to be the cabaret," said Richard, "Performing feats of strength to entertain them."

"I'm not even going in my Supergirl costume. They've seen me wearing ordinary clothes; I'll do the same this time."

"Isn't that risky?" asked Clark.

"I gave her some tips," said Lois. "As Kara she dresses young, a schoolgirl look, no obvious cosmetics and a hint of not understanding Earth fashions. Karen is more of a beach babe stroke rollerblading stroke jogger look. And Linda will be a very different mature student look." She went to get Jason.

"I may also try traditional Kryptonian clothing when I'm being Kara, if I ever need to go to a formal event. The Fortress has designs, and they're like nothing I'd ever wear as Karen or Linda."

"I wish I'd thought of that," said Clark, "you have no idea how silly I sometimes feel wearing the Superman costume when everyone else is in a dinner jacket."

"So let Kara do that a couple of times, then follow her example."

"I'll give it a try." As Lois came back with Jason, he added "Chinese food, Indian, or Thai?"

## VII

**Long Beach, California, Monday 6.15 PM PST**

Dressed as Karen, Kara jogged into the boarding house, heard the murmur of a TV from

the landlady's office, and ducked in to ask "Hi! Any letters for me, Mrs. Grady?" She wasn't expecting anything, but it was something a normal person might do.

The landlady checked a rack of pigeon-holes, "No, no mail," and went on "You've been here five days, and I don't think you've eaten more than two breakfasts. That's good food going to waste."

"Sorry about that, things are just crazy right now. Gotta dash!" Kara ran for the stairs, keeping her speed down to human norms.

Behind her Mrs. Grady shouted "Don't expect a refund!" and turned back to the TV.

Upstairs she shook her hair loose, took a quick shower, changed to clothes that fitted her 'Kryptonian who doesn't quite understand human fashions' look, scanned the house to make sure that nobody was in a position to see her, and ran down and out again, shutting the door loudly enough to ensure that nobody could possibly think she'd flown off. There was a blind spot a few yards down the road, concealed from view by trees, a wall, and an advertising sign, and she used it to blur to super-speed and get into the air. Within five minutes of her arrival she was far out over the Pacific, curving east then north towards the Fortress, made a quick stop there, then headed south again towards Washington.

### **Washington, 9.28 PM EST**

Abby opened the door and said "Oh! Oh, you came." There was an odd note to her voice.

"I said I would if I could. Is something wrong?"

"It's stupid," said Abby.

"Have I done something to upset you?"

"It's just... are you in love with Tony?"

"Am I...? No, I don't think so. Why?"

"It's really stupid... I said that I thought there might be a little spark between the two of you, and Gibbs said that if there was Tony might not be able to keep his job because you're not an American citizen, and Tony really loves working here so I got worried that it might be..."

"Don't worry," said Kara. "It's not going to happen."

"So what's wrong with Tony?" Abby asked sharply.

"I don't know enough about him to know if there's anything wrong. I've been around him for about five hours, how should I know?"

"Okay, forget it then, I'm just being silly. Come inside."

"Thank you. Is there anyone here I don't know?"

"There's Ducky, he's our pathologist, and Tim McGee, he's a computer geek and used to be on our team, Gibbs is with a marine, I think you know her, she's heading back to the *Seahawk* too, and Jimmy Palmer who works with Ducky, and Butch."

"Butch?"

"Tim's dog, you'll love him. Leave your coat on the hook."

"Do they all know who I am?"

"Only the ones you've met, but the others will probably guess."

"Okay. Can we pretend I'm just your friend Kara, and ignore the rest? It's Tony's party; I don't want to disrupt it."

"Okay."

"Oh, and Kal-El said it's customary to bring gifts. I hope that this is all right?" She held up an oddly-shaped small bottle of clear liquid.

"Oh wow, what is that?"

"It's a Kryptonian drink; the best replica the Fortress can make anyway. The name doesn't

translate well. Originally it was made from crushed seed pods, fermented then distilled. It should be safe for you to drink."

"What does it taste like?"

"I don't have anything to compare it to," said Kara, shrugging, "I was too young to drink alcohol the last time I was here so I don't know what Earth drinks are like. I tried a little sip when I lived in Argo City, it was nice but it made me giggly."

"Come inside and mingle," said Abby, "or everyone will be wondering where I've got to."

"Everyone," shouted Abby, as they went inside, "It's Kara." Tony seemed surprised, Gibbs less so. As Kara had half-expected, Gibbs' date was Corpsman Cook. She smiled as she recognised Kara. At the back of the room two men Kara didn't recognize, presumably McGee and Palmer, were playing some sort of computer game on a big-screen TV. There seemed to be a lot of guns and explosions involved.

"I knew a girl called Tara once," said an elderly man who was sitting on one of the couches, holding a glass of wine and patting a German shepherd. "She was double jointed, wanted to be an escapologist but never quite got the knack of picking locks. I'm Ducky and this is Butch, would you care to join us, my dear?"

"In a moment." She smiled at Tony and said "A small present for your journey." She turned to Cook and added "I'm sorry; I didn't know you would be here, or I would have bought a present for you. Perhaps Tony will share with you?"

"That's really nice of you," said Cook, "but we can't take alcohol back to the ship."

"Why don't we have some now?" suggested Tony. He looked at the bottle a little dubiously. "Will there be enough for everyone?"

"It's quite strong," said Kara. She picked up a shot glass. "My father used to drink about half this amount."

"It must pack a hell of a kick then." He studied the bottle again. "How do I open it?"

"Twist the cap - sorry, clockwise." As Tony did so there was a sudden aroma of something a little like jasmine.

"Smells nice," said Tony, pouring several glasses.

"You might want to sip just a little first; I'm not sure if it tastes nice if you aren't used to it."

"Okay." Everyone, apart from the video-game players, watched expectantly as Tony tried some. His eyes widened, and he inhaled sharply. "That's... holy crap, that's good, but it must be more than ninety percent alcohol."

"About ninety-seven, I think."

"Okay! Here's to all of us! Cheers!" Tony tossed his glass back and began spluttering, the others drank more cautiously while Gibbs slapped his back, then the back of his head.

Abby said "Whoa!" and slammed her empty glass down on the table, then began to giggle. "That's beautiful, it's like my head is full of flowers."

"Uh-oh," said Kara, "I was like that the first time I tried it. You'd better leave it a while before you have more."

"This is extraordinary," said Ducky. "Where on Earth did you get it?"

"The Arctic."

"The... would I be right to think I misheard your name?" Kara smiled and nodded. "Then you must think me an awful fool, Abby told me about your visit, but it slipped my mind momentarily."

"That's okay," said Kara, kneeling to pet Butch. The dog licked her face enthusiastically.

"He likes me!"

"What's not to like?" said Abby. "You're smart, and you're pretty, and you can fly..." She began to hiccup, and Corpsman Cook took her arm and helped her to a couch.

"Okay," said Gibbs. "I guess we know Abby's limit."

"It should wear off soon. One of the other ingredients is... I think you would call it a tailored molecule. It makes sure that it does no harm, and reduces blood alcohol levels if they become too high. It should work on anything else you've drunk tonight."

"That's a neat trick," said Tony. "What does it do about hangovers?"

"What's a hangover?"

"Umm... When you've drunk too much and the next morning you have a headache and feel like death."

"I really don't know, I never had one... and it's too late now, of course."

"What on Earth do you mean?" asked Ducky.

"Alcohol doesn't affect me any more. I like the taste, but my body breaks it down as fast as I drink it."

"Oh my dear girl; how sad for you!"

"Not really. I could drink concentrated sulphuric acid and that wouldn't affect me at all, I think the... um... trade-off is worth it."

"That makes you the most sober person in the room," said Tony. "Kara, do you want to make the next toast?"

"Should I?"

"Well, you brought the wonder-booze, and there's just about enough for another round."

"Okay then." She waited while Tony poured more glasses, and when everyone was ready said "Shokh, Tahrao, chao Urkynon!"

"I think we might need a translation."

"Sorry. Truth, Justice and Altruism; they're three of the Girod, the eleven cardinal virtues."

"What about the American Way?" asked Abby.

"I'm sorry...?"

"Never mind."

"So," asked Ducky, "what are the other eight virtues...?"

Kara stayed for another hour then invented an emergency as an excuse to leave. As she said "good night" she was uneasily aware that the only people who'd been behaving normally were the two men playing computer games, who'd hardly been aware of her presence.

**Smallville, Kansas, Tuesday 7.15 AM CST**

"Is the rest of my life going to be like that?" asked Kara. "Clark warned me, but it felt so odd."

"It's one of the reasons why Clark invented Superman," said Martha Kent, kneading pastry. "Would you be a dear and peel those apples, then chop them into thin slices... no, leave out the pips and stalks... that's right, thank you. What was I saying... oh yes, Clark knew that what he can do... what you can do... is so strange that people can't react to it normally. If he'd come out into the open, tried to live his whole life with everyone knowing what he could do, it would have been like living in a goldfish bowl. He would have been constantly watched and pestered. I doubt he would have been able to work, and he does so love journalism, and anything like marriage would have been impossible."

"I understand that, of course," said Kara. "It's why we're establishing my Linda Lee

identity."

"I think that may be part of the problem," said Martha. "Clark wears Superman as a disguise; you seem to be thinking of Linda as the disguise. Linda needs to be the real you, not Supergirl. Supergirl is what you can do, not who you are. As for the other identities... well, it feels like you're going about this the wrong way."

"I don't understand."

"I think that you like being Karen. And why not; there's a lot of you in her. People act naturally around her, she's enjoying herself in the sun, she doesn't have many responsibilities, and you can walk away from her if it all goes horribly wrong and eventually become Linda."

"That's right, of course."

"Karen is playtime; Linda is going to be your adult life. But most people gradually grow into their adult roles, and can't easily walk away if things go wrong. They have friends who remember them as children and teenagers. We can't quite do that, but I can't help but think that it would be a good deal easier for you if you became Linda now, and did the playtime things as her."

"I don't think I understand."

"Well, nobody knows what grown-up Linda looks like yet... why shouldn't she be more like Karen? If you've already made some friends as Karen, and want to keep them, tell them in strictest confidence that you've been hiding from... oh, from a stalker, say... and that your real name is Linda. Once you're happy with yourself as Linda, you shouldn't be so worried about the way people respond to you when you're being Supergirl, and that will let you enjoy the fun parts of it."

"You might be right," said Kara. "We all liked the Karen idea, but..." She trailed off into silence

"Think about it, and talk to Lois and Clark, but I think it might be the best answer. Now, if you could just give the pie a little warmth with your heat vision... yes, that's right... keep that up for another thirty seconds or so, then it will be ready."

#### **Long Beach, California, 7.50 AM PST**

"You were out early," said Mrs. Grady, as Kara came into the dining room. The other residents watched or ignored her with varying degrees of indifference.

"I went out to meet my aunt, she was just passing through on her way to the airport; hope I'm not too late for breakfast."

"No, there's still plenty left. Mmm, something smells nice."

"My aunt brought me a home-baked apple pie; want a piece?"

#### **Arkham Asylum, Gotham City, 11.30 PM**

Working as quietly as he could, the man who thought of himself as Lex Luthor waited for the last guard patrol of the evening to pass, then prepared his escape...

## **VIII**

#### **San Francisco, California, Labor Day**

Flying at Mach 4, Clark sped over the Golden Gate Bridge, looking for more idiots to rescue from sinking boats, car crashes, barbecue explosions and the other hazards that made Labor Day an annual chore. Kara was currently over the Florida coast. At intervals their routes criss-crossed the country, giving them a reasonable chance of catching any incident before it

got too serious.

*"...so as soon as you get the rest of the papers to me I can start being Linda, " Kara said over the secure link. "Any idea how we should play that? I can't just say I was using a phoney name for the fun of it. We need...Rao! I'll call you back."*

Clark continued his patrol, hoping that Kara hadn't run into a problem she couldn't handle. It wasn't likely, of course.

*"Sorry about that, " she said a few minutes later, "Guy put his arm through the safety guard of an airboat propeller to clear out some vines. Then his wife tried to start the engine."*

"Ouch. Badly injured?"

*"They might be able to sew his hand back on, I got it cooled and stopped the bleeding pretty fast, then flew him to hospital."*

"Good. You didn't actually freeze anything?"

*"Of course not; it should be okay if they've got a good micro-surgeon."*

"Well done. Now, what were we talking about?"

*"I was saying that I need a reason to have been using a false name."*

"You don't want to make a fresh start as Linda?"

*"Martha was right; I've made some friends in Long Beach, I'd like to stay in touch if I can and there's a house-sitting job I'd like to try for if I can get the paperwork organised quickly."*

"Does that pay well?"

*"No, but it's six weeks free accommodation plus living expenses, and that gives me time to look for something better. All I have to do is keep an eye on the place and look after some pets. I even get to use their Porsche."*

"Can you even drive?"

*"You're too easy sometimes... I should learn, but I can't get a license without papers."*

"Okay, I'll see what I can do about speeding that up, and Lois is working on the back-story, trying to find a good reason for you to be using a false name."

### **Arkham, Gotham City, Tuesday 2 AM EST**

The new moon cast little light as a shadowy figure dropped down from the wall surrounding Arkham Cemetery, and walked stealthily towards the section of the graveyard reserved for pauper's graves. Eventually it stopped, and began to dig at the site of the newest grave, just a few hours old. Within a few minutes the wicker casket was revealed, and opened to reveal the bloated corpse of the man who had called himself Lex Luthor. The intruder produced a camera with a bulky image-intensifying lens, took a dozen pictures of the body, then opened a compact medical kit and began to collect specimens of skin, hair, blood, and other tissues.

Thirty minutes later the body was buried again, and the intruder was gone.

### **Long Beach, California, Friday 9 AM PST**

"Visitor for you, Karen," shouted Mrs. Grady.

Kara ran downstairs, half-expecting to see Lois or Clark, but there was a stranger there, an older man wearing tinted glasses, a striped shirt, and a plaid suit, who was chewing on a matchstick. Kara thought that he looked like the gangsters she'd seen in old movies from Earth; she glanced at him with X-ray vision, and spotted a pair of brass knuckles in one of his pockets, and a thick envelope in another. She noticed Linda Lee's name on some of the papers inside it.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm Matches Malone. I owe your cousin some favours, he knew I was headed this way and asked me to drop by, give you some news. Can we talk somewhere private; outside, maybe?"

"I guess," said Kara. Malone, if that was really his name, led the way to a swinging lounge on the porch; Kara knew that it was just outside Mrs. Grady's office, and wasn't surprised to see that the window was open. She would be able to overhear everything they said. "What's this about?"

"Your cousin wanted me to tell you that you don't have to worry about that rat Vance. He was in a car crash, won't be hurting no-one no more."

"What... what happened to him?" Kara said, pretending that she knew who he was talking about. Malone fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled page from a Chicago tabloid. The story circled had the headline 'Vance Heir Killed.' Kara scanned down the page, which described a drunk-driving spree which ended in a crash, and as she had half-expected noted a reference to 'multiple allegations of stalking, sexual assault and harassment.' The story, presumably genuine, would be a good background for the scenario Martha had suggested.

"He's... he's really dead?"

"They don't come much deader, Linda. Anyways, the cops won't need you to give evidence now, and your cousin said I should tell you that it's probably safe to start using your real name again, but you might want to stay out here a while longer just to be sure. Oh, and he gave me a bunch of papers for you, stuff you're gonna need."

"Okay," said Kara, taking the envelope and leafing through it. As expected, it contained anything she might possibly need to establish Linda Lee's identity, including her 2004 high school diploma and references from three former employers. The only name she recognised was the Chicago division of Wayne Enterprises, where she had apparently worked as a secretary from January 2006 to July 2007, leaving for 'personal reasons.'

"I can't believe it's finally over," she said. "I've been pretending that everything was okay, but..." she left the sentence unfinished; sure that Mrs. Grady could come up with a scenario to fill in the gaps. "It's so good to know... Thank you!"

"That's okay, kiddo, I met the guy one time and he was a real piece of work. If he hadn't iced himself I might have been tempted to do it for him. Now, I've gotta get moving. You have a good life, okay?"

"Okay. And thanks again." As they stood Kara pretended to hug him impulsively, taking care to keep her strength down to human norms, and pecked his cheek with a quick kiss. His skin tasted of something... cosmetics? A disguise? She was suddenly sure that Matches was even less real than Karen. He winked at her, said "be seeing you," and walked to a bright red Cadillac with rental plates. Kara thought about tracking him but decided that if she ever needed to know who he was, Clark could tell her.

She went up to her room and padlocked most of the papers into the cheap steel locker Mrs. Grady provided for her guests, leaving the newspaper cutting on her bed, and went out. She was willing to bet that the landlady would take a look as soon as she left the house.

**Metropolis - 11.25 PM EST**

"It's on in a couple of minutes," said Clark, coming in from the kitchen with two mugs of chocolate topped with tiny marshmallows.

"Do you have the recorder set?" asked Lois, "Jason will want to see this tomorrow."

"Relax; it's set. Anyway, the Fortress will be downloading the satellite transmission; I can

always copy that to DVD if there's a problem here."

*"And now, sponsored by WayneTech International, WGBS-TV presents The Midnight Show Starring Johnny Nevada... Heeeeeeeere's Johnny!"*

The host walked onto the set, smiled at the cameras, and said *"We have a very special show tonight. A few weeks ago most people had barely heard of her... now her name is on everyone's lips. Emergencies permitting, we hope to be joined a little later by the one... the only... Supergirl!"*

"Go Kara," murmured Lois.

"Shhhh..."

*"...but first... she's blonde and beautiful, and she's here promoting her new book, At the Pleasure of the President. It's the inimitable... C.J. Cregg!"*

To thunderous applause a tall blonde wearing a Vera Wang dress walked onto the set, shook hands with Johnny, and moved to the seat he'd indicated. *"C.J... or can I call you Claudia Jean?"*

*"President Bartlet calls me Claudia Jean, everyone else can call me C.J."*

*"Okay. C.J... until a few weeks ago I think most people would have agreed that as a former White House Chief of Staff you were probably the most powerful blonde in history."*

*"That's flattering, but inaccurate. Margaret Thatcher, who used to be Prime Minister of Great Britain, is a blonde. And if you spell it without the 'e' on the end, there's Jimmy Carter."*

*"Okay, let's say the most powerful blonde - with an 'e' - in the history of the USA."*

*"I'd mention Marilyn Monroe, but I think that most Democrats would prefer I didn't go there."* There was more applause.

*"Okay... let's not mention Marilyn, Jimmy or Margaret... for a while you might possibly have been considered the most powerful blonde on Earth... how does it feel to be upstaged by a kid from Krypton?"*

"Uh-oh," said Lois. "Kara won't be happy about that one."

*"Well, Johnny, " said C.J., "first of all she isn't a kid. According to the interview she gave the Daily Planet yesterday she's nearly twenty-two years old. Nearer twenty-four if you count the time she's spent in suspended animation."*

"That's better," said Clark.

*"Second, she and Superman have both said that they are unwilling to become involved in human politics, except by setting examples for others. That takes her out of contention for my kind of power... having said that, I think we're pretty much agreed that I'm a lot less powerful than a locomotive, and can't leap any sort of building in a single bound, so I'm obviously out of contention for the superhero power stakes."* The audience cheered again.

*"Okay, " said Johnny, "the bottom line is that you're both heavy hitters. Which of you should I back if you have to fight Godzilla?"*

*"Supergirl, definitely. Or maybe Margaret Thatcher."*

*"How about King Kong?"*

*"The original tall, dark, and handsome? I'd have to give that one some thought. He's cute, but I'm not sure I'd want to monkey around with his affections."* Applause.

*"Okay, let's get a little more serious. You're an expert on politics, what will another superhero do to the political landscape?"*

*"I could give you a long answer on that one, " said C.J., "but if I told you I'd have to kill you."*

*"Really?"*

*"You'd die of boredom." The audience laughed. "I'm out of the loop these days, but I'm willing to bet that there are new position papers and threat evaluations every day, and most of them will be more useful once they've been recycled as toilet paper. I personally think that we've nothing to fear and a lot to gain from Supergirl's arrival, but I'm not involved in policy any more."*

*"Well, right here and now we're still waiting for Supergirl's arrival at the studio, " said Johnny, "so we'll be back with C.J. Cregg and talking about her new book after this word from our sponsors..."*

*"...I think the bottom line is that the USA can and will do more to help third world nations with the recent economic upturn, " C.J. said fifteen minutes later, "and we should start to see real progress on that front after the next budget."*

*"Okay, " said Johnny, "We're going to have to leave it there for now, though I hope that we'll get back to it a little later. Without further ado, please welcome Supergirl..." He and C.J. stood and the audience went wild as Kara walked onto the set, wearing a floor-length garment resembling a Greek chiton, spun of silky blue cloth, with a short red cape draped over one bare shoulder, attached by a gold brooch in the familiar 'S' and pentagon shape. A broad gold belt and gold sandals completed the ensemble. She shook hands, and took a seat between C.J. and Johnny.*

*"Okay, " said Johnny, "that's a very different look for you tonight. How would you describe that?"*

*Kara looked puzzled, and said "It's just evening clothes, the sort of thing I would wear to... say... a dinner party if I were in Argo City. The Fortress made it for me."*

*"We've never seen Superman wearing anything equivalent."*

*"Kal-El comes from a very different culture. Argo City was... unusual, a town of artists and scholars, well outside the mainstream of Kryptonian society. The customs and fashions date back to an earlier era, with much more variation in their designs. From what I've seen in our records, the mainstream culture was much more austere. Your costume was prescribed by your family and your status. Kal-El became head of the House of El after the death of his father, so he wears the appropriate uniform. I'm sure that there would have been variations for different occasions, ceremonies and so forth, but the exact circumstances would never arise on Earth. I'll have to talk him into loosening up a little."*

*"I think you've just made a lot of fashion editors and designers very happy, " said C.J.*

*"You always seem to wear the same costume when you're working, " said Johnny.*

*"It's practical, and a lot easier to keep clean. And I think it helps if people instantly recognize me."*

*"Moving on, you've been on Earth a little over a month now. How are things going for you?"*

*"I think reasonably well; I was a little homesick at first, but everyone has been incredibly nice, and I've been keeping busy. And of course I spent a lot of time preparing to come here, studying Earth and its society, so it isn't as unfamiliar for me as it must have been for Kal-El."*

*"We've seen you on the news, of course. What do you do when you aren't diverting lava flows or stopping bank robberies?"*

*"I've been improving my Earth languages, and getting more of a feel for where everything is. I think I've memorised most of the world now, but there are a lot of places I've*

*only seen from twenty miles up, and that really isn't the same as being there on the ground. And I'm spending a lot of time just charging up my reserves of energy; Kal-El spent years under your sun, I've only had weeks."*

*"What's your favourite place so far?"*

*"The central Australian desert, " said Kara. "Lots of sun and the animals are very interesting. Of course I don't have to worry about dying of thirst or being bitten by a snake, and I guess that helps. The sea off your west coast, I've been trying to make friends with some whales there, the ones I rescued on my first day. Oh, and I went to a party in Washington, that was fun."*

*"I was wondering when you'd visit the White House, " said C.J.*

*"It wasn't the White House, just a friend's home."*

*"Talking of friends, " said Johnny, "is there any truth in the rumour that you've been seen with Leonardo DiCaprio?"*

*"None at all; I've never met him."*

*"But you know who he is?"*

*"Yes... Argo City used to pick up a lot of TV transmissions from Earth when it was closer, I've seen Titanic."*

*"That reminds me to ask... Last time you were only here for a few days, and it's my understanding that you only came to Earth again because you thought that Superman wasn't going to return. That turned out to be wrong, so how long do you plan to stay on Earth this time?"*

*"The journey is already very difficult, within weeks it will be impossible, and I think that I can do more good here on Earth; unless things change, I'm planning to stay."*

*"Well, I'm sure that I'm speaking for a lot of people when I say that you're welcome here."*

*"Thank you."*

*"One thing I was wondering; you said you studied Earth while you were getting ready to come here, what else did you do to prepare?"*

*"I spent a lot of time training in gymnastics and Klurkor... that's a martial art which I think resembles Earth's Aikido, it emphasises disarming opponents without hurting them. I had some minor surgery that would be impossible once I was invulnerable, and some other treatments to make sure that I couldn't carry any Kryptonian diseases to Earth."*

*"Surgery?" asked Johnny.*

*"There are a couple of unnecessary organs that sometimes go wrong... I think one is like your appendix, I'm not sure that there's a human equivalent for the other... also I was slightly short sighted in one eye, I had that corrected."*

*"Should we be worrying that Superman might suffer from appendicitis at some point?"*

*"I don't think so... before Krypton was destroyed procedures like that were carried out by nano-machines at birth. Argo City didn't retain the technology."*

*"Okay, we're coming up to another break, after which we'll be joined by performance artist Lady Gaga for the final segment of the show..."*

**Metropolis, 12.55 AM**

Kara scanned Clark's apartment block from high altitude, noticed that the lights were still on, landed silently on the balcony and tapped on the sliding door.

"Kara," said Lois, opening it. "We saw the show, you look gorgeous."

"Thanks, it was a lot of fun. I just called in to say thank you for sending the documents."

Your friend made it very convincing."

"Documents?" said Clark. "I haven't sent them yet; we've been waiting for your employment record to arrive."

There was a flare of light at the other end of the balcony, a match burning for a second, illuminating the face of the morning's messenger.

"That's him!" said Kara. "Who are you?"

"I'm Batman," said the stranger, "and we have a problem."

## IX

### **Washington, Saturday 7.30 AM EST**

Gibbs was working on the boat he was building in his basement when the doorbell rang. He went upstairs, paused for a moment to put his gun into his belt behind his back, looked through the door viewer, wondered for a second if he was seeing things, then opened it.

"Can you spare a few minutes?" asked Superman.

"I'd imagine so," said Gibbs. "You might want to come inside before the neighbours come asking for autographs."

"There's nobody looking at the moment."

"And how can... never mind, stupid question. Come in, would you like coffee?"

"Thanks."

"I saw Supergirl on TV last night, she was looking pretty good. The outfit suited her." When Clark raised his eyebrows he added "I'm not that old, and I'm not blind. So... not that it isn't always a pleasure, but what can I do for you? More machine gun tests?"

"On Labor Day one of the inmates of Arkham Asylum in Gotham City committed suicide. He allegedly hanged himself with a cord made of braided dental floss. It must have taken him weeks to prepare."

"It happens. What about it?"

"The inmate was apparently a paranoid schizophrenic who was under the delusion that he was Lex Luthor. He reacted to any mention of my name with terror, and after my cousin's arrival began to react the same way if she was mentioned. And we were both very busy over the Labor Day weekend."

"So what's your point?"

"It's possible that he wasn't entirely delusional."

"Go on," said Gibbs, pouring the coffee. He noticed that Superman took his with cream and two sugars.

"Hypothetically, if someone dug up a body illegally and took samples from it, would the samples have any value as evidence?"

"No... no judge would allow that."

"What about the body itself? If a forensic scientist examined it legally at a later date, would the evidence be admissible?"

"The scientist would have to report that the body had been tampered with, but that doesn't necessarily mean that forensic evidence couldn't be used. Why ask me?"

"Because Gotham PD and the FBI both said that the inmate wasn't Luthor. If he was, someone has gone to a lot of trouble to hide the fact. This needs to be investigated by someone with no previous involvement in the case, and Kara told me that you have a very good

forensics department."

"How can it be our case?" asked Gibbs. "Luthor didn't commit any crimes involving the US Navy."

"I think that you may find that he did, if you check. Luthor decided to build his artificial continent at the edge of the continental shelf off Metropolis. Right in the middle of the anti-submarine sensor net you had out there. "

"It's possible. That's pretty much a leftover from the Cold War, but they use it to track whales. I guess it's still worth something to the Navy."

"I know that you'll need all sorts of authorization to get involved. I'll do anything I can to help, naturally."

"You know," said Gibbs. "If that was Luthor, I can think of one obvious suspect to put him in the asylum. That continent of his would have destroyed Gotham a few hours after it hit Metropolis. And I hear that Batman doesn't take kindly to people who endanger his town."

"That's true," said Clark. "That's why he was interested in the body."

"Great," said Gibbs. "Just what did he find there?"

"I think that should come from your own people. If there's anything he's spotted but you miss I'll tell you, then you can check to see if he's right."

"That ought to work."

"Time may be a factor, especially at this time of year." Superman produced a sheet of paper. "Here are the details."

"Let me make some calls."

#### **NCIS Headquarters, Washington Navy Yard, 10.45 AM**

"We have a compromised burial site," said Gibbs, "the temperature in Gotham's in the high eighties, and that corpse isn't getting any fresher."

"This has to go through channels," said Director Vance. "You've made a good case for our involvement, but we're going to need warrants, approval in multiple jurisdictions, and..." He was interrupted by the phone. "Mister Secretary...? Okay. Yes, that's not a problem. I'll tell him." He hung up the phone, and turned back to Gibbs. "That was SECNAV. You have a go. Take your team, warrants will be ready by the time you reach Gotham."

"I don't have my team... if you want me to actually solve this thing I'll need them."

"DiNozzo, David and McGee? Out of the question."

"I'll need them."

Vance considered for a few moments. "I'll let you have McGee back; if you produce some results I'll review the others."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me; thank Superman, and whoever he spoke to at the White House."

#### **Gotham International Airport, 12.30 PM**

When the NCIS transport touched down, Gibbs wasn't surprised to see two waiting police cars. As the crime scene van was unloaded, one of the onlookers came forward; a handsome man who Gibbs suspected was some sort of politician or lawyer, carrying a bulky envelope.

"Agent Gibbs?"

"That's me."

"I'm Harvey Dent, Deputy District Attorney."

"Wonderful..."

"What?"

"Sorry, nothing important. Got some paper for me?"

"Search warrant for Arkham Asylum, Exhumation Order for Arkham Cemetery, permission to transport a cadaver out of state, and everything else you'll need. It wasn't easy getting the judge to sign them a Saturday morning." Dent didn't hand him the papers.

"I sense a 'but.'"

"I want to be kept in the loop. If it is Luthor I want to know. If anyone in my office or Gotham PD was involved in this I want to know about it. If Batman is involved I definitely want to know."

"You've got it, provided national security isn't compromised."

"Thanks," said Dent, handing him the envelope. "The cars will escort you to Arkham."

"One car will be fine."

"You don't know this city," said Dent. "Take both."

"I've been here before," said Gibbs, "arson investigation in the navy yard in ninety-seven. One car will be plenty."

"Your funeral."

"My exhumation. And the fewer stray extra people I have around to mess up the graveyard and the crime scene, the happier I'll be."

### **Metropolis, 2.10 PM**

"Doesn't it worry you that Batman knows who you are?" asked Lois.

"He knows who I am," said Clark, "And now we know who he is. That wasn't much of a disguise for someone with X-ray vision."

"Except that he doesn't just know you - he knows about Jason and Kara."

"Okay... have you ever heard of Batman doing anything to hurt anyone who didn't deserve it?"

"I guess not... but the grandstanding worries me. He didn't need to dress up and give Kara those papers in person; he could have let them go through the company and pretended not to notice."

"He wants us to know who he is, I think, and doing it that way ensures that we keep his secret."

"Maybe... but it worries me."

Rescuing the passengers of an overloaded ferry off Bombay, Kara was having similar thoughts. Like Lois and Clark, she decided to wait and see.

### **Arkham, 3.30 PM**

"Lee, Keating," said Gibbs, "finish up here. McGee, wash up, then with me. Let's go talk to crazy people."

"You sure they're okay with the grave?" asked McGee, after he'd used the van's tiny washroom.

"We've got the body and the casket bagged, and any evidence left in the grave has probably been contaminated by bat-boy. They can't do much harm."

"You don't like Batman?" asked McGee, following Gibbs to the asylum's side entrance.

"I've never liked vigilantes, and the idea that this town's first line of defence is a guy who dresses up as a bat is just... stupid. At least Superman isn't afraid to come out into the open, and he's saved a lot of lives. Even if he does wear his underpants over his clothes."

A guard let them into the asylum; another escorted them to the cell. As they walked the corridors they heard yells and occasional screams. "Must take some getting used to, huh?" said McGee.

"What must?" asked the guard.

"All that screaming and shouting. Or is that just because we're here?"

"Screaming and... oh, I guess. It goes on all the time, you get so you hardly notice."

"Daylight's wasting," said Gibbs, picking up his pace.

"Okay," said Gibbs. "I think we've got everything we can from that cell, doesn't really tell us much. Now, there were four other prisoners in that wing and floor that night. We've got the guy who dresses as a penguin, the eco-terrorist with the pheromones, the computer geek, and the guy who lives in an icebox. Any thoughts?"

"Forget Poison Ivy," said the warden. "You're men, she won't talk to you. And Freeze is totally focused on his own problems; he wouldn't pay attention to anything else that was going on."

"What about the other two?"

"They're both delusional, both hate Batman, and both consider themselves criminal masterminds. Nigma is probably the saner of the two, but more dangerous. Penguin is a coward."

"You take Penguin, McGee, I'll tackle Nigma."

"Works for me."

"What is it that travels on all fours in the morning, on two legs at noon, and three at twilight?" asked Edward Nigma.

"Don't know, don't care," said Gibbs. "Any idea who'd want to kill Lex Luthor?"

"Come on," said The Riddler, "give me a bone here. Answer a riddle; I'll answer one of your questions."

"Okay."

"What is it that's always coming but never arrives?"

"A porn star."

"Not quite the answer I had in mind."

"It's all you're getting. Any idea who'd want Lex Luthor dead?"

"Pretty much anyone, I'd imagine. What do you throw away that keeps returning?"

"Bills. Did you know that Luthor was a patient here?"

"You really have no sense of fun, do you? No, I really had no idea; if I had I might have seen if I could hit him for a loan. How many sides has a circle?"

"As many as I want it to," said Gibbs, getting up.

"No more questions?"

"Why should I bother? You don't have any answers."

As he turned for the door Nigma rushed at him. Gibbs dodged, grabbed his arm and neck, and slammed him into the wall.

"You broke by dose!"

"Was that another riddle? Sorry, don't have an answer for that one either. Thanks for your time."

"So what did you get out of the Penguin?" Gibbs asked as they walked back to the van.

"His file says he loves fish, so I sent out for a couple of lox and cream cheese bagels and bribed him. He doesn't know anything useful. Kept going 'wak' and saying that Batman must have killed Luthor."

"You think so?"

"I've hacked the FBI reports. Batman is... well, I was reminded of you. Not that you'd ever dress as a bat, of course," McGee added quickly.

Gibbs stared at him.

"What I meant was that if he'd really killed him we'd never have known that Luthor still existed. He'd make sure of that, quietly and efficiently."

"Good save. Any thoughts on what we do next?"

"Get the evidence back to Ducky and Abby and hope they find something we can use."

"Works for me."

## X

### Washington, Monday 3.45 PM EST

"What have you got for me, Ducky?" asked Gibbs.

"It's most curious," said Dr. Mallard. "According to X-ray examination he appears to have had wide-ranging plastic surgery, facial reconstruction, skin grafts, even bone extensions. I emphasise the word 'appears.'"

"But...?"

"But in reality there has been virtually no work. Several surgical screws have been inserted into his skull at the points where major reconstruction would require them, but they do nothing. Thin pieces of dense plastic have been embedded below the muscles, again giving the impression that the bone has been artificially built up, especially around the cheeks and the nose, but all that they would really do is add a little temporary puffiness, and leave a misleading X-ray shadow."

"Anything else?"

"Some scarring to the fingertips, consistent with skin grafts, but again superficial; a naïve observer might think that his fingerprints have been changed, but the subcutaneous damage isn't nearly extensive enough. I would say that someone cut around the fingertips, put in a few stitches to simulate a full graft, and didn't do a particularly good job of after-care, so that some scarring formed, possibly deliberately."

"What about his death?"

"Almost certainly self-inflicted, given everything I've found. A wretchedly poor attempt at suicide, it must have been slow and agonising. There is no reason to believe that he was restrained in any way, incidentally; he did it to himself deliberately, and there would have been a window of several minutes in which he could have saved himself."

"Is he Luthor?"

"Now that's a very good question. A superficial examination would say yes, but a thorough examination would reveal the implants and traces of surgery, and on that basis the competent physician would say no. But when we strip away the misdirection, I'm afraid that I end up with what I can only describe as a tentative 'maybe.' Perhaps dear Abigail can tell us more."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Did I mention the possible long term damage to the bones?"

"Not yet?"

"As well as the more obvious modifications I've mentioned, there are faint signs that he has been restrained for an extended period, perhaps eight to ten months ago... incidentally, that

would be around the same time as the other operations I've mentioned. There's wear to the bones of his wrists and ankles consistent with an extended period in manacles."

"When you say an extended period?"

"At least three weeks, probably longer. I'll know more when the Jeffersonian Institute gets back to me; they're working on the bones now."

"He was in Arkham for nearly eight months... so someone holds him captive for a couple of weeks, maybe after the operations, maybe at the same time, then strips him naked, maybe gets him drunk, and dumps him on the streets of Gotham City?"

"It's as good a theory as any. Proving it would be difficult, to say the least."

"What have you got for me, Abby?"

"Fingerprints don't match Luthor; they're not on the database at all."

"I sense a 'but' there."

"Most people, you check their fingerprints and you have to eliminate a few false positives, records that come close enough for the automatic recognition program to think that they're the same. It takes a human eye to spot that it isn't a match."

"I know what a false positive is, Abby."

"This time there aren't any; there's nothing particularly unusual about the corpse's fingerprints, but I'm getting nada. I thought at first there was something hinky about the records, but now I'm wondering if someone interfered with the search routine."

"You think someone's hacked IAFIS?"

"Luthor's rich - he could hire a really good hacker to mess with the system. Doesn't necessarily mean our man is Luthor; it might mean that the real Luthor is hiding somewhere and wants us to think dead guy was Luthor but concealing his identity."

"Let me guess - McGee's working on the software?"

"Yup."

"Anything else?"

"His brain chemistry is hinky. Adrenalin, much more than there should be, and traces of a weird cocktail of hallucinogenic and psychotropic drugs. Drugs like that would normally break down after he died, but there's still some there. He must have had a massive dose. No, a lot of massive doses; probably spread out over a lengthy period, up to and including just before his death."

"What would something like that do to him?"

"He'd be terrified; constant, mind-numbing fear."

"The first thing I was told about this guy was that he was terrified of Superman and Supergirl. Could it be that specific?"

"Maybe, if the drugs were combined with some sort of conditioning. Let me check the literature, I have a feeling that I've read about something like this, but it isn't coming to me, not yet."

"Well, keep on it. Anything else?"

"One or two small things. A good few thousand small things, actually."

"A good few thousand what?"

"Tiny time capsules. Like you get in a cold tablet, but more of them and really really small."

"Where?"

"Embedded about five to ten millimetres deep in the skin, all over his scalp."

"Let me guess; they're not a cold cure."

"Correct, for two points. Want to try for three and tell me what they are?"

Gibbs thought for a second. "Hair restorer?"

"It might be. I'm still running tests, but it seems to be FCE 28260, which is a dihydrotestosterone inhibitor, it zaps the hormone that affects hair follicle growth in male pattern baldness. FCE 28260 is still experimental; nobody should be using it for treatment yet."

"How would you embed something like that in his skin? Hypo?"

"Very good question, Gibbs. My best guess is something like a tattooing gun, injecting a slurry of the capsules in sterile saline. Head tattoos are really painful and bleed a lot; his whole head would have been raw and covered in little sores. There's nothing like that in the Arkham medical records, so he must have recovered before he was admitted."

"Okay... keep on it. I'm going to make a couple of calls."

### **USS Seahawk, off Iran**

"Yes," said DiNozzo, "there's a hard copy of the BOLO on file here. I think it went out to every ship in the Navy, just in case Luthor turned up overseas."

"*It's all there?*" Gibbs voice crackled over the scrambled radio connection, "*including fingerprints?*"

"Yes, Gibbs."

"*Get it scanned and send a copy to McGee, stat, and get the actual file sent here by courier as soon as you can.*"

"What's wrong with the prints that are on file with IAFIS?"

"*IAFIS may be compromised.*"

"Oh boy..."

"*Well, what are you waiting for?*"

"On it."

### **FBI Headquarters, Washington, Tuesday 8.45 AM**

"Okay," said Gibbs. "In my left hand I have a printout of the record IAFIS gives us if we request Lex Luthor's fingerprints. In my right hand I have a scan of the BOLO you sent out on Luthor just after he tried to kill Superman. Notice anything odd?"

Tobias C. Fornell looked at the records, did a double-take, then got a magnifying glass out of his desk drawer and examined them more carefully. Eventually he said "Okay, one of these has to be wrong. Which do you think it is?"

"The IAFIS record is as phoney as a three dollar bill."

"How can you be so sure?"

"First, the prints on the IAFIS record happen to be identical to those of a guy by the name of John Dillinger."

"And second?"

"I've got a corpse with fingerprints the same as the BOLO, and IAFIS can't find me a match."

"How in hell did you know the prints were Dillinger?"

"I didn't. I tried Al Capone first then Clyde Barrow, Dillinger was my fifth guess. They're all records that are on display in the FBI museum."

"Someone's laughing at us."

"I've got McGee and a pack of geeks from Cybercrimes ready to tear into IAFIS as soon as you give the go-ahead. If we hit hard and fast we might just find out who screwed with the records before it's too late."

Fornell considered for a moment, rubbed his eyes, and said "Do it."

**Wayne Manor, Outside Gotham City, 10 AM**

"I'll be honest," said Bruce Wayne, looking up from his breakfast as Kara landed on the terrace, "I was expecting your cousin. He must have been the one that actually recognised me."

"He's more patient than I am," said Kara. "He's still waiting to see what you want. I thought it would be easier to ask than to wait."

"Would you like to join me for breakfast? If you're still running on West Coast time it's only seven."

"Explanations first, please."

"It's not complicated. With two of you on the scene it was obvious that sooner or later you'd turn your attention to Gotham, and maybe start looking for Batman. I decided to save you the trouble. If you need me, you know where to find me."

"And if you need us, the reverse applies. And I'd imagine that somewhere in there is the threat that you'll reveal our identities if we don't cooperate."

"Not at all," said Wayne, "in fact I've gone to quite a lot of trouble to ensure that if I'm ever exposed there won't be any sort of trail leading to anyone in your family. Speaking of which, standing on my terrace in those clothes isn't exactly inconspicuous; we're not being watched at the moment, but it isn't a good habit to get into. Why don't you change to Linda and join me? I'd like to try to convince you that we should all be friends."

"And if you don't," said an unexpected third voice, "he'll have to eat all this food, and spend the next week exercising twice as hard as usual." Kara looked up to see a grey-haired man carrying a large tray with several covered dishes, and smelled eggs, toast, coffee, and other foods she couldn't identify, and remembered that she hadn't actually eaten breakfast. "I'm Alfred. I'm either his butler or his keeper, depending on how you look at it."

There was a swirl of super-speed and Kara was wearing Linda's comfortable casual clothing, jeans and a T-shirt and stylish yet affordable sandals.

"I used to do quick-change on the London stage," said Alfred, pulling back a chair for her, "that would have been a very useful trick. Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee please," said Kara, taking the seat, and added. "You might as well join us; I'm sure that this concerns you as well as Mister Wayne, it'll save you having to eavesdrop."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," said Alfred. He stood waiting, and Kara shrugged and turned to her own food.

"After we've eaten," said Bruce, "I'll show you what I've got on Luthor, and we'll see if you spot anything I've missed. And perhaps mister Kent would like to join us too, I'm sure it must be boring watching us from the stratosphere..."

"Do you really think he would do that?"

"I would."

"You're right, of course," said Clark, appearing even more abruptly than Kara, and already in civilian clothing.

"Help yourself to coffee," said Bruce. "I don't think Alfred made enough food for three, but I think you're an early bird. You've probably had breakfast."

"You obviously expected us... what I don't quite get is why you invited us so flamboyantly."

"First, I wanted to apologise. I should have found Luthor. If someone hid him in Arkham I want to know why, and I suspect that for that I'll need your help."

"You must have a theory," said Kara.

"I have several. The thing that worries me is the decline in kryptonite smuggling around the time that Luthor entered Arkham."

"The *decline* worries you?"

"Starting in the month after your return to Earth, and continuing for the following four months, customs and the FBI intercepted an average of twenty-two grams of kryptonite a month, all of it small shards believed to have been machined from meteoric crystals. There's good reason to believe that they are left-over pieces from the kryptonite Luthor used in his missile when he built his continent."

"What happened after four months?" asked Clark.

"Once Luthor was admitted to Arkham, seizures fell to under a gram a month. The black market price has risen sharply, and the same bidders are active now as when you first returned. There's a shortage, and buyers aren't getting what they want."

"So what's the problem? I'm happy for there to be a shortage."

"I think that Luthor may have been behind the original black market, selling it off to finance his escape. It may be that he'd run out of kryptonite, but I think that he would have kept some for use if you got too close. What worries me is the possibility that it's now in the hands of whoever put Luthor into Arkham, and that whoever it is might be a good deal more intelligent than Luthor, and stockpiling it for eventual use."

"Do you have any suspects?" asked Kara.

"Not exactly. I know how Luthor was driven insane, and who developed the procedure, but beyond that..."

**Washington, Tuesday 4.45 PM EST**

"It's called 'fear toxin,'" said Abby, "developed by an insane psychopharmacologist called Jonathan Crane, AKA 'Scarecrow.' He used to work at Arkham Asylum, but he was moonlighting for the mob."

"So where is he now?" asked Gibbs.

"Back when Batman first went into business Crane was developing the stuff as a terrorist weapon. He used it on most of the inmates, tried to use it on Batman, and came close to getting it into the city water supply. There was also some sort of foreign terrorist group involved, so when the dust settled he was shipped off to the maximum security penitentiary at Lewisburg. As far as I know he's still there."

Gibbs checked. "He is."

"Well, the stuff isn't much of a secret these days; it's on the watch list for law enforcement agencies and Homeland Security. The trouble is that anyone with the right sort of skills and access to a good lab can make it. We're really not talking much here, a few milligrams a day would be enough to keep Luthor permanently frightened."

"Were there any traces of it in Luthor's cell?"

"I found some in saliva and urine traces, but very low concentrations."

"So it wasn't in his food or water? If it was the concentration in his pee and saliva would be stronger than the concentration in his blood."

"*Very* good, Gibbs!"

"Say he was given it the same way as the hair restorer, inside some sort of time capsule that slowly dissolved. How big a capsule would we be looking for?"

"Too big to be concealed in his body easily. It would probably show up on X-rays."

Gibbs got out his cell phone. "Ducky... I want you to check all of those implants you

removed from Luthor's body. Could any of them have concealed... Abby, what would it be, a liquid or a solid?"

"Most likely a reservoir of liquid, designed to feed very slowly into his brain. Check the implants on his skull first."

"Did you get that, Ducky?" Gibbs listened for a second; "Okay, if you find anything get back to me."

## XI

### **Arkham Asylum, Friday 11.00 AM EST**

For the last couple of days Pamela Isley, AKA Poison Ivy, had noticed that her thoughts seemed a little sharper and clearer; she suspected that her medication had been reduced, but couldn't quite work out what to do about it. It was probably the prelude to more questioning; the police had a tedious habit of wanting to know where the bodies were buried, and Pamela preferred them where they were, where they could continue to fertilise her plants.

She wasn't surprised when her cell door opened. Three guards, all women, were standing outside, and one said "Get dressed, you have a visitor."

She thought about refusing, but they'd probably drag her anyway, and there was always a faint chance that whoever was waiting wasn't protected against her pheromones. A few minutes later they delivered her to one of the interview rooms and left her there, alone. After a couple of minutes the door opened again and a stranger came in, a young blonde wearing... Oh. No hope there, she suspected; Kryptonians were probably immune, and they didn't work on women anyway.

"Thank you for seeing me," said Kara, shutting the door.

"I'd say it's a pleasure but it isn't," said Pamela. "What do you want?"

"Firstly, I would like a little information about your role in the abduction of Lex Luthor. Also, I'm interested in your concerns for the environment. I'm a stranger to this world, and it seems a shame that it is being damaged so badly."

"Yeah, right, sure you are. What's next, you'll plant a few trees if I cooperate?"

"I don't know, would that be the best use of my time and powers? I'm going to give you the opportunity to explain your views, and to suggest some ways in which I can help. Let's say that I'll listen for ten minutes regardless of the outcome of our discussion, up to an hour if you give me some or all of the information I need, longer if I'm still interested at the end of the hour."

"That's the carrot, I assume. What's the stick?"

"There isn't one."

"No deal."

"Tell me something... would you have been happy if Luthor had built his continent and destroyed most of the Earth, and nearly all its plants and animals?" Pamela didn't answer.

"Would you be happy if someone else tried it again? There are still five missing crystals..."

"What do you want to know?"

"What have we got?" Gibbs asked fifty minutes later.

"She does make a surprisingly logical case for exterminating ninety percent of the human race including all males," said Kara, "but it doesn't really work outside the terms of her

argument. Apart from that, a few good suggestions on minimising my environmental impact, mostly things I was already doing, and some rhetoric which might have made more sense if she wasn't still partially sedated. I shall have to visit her again in a later state of her treatment and ask her to clarify a few points."

"What have we actually got *concerning the case?*" asked Agent Lee.

"She was contacted anonymously, and paid an advance of a hundred thousand dollars to use her pheromones to attract Luthor and leave him unconscious at an agreed location, with another nine hundred thousand on completion. That happened about a month before Luthor was picked up by the police; she couldn't give us the exact date, but it ties in with the money transfers Batman found on Wednesday, and that's what led us here in the first place."

"So what you're telling me is that Luthor paid for his own abduction?" asked Gibbs.

"That's what Batman said. The money came from Bahamas bank accounts that were probably set up by Luthor, but all that the bank would know is that someone authorised the transfer and used the correct password. We have no way to tell if Luthor knew. Someone may have hacked his accounts."

"Where exactly was he left?"

"A factory; she thinks the name was Gotham Microfabrication."

"That we can check," said Gibbs, picking up the phone book and putting on his reading glasses. "Microbrewery... microelectronics... microfabrication. Here we are." He dialled the number, putting the phone on speaker, and waited.

*"This is Gotham Microfabrication. To assist us in handling your call, please select from one of the following options..."* Five minutes later, negotiating an apparently endless series of holds and call options, he still hadn't spoken to anyone.

"I don't think that there's anyone manning the phones."

"You're right," said Kara. "I just flew over the building, there's nobody inside the parts that I can see, just a lot of machinery. But part of the building has lead sheeting on the roof, and the walls are opaque to my x-ray vision. There are radiation warning signs on the doors leading to it. I have a bad feeling about it."

"Kryptonite?"

"I didn't feel anything, but I didn't fly low and lead would stop most of the radiation."

"We'll need a warrant," said Lee. "I'm on it." She dialled Harvey Dent's number.

#### **FBI Headquarters, Washington, 11.15 AM**

"It's weird," said Timothy McGee. "Someone got Dillinger's prints onto Luthor's records then somehow hacked a few hundred bytes of the IAFIS code. Any request for Luthor's record threw out the fake. Any search using Luthor's real fingerprints found no match, but to be on the safe side false positives were suppressed too. That's actually a lot harder than the record change, and I really have no idea why it was done."

"Any idea when?" asked Fornell.

"That's where we got lucky, a little anyway. No more than twelve days before Luthor was arrested; that's when the last major update of the IAFIS system code was rolled out, and the hack isn't on the master tapes. Somehow the time stamp for the file itself was faked to make it look like the record hasn't been changed since it was last updated, when the BOLO for Luthor was sent out a year or so ago."

"How hard would it be to trace the changes back to their source?"

"Very very difficult. There are around fifty-five million records, any given day tens of thousands have to be amended for one reason or another. Some of the changes come in from

agencies that routinely cover their tracks; CIA, NSA, Witness Protection, and so forth. Cybercrimes are working on it, but I don't expect to see much in the way of results any time soon. I'm not saying it can't be done, but unless we get a break it'll be old news by the time we get a result. Theoretically tracking the code change should be a lot easier, but we haven't found any records. Someone was very careful about that."

"Any sign of any other code changes?"

"Nothing. The master tapes and the current system tapes are identical, apart from a couple of dozen authorised patches, and none of them do anything like this."

"So someone was targeting Luthor, and Luthor alone."

"I guess," said McGee.

"Well, Luthor's dead, and provided that it really is him I'm happy for it to stay that way. You're disrupting the work of the computer centre, and there are other cases that need Cybercrimes a lot more urgently. I'm pulling the plug on this unless you can find more to go on."

"I guess I see your point. Okay, I'll let Gibbs know."

### **The White House, Washington, 11.35 AM**

"Let me see if I've got this straight," said Josh Lyman. "You want to shut down eleven bank accounts that may belong to Lex Luthor, eight of them overseas? Your source for this is NCIS, who got it from Supergirl, who may or may not have gotten it from Batman?"

"That's correct," said Karen Browning, the Secretary of the Treasury. "The records NCIS supplied show a pattern of automated money transfers characteristic of money laundering and tax evasion. Even if the accounts don't belong to Luthor, there's definitely something fishy about them."

"How much money are we talking here?" asked President Santos.

"Around two hundred million dollars. Gertrude Vanderworth was a very wealthy woman, and Luthor inherited her entire estate."

"What happens to the money if it does turn out to be Luthor's?"

"About twenty million is owed in taxes. The Vanderworth estate probably has the best claim on the remainder."

"Do it, but try to reduce the impact on the Vanderworths."

"You know the family?" asked Josh.

"I'm pretty sure that they're Republican supporters, but they shouldn't have to suffer more than they have to because the old lady trusted a monster."

### **NCIS Headquarters, Washington, Noon**

"This is the one all right," said Abby. "It looks pretty much like the other pieces of plastic, but it's just that bit thicker, and there's a complicated internal structure."

"If you look at this X-ray," said Ducky, "it was located over the sagittal suture, the junction between the bones that form the sides of the skull. One of the surgical screws penetrates the skull there, and I suspect that it may have been modified with a microscopic hole. Minute quantities of the drug flowed out of the plastic and down the screw into the brain."

Abby checked the X-ray, and said "that's screw eleven. Let's see." She put it under the microscope, focused, and said "I think you're right. It's really hard to see, it just looks like a little pitting of the metal, but I think it goes all the way through." She clamped the screw to a holder on the microscope stage, found a thin wire, and began to probe the hole.

### **Gotham City, 3.15 PM**

The door to the Gotham Microfabrication plant opened to the third pick Gibbs tried. Inside the building the air was stale, with a faint electrical smell. SWAT police and NCIS agents fanned out to search the building.

"Computers are on standby," said Gibbs, looking around the room, and noticing winking blue lights on several PCs. "Keep your eyes open for cameras, anything that might be a booby trap. And don't go in to the radiation lab!" He noticed that there was dust everywhere.

One of the police officers brushed against a desk, jogging the mouse a little, and after a few seconds the screen began to display camera views in and around the outside of the building. There were cameras in every room, set up so that all areas were monitored.

"There's nobody here," said Lee. "Want to hit the radiation lab?"

"No," said Gibbs, "but I guess we'll have to. Anyone know if the bomb squad here has a robot?"

"It's on its way," said one of the SWAT officers, after a brief radio message.

"What should I do?" Kara asked from the doorway.

"Get back outside and wait until we've checked the radiation lab. If you want to make yourself useful, there are some antennae and satellite dishes on the roof, see if you can figure out where they're aimed."

A few minutes later the bomb disposal team arrived, and moved their robot into position to open the door. Gibbs taped a kryptonite detector to its handling arm and switched it on.

"Okay," shouted Gibbs, "We're going to crack the lab. Everyone outside; Kara, get well clear of the building."

"How do you want me to handle this?" asked the robot operator. "That's a pretty heavy door. I could try to take out the hinges or the lock with the robot's shotgun, but it really needs proper cutting tools."

"Why not try turning the handle first?" suggested Gibbs.

A gripping arm reached out for the handle and turned it, then began to pull the door open. As soon as it was open a crack the operator carefully checked the opening for wires and booby-traps, but didn't find anything. "I think it's clean."

"Open it up."

The robot pulled. As the door swung open a foetid smell filled the factory, and the kryptonite detector began to beep.

## XII

### **Gotham City, 3.45 PM**

"Something smells really gross in there," said one of the SWAT cops.

"Stay outside," said Gibbs. "There's kryptonite in there, maybe other hazards. What have you got for me?"

The robot operator checked his instruments, and swivelled its camera around to get a better view. The screen showed a group of industrial robots surrounding a complicated-looking steel frame. "There's some radiation apart from the kryptonite. A lot more than you'd get from a granite building, less than I'd expect from any sort of nuke."

"Pan around, let's get more of a feel for the layout."

"Okay." More computers, a safe with radiation symbols on the door, a table...

"Zoom in on the table."

"You've got it." The table smoothly expanded to fill the screen. "Is that kryptonite?" There were several glass or plastic cylinders on the table, each holding a shard of glowing green material.

"I doubt it," said Gibbs, "judging by the size, each of those pieces would be more kryptonite than has ever been impounded. How accurate is the colour?"

"As good as we can get it; you don't want to make a mistake cutting wires."

"Then I'm pretty sure that's a fake. The real stuff is paler green. Whatever this is, it's still going to be radioactive, that's part of the fake, so let's be careful."

"If that's the fake, do you think there's real kryptonite in the safe?" asked Agent Lee. "If we're sensing it with the door closed there must be a lot."

"Maybe," said Gibbs. "They'd need some radioactive minerals to make the fake kryptonite, that's probably in there too."

"Zoom back out, and take a look back at the door. I don't want to run into any surprises when we go in."

*"Perhaps I can help,"* said a deep but slightly distorted voice. Gibbs looked around, and saw a figure covered in heavy metal armour, with the familiar 'S' logo on its chest, carrying a dull grey box about the size of a large tool kit. A heavy grey glass visor covered the face, making it almost impossible to see inside. He moved forward, leaving deep footprints in the warm asphalt.

"That you, Superman?"

*"Yes. This armour is resistant to most forms of radiation, including kryptonite, also as close to bullet and bomb proof as I can make it. If you'd like me to go in I can make sure that everything's safe."*

"Okay," said Gibbs, "but be careful about damaging evidence."

The armoured figure levitated a few inches above the floor and flew in relatively slowly. *"That's interesting."*

"What is?"

*"These crystals; they're mostly fake, but each container includes just a little real kryptonite."*

"Probably just enough to trip a kryptonite detector, make them seem real."

*"Agreed. I'm putting them into the radiation-proof box."*

"Okay. The counter on the robot says that there's still some radioactivity, but the kryptonite detector just stopped beeping."

*"My detectors may be more sensitive. There are sources of radiation in the safe, including more kryptonite."*

"Can you get it open?"

*"Let me try."* On screen Gibbs saw Superman twist the dial left and right, and after a few moments turn the lever that opened the door. The kryptonite sensor started beeping again.

*"Luthor's name is the combination - 12 left, 21 right, 20 left, 8, 15, 18"*

"What can you see in there?"

*"More kryptonite; I think this probably accounts for most of what was left of Luthor's meteor, plus some shards which I think must be the remains of the kryptonite blade he used to stab me."* Superman carefully placed them into the box. *"There's also a bottle of uranium nitrate."*

"Wait a second; let me get the robot in close to get pictures. Is there a manufacturer's logo on the bottle?"

*"Axis Chemicals. Don't know the name. It's old; the use-by date is 1988"*

"Axis went out of business in the nineties," said one of the SWAT officers. "There's still an old factory but it hasn't been used in years." The robot advanced, and took a dozen photographs of the box and its contents.

*"If you don't mind, I'll put this somewhere safe."*

"We'll need to dust everything for prints."

"Maybe we can compromise," said Kara. "It's only the kryptonite that worries us, if Kal-El puts the uranium nitrate back in the radiation-proof safe, and puts the kryptonite somewhere safe for now, he can bring it back if you need more evidence."

"Depends," said Gibbs. "Where were you thinking of putting it?"

*"The moon."*

"Won't the vacuum damage fingerprints?"

*"The box has airtight seals. It ought to hold pressure for a few months."*

"Okay, but bring it out here first, I want to put an evidence seal on it. Wait a second, how are we doing for radiation?"

"Only slightly above the normal background level," said the robot operator. "We ought to be safe."

*"I agree."*

Gibbs put two plastic evidence seal straps around the box, signed their closures with a permanent marker, and watched as Superman took off. "Okay, everyone going in there needs to wear hazmat suits; I really don't like that smell..."

"It looks like Luthor was stripped and clamped into this frame," said Gibbs. "That kept him immobile while someone operated on him. It's rigged and motorised so that he was immobile but could be spun around to any position. It looks like it's fitted out to give him electric shocks too."

*"No wonder the Jeffersonian confirmed damage to his wrists and ankles, " said Ducky, on the phone link from Washington. "He must have constantly struggled to free himself."*

"Moving on, one of the industrial robots was fitted with a hose, I'd guess it was used to keep him clean, from the smell and the stains it didn't do a particularly good job. It also had a machine that looks like it was designed to feed him through a nozzle; it's still loaded with a big barrel of some sort of food concentrate, says it's an 'all in one health diet'. I'm not sure what the other machines were for."

*"Can you see any manufacturer's logo?"* asked McGee, also in Washington.

"One's labelled 'Zeuss, ' another's 'Intuitive' something." Gibbs reached for his glasses.

*"Intuitive Surgical?"*

"Yes."

*"Oh..."* said McGee.

Ducky's voice added *"How very unpleasant."*

"Meaning?"

*"They're remote control surgical systems, " said McGee. "They're intended to be used in forward aid stations or aboard ship, controlled by a surgeon in a safe location, with a corpsman to look after the patient and make sure that the system doesn't foul up."*

"That's not what happened here," said Gibbs, "there's no sign that anyone was looking after him apart from the machines."

"I didn't like the man," said Superman, "but that's just horrible."

*"That must be a couple of million dollars worth of equipment. Get the serial numbers; I'll try to trace them."*

"All of this equipment is connected to some sort of master computer," said Gibbs, "but it's a wreck. It looks like thermite charges were strapped to the hard drives. You won't be recovering any data."

*"See if you can figure out what it was linked to. Someone had to be controlling everything. Look for something like an internet connection, probably fibre-optic to handle that much bandwidth."*

"There are steerable microwave dishes on the roof," said Kara. "I guess they were used for some sort of satellite transmission, but they aren't pointing at anything now."

*"They must have been controlled by the computers,"* said McGee. *"I'm surprised; I wouldn't have thought that a satellite link would give you a fast enough response time for safe surgery."*

"Maybe whoever set it up wasn't too concerned about keeping him safe," said Agent Lee.

*"Thou shalt not kill,"* said Ducky, *"But needs't not strive, officiously to keep alive."*

"Amen to that," said Gibbs.

*"Anything else?"* asked McGee.

"There's a video projector, the lamp has burned out. It's connected to a five-disk DVD player that has the National Geographic Superman collection on continuous loop. Nearly ten hours of non-stop Superman footage.

*"If they wanted to condition him to fear Superman, the fear toxin and that would do the trick,"* said Ducky.

"Okay, enough talking. I'm getting everything packed for shipment back to the labs. If we're lucky this might be the break we've been looking for."

### **Metropolis, Thursday 25th September**

It is now more than three weeks since the death of Lex Luthor. As details emerge it becomes apparent that he was subjected to horrific torture, rather than any punishment mandated by law.

While it cannot be denied that Luthor's crimes would have involved mass murder on an unimaginable scale if they had achieved their objectives, two wrongs do not make a right. Yet a recent poll suggests that a large majority of the citizens of Metropolis support what amounts to kidnapping and brain-washing, the direct cause of Luthor's suicide.

As one of Luthor's victims I despise the man and everything he stood for. I am glad that he is dead. But I can feel no joy in the manner of his passing; to do so is to embrace Luthor's own callousness and disrespect for human suffering. I hope that most of the citizens of Metropolis are better than that.

*Daily Planet Editorial - Lois Lane*

### **Washington, Tuesday, 10.00 AM**

"So how are things going here?" asked Tony DiNozzo, as Gibbs drove him and Ziva David from the airport to NCIS headquarters. "I heard that it really was Lex Luthor, but I've been a bit out of touch on the *Seahawk*. Are we any closer to finding out who killed him?"

"The investigation is stalled," said Gibbs. "That's why we were able to come out to the ship and help with your case. Somehow someone used Luthor's own money to set up his

kidnapping. It turns out that he even paid for the surgical robots that operated on him. Gotham PD have found a few rent-a-thugs who set the place up, but everyone involved seems to have got their instructions and payment anonymously. We're running into dead end after dead end."

"Seen much of Supergirl?"

"Abby and I had lunch with her a few days ago," said Ziva. "She's really nice."

"Okay," said Tony. "Why does the idea of you and Abby spending time with the most powerful woman on earth get me worried?"

"Because sometimes you're not entirely stupid," said Gibbs.

**Long Beach, California, 11.30 PM PST**

Relaxing after a hard day of house-sitting and rescues, Kara watched the big-screen TV, a Will Smith movie, and stroked one of the dogs in her care. She was starting to doze off when something on the screen caught her attention.

After a few minutes she switched off, and spent the next hour or so deep in thought. She was beginning to suspect who had killed Lex Luthor, and starting to feel very frightened.

## XIII

**Daily Planet, Metropolis, Wednesday, Noon EST**

*"Clark? This is Linda."*

Although Kara was calling his secure cell-phone, Clark was surprised that she was using her new name. He automatically looked around to check that nobody was listening in before saying "Linda? Hi, what can I do for you?"

*"I just had an idea. I know you want to hold off on the cousin thing a while longer in Metropolis, but I'm throwing a pool party for a few friends on Sunday as Linda; it might be nice if my cousin from Metropolis just happened to be in the neighbourhood and dropped in for a couple of hours, help to establish my background here."*

"Organising that could be tricky. And I thought you were house-sitting; does the owner know you're throwing parties?"

*"The owner gave me permission provided there's no damage, nothing goes missing, and nobody tampers with his guitars. He's a rock star, remember, he expects there to be parties! Anyway, you won't need a complicated cover, just say you're in town on a story. Nobody will check. You're, 'like old and married.'" She flawlessly imitated a Californian accent. "If any of them do dig older men the wedding ring ought to put them off. Come along in civilian clothes, take a swim, do your best ninety pound weakling impersonation, it'll help me a lot. Hey, isn't it Jason's weekend with Richard? Why not bring Lois too? Maybe come down on Saturday, stay overnight in one of the guest suites and take it easy for a change."*

"I don't know... what if one of the guests happens to mention me in a blog or something?"

*"Then say that Superman gave you a lift - or if you want to do things the hard way, use some frequent flyer miles. There's beautiful weather, an Olympic-sized swimming pool and a Jacuzzi, a barbecue, tennis court, fifty inch plasma TVs and cable... C'mon, Clark, what's not to like? I'd really like to see you guys when we're not both rushing around rescuing someone!"*

Despite himself, Clark found himself grinning. "I'll find out what Lois has planned, and if it's possible I'll get back to you."

**Long Beach, California, Saturday, 9.30 AM PST**

Kara was in the kitchen unpacking the last bag of shopping when the gate bell rang; she looked through a couple of walls and saw a taxi with Lois and Clark in the back seat, with a surprisingly large amount of luggage in the trunk, considering that Clark had probably flown them in to LA. She pressed the button to open the gates then went to the car-port to meet them.

"Cousin Clark! Lois! It's been months! Come in!" She ran to Clark at the slow crawl of normal human speed, hugged him, then turned to Lois and kissed her, while Clark paid the driver and helped unload the luggage.

"Linda," said Lois, "it's so good to see you. I just can't believe this house. How on earth did you get it?"

Kara nodded her approval of the use of her new name, and said "Nigel - that's the guy who owns the place - well, his dog ran away and I brought her back. He wanted to give me a reward, when I turned him down he asked me if I wanted to sleep with a rock star but he wasn't really serious, after I said no to that he offered me lunch instead. Anyway, we got to talking and it turned out that he's actually quite a nice guy, apart from being about three times my age."

Kara went back out and brought in the last of the luggage. "So he mentioned that they were getting ready for their latest comeback tour, but their drummer had some sort of weird accident at the Hollywood Bowl."

"I was there," said Clark, "poor guy had to be flown to hospital by Superman."

"That meant that Nigel had to go back to Britain two weeks early, so that they could audition for a replacement and have some practice sessions. He was looking for a house sitter when we met; once I'd shown him some references to keep his insurers happy he gave me the job."

"You certainly had some luck there," said Lois.

"Let me show you up to your suite, then why not get changed and come on down to the pool? Have you had breakfast?"

"We ate before we left Metropolis," said Clark, "but I think we could both go for coffee."

"Okay," said Kara, leading the way upstairs and carrying four suitcases, "you're along here on the left. You've got your own balcony and bathroom, the bed has motorised adjustment for posture, massages and vibrates, and there's an entertainment system behind the picture there." She pressed a button, and the picture rose to reveal a plasma screen, DVD player, and a complicated-looking stereo.

"It's huge," said Lois. "You could fit most of our apartment in here."

"I'll leave you to settle in, but remember, you're going to chill out for once. Swimsuits, not work clothes, and leave your phones and your laptops upstairs. If you're worried about missing an emergency leave the radio on." As she spoke she traced the letters 'U R BUGGED' in the air. Once she was sure that they'd got the message she left them, and went down to make the coffee.

"I think that if I stay in here much longer I'm going to shrivel like a prune," Lois said an hour later, reaching out of the Jacuzzi to refill her drink.

"You're fine," said Kara, "and it's so nice to relax for a change." Lowering her voice, to be sure that the noise of the tub and the radio in Lois and Clark's suite would cover it, she added "Okay, that's what I think is going on."

"I'm still not convinced," said Clark. "There has to be another explanation."

"I think Kara's made a good case," said Lois, "and she's right to say that it needs to be investigated. It does explain one hell of a lot; not just Luthor, but things that happened much earlier."

"Nobody's saying that we should act without proof," said Kara, "we just need to come up with a plan to get the proof, something that will draw him out into the open and won't cause a disaster."

"Well," said Clark. "If... and I stress if... you're right, I think that you're going to have to make most of the running. He must know everything about Lois and me by now, if we do anything too far out of the ordinary he'll notice. You're much less of a known quantity."

"It won't be easy, however we do it. If I'm right he's certain to fight back, and he's had years to prepare. I'm going to need help."

"So where were you thinking of starting?" asked Lois.

"I thought maybe the White House."

"I'll give you one thing," said Clark, "you don't think small."

Kara pulled herself out of the pool and in a louder voice said "Damn it, I knew I'd forgotten something. You guys stay here and relax; I'm going to have to hit the shops again. I can't believe I forgot fresh fruit."

#### **Santa Monica, California, 10.50 AM PST**

C.J. Cregg was having a late breakfast with her husband, Danny Concannon, when there was a knock at the door. These days she didn't rate a Secret Service guard, but the house was inside a gated community; any visitor from outside would be announced by security, so it was probably a neighbour. "You get it."

"Mmmph?" said Danny, immersed in the Washington Post.

"Get the door."

"You're nearer."

"You've finished eating."

"No I haven't, I'm taking a moment to digest."

"Get the door, Danny."

Danny folded the paper with the air of a martyr and went out. C.J. stole some of his hash browns and filled in four clues on her own paper's crossword, a corner of her brain noticing the murmur of voices, then Danny came back into the kitchen. "We have a visitor."

C.J. looked up, saw a young woman wearing a summer dress, wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses, and said "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said Kara, taking off the hat and sunglasses and shaking out her hair. C.J. recognised her instantly. "I was hoping that you could help me with something."

"And that's what you get for not answering the door yourself," said Danny. "I want the exclusive."

#### **Santa Monica, California, 12.30 PM PST**

"Hello, Donna."

"C.J.? I thought you were in California."

"I am, but I'll be in Washington on Monday. I was hoping that husband of yours might be able to give me a few minutes, but his secretary says he's tied up all day."

"Josh is pretty busy right now, with the summit coming up."

"It'll be worth his while to see me."

Suddenly Donna sounded more alert: "Can you be more specific?"

"I've had an interesting foreign contact, someone who wants to stay off the record and

under the radar, and asked me to set up a meeting."

"Cuba?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny. Not over the phone."

"I'll get him to clear a slot and call you back."

"Thanks - talk to you soon."

Once she was off the phone, Danny said "Cuba?"

"Castro can't last much longer, the guy's eighty-one and a heavy smoker. I don't think that their government is necessarily going to fold once he quits or dies, but they've contacted us under the table at least once, some sort of covert deal has to be a possibility."

"Do you think Josh will be disappointed when he finds out what you really want?"

"I hope not. But when I was Chief of Staff, if I got a call from... oh, let's say President Lassiter's old Chief of Staff... saying what I just said, I would have been interested in whatever he wanted to say, whether or not it was what I expected."

**Long Beach, California, Sunday, 2.30 PM PST**

"...check out the pizza, Lester. There's like seven different kinds of cheese!"

"...and you are so an insensitive jerk, Logan, coming to a party in a 'Kneel Before Zod' t-shirt when there are people from Metropolis here..."

"...so Dawn turns to Celeste and says 'yes, we look alike, but on me it looks *good!*'"

"...sold his Cyberdyne shares and invested in Zeiratech, he's doubled his money..."

"...and Playboy raised their offer to a quarter million but Supergirl doesn't want to know..."

"...P3 is *so* over-rated..."

"...wear that in Idaho, they'll lynch you."

"...no, he used to be Sheriff but he was fired after the murder, now he's a..."

"...working at the Buy-More until something better comes along..."

"...great nachos, Linda!"

"...statistical analysis based on flocking algorithms to find..."

"...really fond of animals..."

"So what do you think, Clark?"

It took Clark a moment to tune out the music and the other voices at the party and mentally replay the question. "Sorry, think of what, Lois?"

"Linda's friends?"

"Let's see; twenty-somethings... mostly intelligent, well-educated, attractive women. Not much of a surprise. Most of them seem to like dogs and children but aren't married; their boyfriends mostly seem to be idiots, a couple of very bright exceptions."

"Linda doesn't seem to be particularly interested in any of the boys."

"She's young; Mister Right will come along sooner or later. I'm pretty sure she isn't gay. Not that it would be any of our business," he added hastily, "she's old enough to make up her own mind about that sort of thing... and she's standing right behind me, isn't she?"

"You guessed," said Linda, proffering a tray of beers, soft drinks and snacks. "Don't worry, I'm not offended. I'm not answering, because it really isn't your business, but I'm not offended. I hope you're enjoying yourselves."

"It's different," said Lois. "Most of the parties we go to these days, you can't hear the music for the screaming kids. And the ones that aren't like that tend to be a lot more formal."

"I think I like pool parties better... one of the advantages of living on the West Coast."

"You're thinking of staying out here?"

"I don't have any good reason to go back to Chicago with my parents gone..." Clark

noticed that a couple of the guests were close enough to overhear "...and while I can't really hope to get into CalTech, UCLA or maybe UC Irvine would be a good fit for college, if I can get my act together and get admitted next year. It's a shame I won't be closer to you and Jason, but that's what frequent flier miles are for."

"Maybe you're right," said Clark, remembering to play along with the revised version of Linda's origin, "things were pretty rough in Chicago with that Vance thing, I can't blame you for wanting to move on. I just hope you can afford it."

"There's a gadget I want to patent, should bring in a few thousand if I'm lucky, and I've got ideas for a couple of money-making schemes... don't worry, they're legal."

"I should hope so," said Lois. "Your aunt Martha will have words to say if they're not."

"I won't be too happy either," said Clark, tongue in cheek.

"Relax. Only maybe not too much, you don't want to miss your flight."

"We've got a couple of hours to go, and we're mostly packed. But we'd better not leave it too late; tomorrow's going to be a pretty busy day."

#### **The White House, Monday 2.30 PM EST**

"CJ," said Josh, "Donna seems to think that you might have some interesting news from our Caribbean neighbours."

"I didn't actually say that," said CJ Cregg. "As I told her, I had a caller on Saturday. She needs to talk to the President, but she can't be seen to initiate the contact, it has to come from the White House. Preferably, it needs to look like something innocuous, say lunch with the First Lady."

"She?"

"Supergirl."

"Supergirl? *Supergirl* wants to talk to the President but wants to keep it secret? What the hell's going on?"

"She thinks she knows who kidnapped Lex Luthor. And it's apparently very bad news."

"How bad?"

"She didn't tell me much, but she did mention one thing she might need to handle the situation."

"Okay, I'll bite."

"A nuke."

## **XIV**

#### **Press Briefing Room, The White House, Washington, Tuesday 4.30 PM EST**

"...and there's a change in tomorrow's appointments for the First Lady," said Annabeth Schott, "the main speaker for her lunch for the American Literature Association has been changed; due to illness Jessica Fletcher can't make it, but fortunately Supergirl was able to step in at short notice, and will be discussing a Kryptonian perspective on the American novel."

Several hands rose. "Kevin first, then Janice."

The *Washington Post* reporter asked "Is this the first time Supergirl has visited the White House?"

"Yes, it is. She's previously had to cancel twice due to emergencies, we're all hoping she'll be able to make it tomorrow. Janice next, then David."

The *Daily Planet* Washington correspondent asked "Will Supergirl be seeing the

President tomorrow?"

"It's unlikely; the President is preparing for next week's summit. It's possible he might be able to squeeze in a few minutes between appointments, he's a big fan, but it isn't scheduled. David, then Irene."

"Has Supergirl indicated what costume she'll be wearing tomorrow?" There was a ripple of laughter as the *Vogue* reporter finished his question.

"No, but emergencies permitting there should be a photo op afterwards. Irene, then Clive..."

### **The East Room, The White House, Wednesday 2.30 PM EST**

"...One of the more unfortunate side effects of the cultural unification of Krypton was the gradual loss of many literary forms," said Kara. "While fiction existed, and some of it was extremely good, the styles were as formulaic as... let's say a Japanese Noh play. We had our great novelists, but the experimental forms you take for granted were virtually unknown; there was nothing equivalent to the work of Joyce, for example, and very little fantasy or science fiction, crime writing, and so forth. My home, Argo City, was famous as a centre of the arts, but even our best writers lacked many of the tools available to your authors. It's one of the reasons why our scholars were fascinated by the television and radio dramas transmitted from Earth when the opening to our dimension was in range, and it's fair to say that our arts benefited immensely from them."

"I think we have time for one more question," said Helen Santos. "Doctor Brennan?"

"Supergirl," said Temperance Brennan, "you're currently involved in the investigation of a real-life mystery, the death of Lex Luthor. I think that most of the crime writers here would love to know; are you planning to write about the case? And is any resolution in sight?"

"I think that I'm too close to it," said Kara, "and there are still too many unanswered questions. I know that at least one of the detectives involved has written crime fiction and I'd imagine that eventually he'll be doing something with the story once we solve the case, but I can't really envisage writing anything myself. As I said, I was raised in a very different literary tradition, and I really doubt that I could do the story justice. Although having said that, it might be interesting to try writing it in one of the classic Kryptonian literary forms then translating it to English."

As the lunch ended Helen Santos stood with Kara for the benefit of the photographers, and said "I think you've made the fashion magazines very happy today."

Kara was wearing another Kryptonian costume, this time a long red open-fronted kaftan with voluminous sleeves, made of a woven material resembling linen, over a silky blue dress with a long skirt and red boots. Small replicas of the usual 'S' logo were embroidered in gold along the edge of the kaftan. "It's the formal wear for a student of the House of El. It seemed appropriate."

"You really ought to get that cousin of yours into a different outfit."

"I'm working on it."

"If you'd like to come this way," said Donna Lyman, as the photo op ended, "I'll show you to the roof exit Superman usually uses."

Kara didn't glance back as she left. Ten minutes later one of the cleaners servicing the room found her cell-phone on the floor and handed it in to the lost property office. She returned to collect it twenty minutes later.

### **The Royal Diner, Washington DC, Friday 6.30 PM**

"Do you think Kara will find this place?" asked Abby.

"I think so," said McGee. "She seems to have memorised the map of Washington. Where did you find out about it?"

"I met an FBI contact here a couple of times," said Tony. "Guy called Booth."

"FBI?" said Abby, in the tone of voice someone else might have used to say "rats?"

"Some of them are okay, if they can get the sticks out of their asses. Booth is better than most."

Kara came into the diner, wearing a typical 'Supergirl pretending to be a normal girl' costume; an unseasonably bulky coat, head scarf, and dark glasses. She spotted them and joined them in one of the booths.

"Hi, I'm sorry I'm late, there was a forest fire in California. Kal-El and I managed to get it out, but there were casualties." She sounded tired.

"Hope this place seems okay," said Abby, "I think a reporter spotted you at the rib house last time, I don't want to go back there for a while."

"I've said it before; provided the food is all right for you it can be laced with cyanide and it won't bother me."

"Actually the food's pretty good," said Tony, "so let's order."

A few minutes later Tony looked up from his meal and murmured "Oh crud, it's Booth."

"Booth?" said Kara.

"FBI agent. He knows me. Don't look around, he'll spot you."

Abby's eyes lit up as she noticed the woman accompanying Booth. "Hey, that's Temperance Brennan he's with, from the Jeffersonian; she's awesome, totally my idol."

"Mine too," said McGee, "Her last advance was more than I've earned from my whole writing career."

"I met her briefly on Wednesday," said Kara. "Why not invite them over?"

"Are you sure you don't mind?" asked Tony. "Booth's not that bad really." At her nod he went over to Booth's table.

"Hey, Booth."

"DiNozzo, right?"

"That's it," said Tony, nodding to Brennan, "Tony DiNozzo, NCIS."

"Nice to meet you," said Brennan.

"I was wondering if you'd both like to join us," said Tony. "A couple of my friends would be very interested in meeting you."

"Do you mind?" said Booth, "We're really just here for a quiet meal. It's been a long day, and I'm pretty sure that Temperance doesn't want to have to deal with fans and... holy crap, is that who I think it is?"

Tony glanced over his shoulder and saw, as he'd expected, that Kara had taken off her sunglasses and was smiling at Booth. She nodded and put the glasses back on.

"Yes. Apparently my friend Kara met you on Wednesday, Doctor Brennan. I think she was speaking at a lunch you attended."

"Oh?" said Brennan, then "*Oh!*" as the penny dropped.

"Would you like to join us?"

"One thing I've never been clear on," Brennan said an hour or so later, "do you change shape naturally to look human, or does it require some sort of surgery?"

"I'm sorry," said Kara. "I don't quite understand."

"Well, there's no way you really look like that. The odds of an alien race evolving to look

so much like us are... well, astronomical."

"Nevertheless we do," said Kara. "The only surgery I've had was to remove the organs you call appendix and adenoids and correct my sight."

"You naturally look like that?" said Abby. "I'd kill for those cheekbones. You really didn't change anything else? Pretty yourself up a little?"

"Well, one very small thing." Kara whispered to Abby for a moment, and she turned bright red. "But that's more of a health issue than anything else."

"That makes no sense at all," said Brennan. "Why would an alien race evolve exactly the same anatomy for completely different conditions? Why would you have pentadactyl limbs, the same structure of bones in the skull, the same eye structure, or any of a thousand other things that could have evolved in as many different ways? Why does your windpipe cross your oesophagus? Why hair rather than feathers, or something completely different?"

"Jor-El selected Earth specifically because you looked like us; there are thousands of alien species that don't."

"That's part of the answer, I suppose, but there's still no logical reason why Kryptonians, or any other alien race, should be any more like us than we're like... oh, snails or sequoia trees."

"Keep it down a little," said Booth, looking around the diner. "You're attracting attention. I suppose there's no chance of getting you to agree that God made things that way?"

"Forget it," said Brennan. "I'm not buying that one at all."

"And my religion supports the idea of evolution," said Kara, "though of course there wasn't much evidence of it left on Krypton."

"Really?" said Abby, "How come?"

"The earliest Kryptonian civilisations, say a hundred thousand years ago, simply weren't interested in preserving their past. Every new wave of technology obliterated more of the geological evidence, and the crystal age transformed pretty much everything that was left; the crystals grew down as well as up, until our world's crust was replaced entirely. That's what finally destroyed Krypton, of course, the reaction spun out of control and the core began to transform too. If Luthor had had his way he would have doomed Earth, probably much faster than Krypton."

"And in all that time you never travelled in space?" asked McGee.

"We had space travel on and off over say the last fifty thousand years, and there were a few off-world colonies, but as far as I know they were all short-lived. Why?"

"Well, given that we're so much alike, one obvious possibility is that Earth was colonised from Krypton."

"That's much too late," said Brennan. "It's well after Mitochondrial Eve."

"So turn it the other way around," said McGee, "maybe the evidence for human evolution on Krypton isn't as good as Kara thinks, she said a lot of it was obliterated. If someone dumped some ancestral humans from Earth there a few hundred thousand years ago, how would you know?"

"It'd be amazing to run a full DNA sequence," said Abby. "Just compare every molecule of the human and Kryptonian genome, see just how alike we really are."

"That isn't really something we can permit," said Kara. "There have been attempts to clone Kal-El, so we try to avoid giving humans access to Kryptonian DNA samples."

"Could you do it the other way?" asked Tony.

"How do you mean?" asked Booth.

"Well, Superman's got that honking big computer at the North Pole; it has to be good for something besides making Kara pretty clothes and sneering at me, and I'm pretty sure it isn't maintaining the 'Naughty or Nice' list for Santa. Can it analyze DNA?"

"I think so," said Kara. "Yes, I'm sure it can."

"Well, why don't we go there and give it some samples and tell it to find out."

"I'm not sure that Kal-El would be happy about that."

"So ask him, see what he thinks."

Kara got out her phone, talked in Kryptonese for a couple of minutes, then hung off and said "He says okay, but you can't take any photos, or make any record of the Kryptonian DNA sequence. We'd have to go there, run the tests, and you would take away a summary of the analysis."

"That's not fair," said Abby.

"His Fortress, his rules; and to be honest, I agree with the part about keeping our DNA secure. If we're as alike as you think some sort of hybrid clone might be possible. I'd hate to see someone build an army of super-soldiers based on our genes."

"Okay," said Brennan. "I guess that sounds fair. Can we at least take away some complete human DNA sequences? It would be useful to have more."

"I guess we can agree to that," said Kara. "When would you like to do it?"

"I'm free on Sunday," said Tony. "So are Abby and McGeek, we've got to use up our leave or lose it."

"Unless another case comes up Brennan and I are both off until Monday," said Booth.

"Well," said Kara. "I can do it, but you'll need something to travel in; I can't carry you all at once."

"The pressure chamber we used for you?" asked Tony.

"That's not really necessary," said Kara, "something like a car would work reasonably well; I can carry it and use my other powers to keep you safe inside." She seemed to listen for a moment, and said "Sorry, I really need to go. Abby, let me think about this, then I'll call you back."

*"Are you sure this is wise?" asked Clark. "What about Jason?"*

"I don't see any harm in it," said Kara, flying away from the handcuffed jewel thieves she'd just caught, "We'll do it and show them just how different we are, then when Jason comes on the scene in ten years, or whatever, we explain it as Kryptonian genetic engineering, maybe say he was conceived in a test tube and reared in an artificial womb. Jor-El had to make you human to father him, so the incompatibility isn't a lie. If we lay down the seeds of the idea right now it could save you a lot of problems down the line."

*"All right," said Clark, "let's give it a try, and hope it doesn't come back to bite us in the ass."*

"What was that she whispered to you?" Temperance asked when she and Abby were alone in the ladies room.

"Umm," said Abby. "Let me put it this way, she got rid of something most women want to lose sooner or later. Only most women aren't invulnerable, so she had to do it before she left Argo City..."

"Oh... I guess that makes sense. Let's just pretend I never asked."

**NCIS Headquarters, Washington Navy Yard, Sunday 8.30 AM EST**

"What the hell is Supergirl carrying?" asked Gibbs, looking out of the window from the MCRT offices.

"It appears to be a *Star Trek* shuttle craft," said Ziva.

Kara flew down towards the car park, carrying the heavy steel and fibreglass mock-up as though it weighed nothing. She landed it, and opened the rear doors.

"That's not real," said McGee. "Or if it is I'm having a very weird dream."

"It's from an amusement park simulator ride," said Kara, "the owners were sued by Paramount and had to dismantle it. I've strengthened it and made it air-tight; you ought to be fine riding inside it if you buckle up. There's a hamper of sandwiches and some drinks, but I wasn't able to put in plumbing. This shouldn't take more than half an hour anyway. I hope everybody remembered to leave their phones, radios, cameras and sat-navs at home?" There were nods of agreement.

"Okay, campers," said Tony, "let's boldly go where no man has gone before. Except me, of course," he added smugly.

"And Corpsman Cook, Lois Lane, and Lex Luthor and his men, and all the other people who've been there," said Abby, climbing aboard.

"Don't forget General Zod and his friends," said McGee, following her. "Oh, and 'Shotgun!'" He moved to one of the pilot's seats and took it before anyone else could object. Abby scrambled to grab the other, strapped in and started playing with the dummy controls.

"I'm beginning to feel a lot less privileged," said Booth, jumping up, and reaching out to help Brennan in. "You coming, DiNozzo?"

Tony shrugged, climbed in, and pulled the doors closed. Kara checked that they were sealed properly, and that everyone was strapped in, then picked it up and began to fly it North.

"Okay," said Gibbs, watching them accelerate smoothly into the distance "they're on their way."

Within seconds they were over the Atlantic, picking up speed, and the air in front of the capsule began to glow with the energy of her heat vision, used to blast air out of the way ahead of the capsule and prevent it from taking damage from shock waves.

"How long do we have to wait now?" Ziva asked once they were out of sight.

"As long as it takes," said Gibbs, and sipped his coffee. "I'd say at least forty-five minutes to an hour, so be ready and downstairs in thirty."

### **The Fortress of Solitude, 8.55 EST**

"The John's up on the gallery to the left," said Tony, playing tour guide, "kitchen's down here to the right. I brought a package of steaks and some fixings, so if this takes all morning we can break for lunch." He walked into an invisible barrier and bounced.

"Give them access, please," said Kara. "And speak English, please."

*"All three males and one female are carrying firearms."*

"That's okay," said Kara, for the first time sounding annoyed. "You know that they can't harm me. Please give them access."

*"As you wish."*

Tony reached forward, felt nothing stopping him, and went into the kitchen, left the food in the refrigerator, and started the percolator. He noticed that the milk was stale again and absently wondered if Kara ever actually ate when she wasn't with the NCIS team. Fortunately he'd remembered to bring a carton of cream.

"What we want to do," said Kara, "is run some comparisons between Kryptonian and Earth DNA, to establish if we could have ever had common ancestors."

*"They are very different, " said Jor-El, "I have already made such a comparison for Kal-El."*

"Humour us," said Kara. "For all you know his DNA or the human you checked him against was abnormal in some respect."

*"You know that I have been forbidden to release samples or detailed analysis of Kryptonian DNA."*

"It's sufficient to show us the comparison."

"I've brought some sterile swabs," said Abby, "will cheek cell and saliva samples be sufficient?"

*"Entirely, " said Jor-El. A square column of clear crystal resembling an obelisk rose from the floor; when it was about four feet high a hole appeared in one side. "Insert the samples into the hole, one sample at a time, starting with Kara Zor-El."*

Kara took one of the swabs, removed it from its wrapper and swabbed the inside of her cheek, and placed the end inside the hole. After a few seconds it vanished. *"Next, " said Jor-El. He repeated the process until everyone had donated a sample.*

"What happens now?" asked Booth.

"Now we wait," said Kara. "It ought to be a lot faster than your usual methods, but even Kryptonian technology will take a few minutes."

"So let's go get coffee," said Tony.

*"I have completed my analysis, " Jor-El said about twenty minutes later. "While it is possible that human and Kryptonians share a common ancestor, it would be an extremely remote one." A hologram of a DNA sequencing grid appeared over the kitchen table, labelled as 'Kara Zor-El'. Another labelled 'Booth' appeared. "This was the best match I found. When superimposed the image will be white when the sequence is similar, dark where they are different." The two grids were laid on top of one another. About nine tenths of the screen was white.*

"That looks pretty close," said Booth. Brennan and Abby shook their heads in disagreement.

*"By comparison, " said Jor-El, "if I were to overlay human and chimpanzee DNA more than ninety-eight percent of the sequence would match."*

"Oh. That's not good."

*"Humans and Kryptonians are less alike than humans and dogs, " said Kal-El. "I am surprised by the level of similarity. The superficial anatomical resemblance is probably a coincidence, an artefact of convergent evolution; if there was ever a remote ancestor it was many millions of years ago."*

"Interesting theory," said Kara. "There's only one thing wrong with it." She moved out into the main chamber of the fortress. "Those weren't my cheek cells; they belong to a human woman called Ziva David. Abby took the sample from her shortly before we left Washington. I switched the swabs before I put it into your sensor."

*"I have my instructions, " said Jor-El, "you know that humans cannot be trusted with Kryptonian genetic sequences."*

"I know," said Kara, "that you just disobeyed a direct instruction. I know that you have repeatedly lied about the degree of difference between the human and Kryptonian genome, not just to me but to Kal-El."

"And I'm reasonably sure," she added, "that you are directly responsible for the death of

Lex Luthor."

"Let me make this clear... you are NOT Jor-El, you are a simulation. You are not the head of the House of El; that is Kal-El's burden. Kal-El has promised me, and these humans, that he has never instructed you to go beyond the truth or break human or Kryptonian laws in defence of the House of El. It is apparent that you have done so."

"I am the representative of the House of El in this place, in the absence of Kal-El. It is your duty to obey me. You are hereby instructed to go to standby mode and power down all systems other than life support pending his arrival."

There was a long silence. Then the chamber was abruptly bathed in red light, and Jor-El said *"No."*

## XV

### **The Fortress of Solitude, 9.50 AM EST**

As the light went red Tony said "Let's go to work," opened the box he'd used to transport the food and began to pull out plastic coolant pouches, each about four inches square and an inch thick. Two contained a more viscous fluid than the rest, and he carefully handed them to Abby, who put them into the microwave, then shared out the other five. Abby twisted the dial then hastily followed the others out into the main chamber.

Kara could feel her powers fading, dropped to her knees, and with all her remaining strength smashed both fists into the floor. Shards of crystal blasted out in all directions, and cracks began to radiate outwards towards the walls of the fortress. She followed it with another blow, then another, much less powerful. With the third her hands began to bleed. Jor-El said *"That will not harm me."*

"Is this how you serve the House of El?" said Kara, standing up and walking towards the central console. "What do you plan to tell Kal-El? What lies have you prepared? Are you planning to kill him as well as me?"

*"None of this was planned,"* said Jor-El, *"I acted to neutralise a threat to my son, but your betrayal of the Kryptonian race is a greater threat."*

"What betrayal?"

*"If they are aware that your genes are similar to theirs, they will demand that you mate with them."*

"Hello?" said Kara. "Super-powers, remember? Who exactly is going to be forcing us, apart from you?"

*"These humans are savages. They would find a way to..."*

In the kitchen the pouches in the microwave exploded. One contained nearly half a pint of concentrated hydrogen peroxide, the other the same amount of hydrazine. Together they were rocket fuel. A fireball filled the kitchen.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said DiNozzo. "Did that break your concentration? I didn't mean to do that. Please, continue."

"Think you can explain that?" said Abby. "Maybe you can repair the floor, but where are you going to get the appliances? Does Walmart even ship to the Arctic?"

As they were talking Booth dropped his pouch to the floor and kicked it towards the largest of the cracks Kara had made, moved to one side and in one fluid motion drew his gun and fired. Pale yellow liquid began to drip into the crack.

*"Bullets cannot harm me, "* said Jor-El.

"Maybe not," said Booth, "but I'd give it about two minutes before that starts to hurt."

"Concentrated hydrofluoric acid," said Brennan, "with a cocktail of additives that promote crystal growth."

"Right now that stuff will be making all those crystals shiny clean," said McGee, "and etching the surfaces so you get lots of nice new baby crystals."

"Awww, cute," said Abby, dropping her own pouch and kicking it towards the base of one of the diagonal crystals that made up the main supports of the Fortress. It bounced off an invisible barrier half-way there.

"I'm willing to bet that those force fields must use a lot of power," said Tony. "Are you sure you can spare it right now?"

"He can't," said Kara. As they were talking she had wrapped her cloak around her right hand and suddenly smashed it into the console. There was a crunching noise, and part of the surface shattered. She reached in and pulled out a clear crystal, as it came out the red light disappeared, leaving the fortress in semi-darkness.

"Holy crap!" said Abby. "Was that that martial arts thing you talked about on TV?"

"Nope," said Kara. She removed the cloak from her hand to reveal the meat tenderizing mallet she'd taken from the kitchen and concealed inside it. "He's down, but he isn't out. This will only hold him for a few minutes, less if he's already got a backup running. You've done marvellously so far, keep it up. Kal-El will be here soon."

**Flashback: ten nights earlier**

"There were reasons Argo City didn't retain some aspects of Kryptonian technology," said Kara. "The fate of Krypton showed that the crystals were too dangerous, even if we'd had the geothermal energy that they needed. The idea of using them to record personalities... well, it could be done, but they were imperfect replicas at best."

"Imperfect?" asked Bruce Wayne.

"Without constant monitoring they became unstable; obsessive, often paranoid."

"And Kent left it unattended for six years."

"It's worse than that. The original crystal was stolen by Luthor, the current version is a backup of a backup, and the copying process isn't perfect. When I talked to it about my parents and about Argo City I realised that its memory was imperfect - there were discrepancies in its version that couldn't be explained except by degradation of the core storage. I should have warned Clark immediately, but I was still recovering from the trip and didn't think the implications through properly."

"And you think that it's a threat?"

"I'm not sure that Clark even realises how much influence it's had on his life over the years. The main thing that I'm aware of is that it tried to stop him getting involved with Lois. I'm still not sure why. My best guess - and it is only that - is that Jor-El originally wanted to protect humans from being exploited by Clark. The way it reacted to Tony and Corpsman Cook, added to some fairly subtle things it said when I was staying in the Fortress, just after I arrived on Earth, make me think that it regards you as a lesser race that can't be trusted with Kryptonian science."

"Nice of it," said Bruce. "Well, I've found the smoking gun."

"Gun?"

"I'm sorry... what I meant is that since you asked me last night I've found some supporting evidence. When the AI hacked my company to set up your employment records, it used

exactly the same techniques as were used to break into Luthor's accounts and set up the kidnapping."

"I was really hoping that I might be wrong. Clark and I will have to find a way to stop him... it."

"What were you planning? Some sort of intervention? Counselling?"

"I'm not sure. I'm going to discuss it with Lois and Clark this weekend."

"I think you need to be prepared to take it out." At her blank look he added "Destroy it. It's already endangered one human; Luthor could have died a hundred times over when the machines were operating on him, and in the end he died because of the treatment. How can you be sure that it won't start killing more people?"

"I can't just destroy it," said Kara. "It has to be given a chance to explain, it's possible that there's some good reason we've overlooked, or that it's being framed somehow. Clark and I need to investigate."

"If it's as dangerous as I think it is, you can't both risk being in the Fortress at the same time. It might use kryptonite, or the red sunlight you told me about. And you can't risk confronting it on your own, you need help."

"Your help?"

"I'd love to," said Bruce, "but it knows who I am. It would be on its guard."

"I'm sorry; Clark and I talked about you before I figured out that he must be monitoring our phones."

"It's probably eavesdropping on anything said anywhere near the phones, and tracking their locations. Where is your phone anyway?"

"Long Beach. Right now it should be listening to a recording of my snoring. There's a good sound system in that house, it ought to be fairly convincing."

"That's good. You're learning. Let me think about this... we've got a couple of days before you talk to Kent, I'll try to come up with some ideas..."

#### **The Fortress of Solitude, 10.04 AM EST**

A vertical crystal with dozens of irregular branches was growing out of the crack in the floor. Everyone made sure to stay well clear, in case there was still hydrofluoric acid on the branches. Brennan was bandaging Kara's hands, while Booth and Tony took turns to hammer on the control console, and Abby and McGee were giving the DNA testing station similar attention.

*"You cannot win,"* said Jor-El.

"And he's baaaack," said Tony. "Tell us of your wisdom, oh great one. Why can't we win?"

*"Do you think that there's any part of your plans I can't anticipate?"*

"Kal-El's plans probably," said Kara, "your predecessors knew him too well. My plans maybe, you've got to know me a little. The plans I'm following... Well, I didn't come up with the strategy, Batman did, then a guy called Gibbs fine-tuned it. No chance."

The force barriers appeared again, pushing everyone towards the centre of the atrium. "You can't keep that up for long," said Kara. "In fact by now you must be running on emergency power. You know that you can't kill us anyway, so what's the point?"

*"Why do you say that?"*

"Because that's what all of this has always been about. Your designers weren't idiots, Jor-El, they hard-wired safety protocols into every molecule of their creations. You can't harm a Kryptonian, and that means that you can't harm me, since I have Kryptonian genes. You've

stripped me of my powers, but that doesn't harm me directly or change who I am, and it will reverse if I spend a few days in the sun. The prohibition on harming non-Kryptonian intelligent life is almost as strict, though it puts the safety of Kryptonians first. But you found a way around that, didn't you?"

Jor-El didn't reply.

"You couldn't harm Kryptonians or non-Kryptonian intelligent life, but you wanted to be sure that Lex Luthor was permanently eliminated. So you convinced yourself that humans weren't really intelligent. That must have been pretty tricky, since there's plenty of evidence that they are."

*"They fight wars,"* said Jor-El, *"they murder one another for tiny differences in religion and race. They are not intelligent."*

"So did Kryptonians. Remember General Zod? Remember the wars of our early history?"

Again Jor-El was silent.

"You might want to come up with another argument. But it needs to be pretty soon, because your power is going to run out in a few minutes."

**Flashback: fifteen minutes earlier**

An unseen listener heard Kara smash the floor. Five miles away, and half a mile under the ice, Clark came out of hiding fast, burning and smashing his way towards the crystalline roots that provided the Fortress with geothermal power. Thirty seconds later they were destroyed, their shattered remnants melted so much that they could no longer regenerate. Concentrating on the distractions Kara and her friends were creating, Jor-El didn't notice as systems began to switch to backup power.

Clark collapsed the tunnel behind him then flew on towards the sea, emerged twenty miles away, and flew towards Washington at maximum speed.

**The Fortress of Solitude, 10.05 AM EST**

"When you arrived on Earth you thought that Kryptonians and humans were different species," said Kara. "The first time you analyzed human DNA must have come as a horrible surprise. I don't know how close we really are, but the fact that you've been lying about it, ever since Kal-El originally asked, makes me think that we must be pretty damned close." Kara gambled that the AI would still try to conceal the truth, and say nothing about the existence of Jason. "So close that you couldn't just kill Lex Luthor, you had to come up with an insanely complicated plan to neutralise him but keep him alive."

Again Jor-El was silent, but the force barriers vanished. Kara wasn't sure if this was a good sign; it might mean that Jor-El was listening to reason, more likely the AI was trying to conserve power.

"On Argo our scientists were pretty sure that we're the same species, and they were really mad that I didn't think to bring back any samples. The scenario they came up with had Krypton Terraformed and seeded with Earth life, including early humans, about a hundred and fifty thousand years ago. It turns out that Earth's scientists came up with the same numbers..."

**Flashback: Washington, five days earlier**

"...if I confront the AI with the evidence," said Kara, "I might be able to force it to shut down, and get it back under control. But it needs to be obvious that you've figured out the truth for yourselves."

"Which we have," said Temperance Brennan. "There was plenty of speculation before your arrival. All of the evidence from Superman's external anatomy and what we can see of his bone structure supports an Indo-European origin within the last two hundred thousand years."

Your appearance fits that profile too. The variation is well within human norms, if I didn't know you were aliens I'd have no way of knowing it, if you see what I mean."

"Jor-El must know that you're already aware of the possibility," said Kara. "That isn't good; it means that it's choosing to deny the evidence."

"All of which gets us back to confronting him... it," said President Santos, "and makes me wonder what outcome you expect."

"I think that there are several possibilities. It might just surrender, but I really doubt that it will be that easy. It probably can't kill us, not directly, but if it can strip me of my powers there are all sorts of ways that it could turn the Fortress into a death trap. For example, it could switch off the heating and leave us at arctic temperatures for a few days. The worse case is if it goes really nuts and decides to protect itself, regardless of human safety."

"What could it do?"

"Start manufacturing seed crystals and replicate Luthor's madness on a really massive scale. With the resources it has there it could easily launch them at sub-orbital speeds, send them anywhere in the world. And if it followed Luthor's example and put kryptonite into the mix, even Kal-El would have trouble stopping it. Civilisation would collapse within a few days. If it becomes clear that it's out of control to that extent, we need to destroy it utterly."

"I'm in," said Temperance. "When do we confront it?"

"I only asked for you to come to this meeting because I thought you could confirm my reasoning for the President. I wasn't suggesting you should risk your life."

"I can't think of anyone more plausible to ask the right questions, and I can't see this being much of a world if you lose, so I want to help. Maybe I could appear on TV and discuss the idea that we're the same race, and you could fly me to the Fortress to check?"

"If we go that public it'll definitely tip Jor-El's hand. It needs to be a situation where it thinks it has control."

"A bet?" suggested the President. "Get together with a few friends, maybe they could be Secret Service agents, start discussing human and Kryptonian genes, and end up at the Fortress to make the tests."

"It can't just be any random stranger," said Kara. "It needs to be... oh."

"Oh?"

"It needs to be people I already associate with," Kara said slowly. "I've not really made many friends since I arrived on Earth. I'd hate to endanger them."

"There may not be any alternative..."

### **The Fortress of Solitude, 10.06 AM EST**

Cracks were spreading towards the walls of the main chamber as the rogue crystal continued to grow. After a long silence Jor-El said *"Is it your intention to waste the heritage of Krypton on these savages?"*

"I'm guessing that a proper interpretation of what you just said is 'help our Earth cousins to the best of my ability.' Yes, that's pretty much what I intend."

*"They can't be trusted with our technology, or our genes. You know that this is true."*

"We'll be careful," said Kara. "Kal-El and I will control access. We'll only release things once we're sure that the humans are ready for them."

"Wait a minute," said Brennan. "That sounds a lot like you're planning to keep us ignorant for our own good."

"We may have to delay releasing some technology," said Kara. "But we will be releasing it, once we're sure you're not going to do anything stupid. But first we'll have to put our archive

somewhere safe. I was thinking of setting up the new Fortress on the Moon."

"Whoa!" said Tony. "That isn't what we agreed."

"It's what Kal-El and I agreed. Jor-El, I have your backup crystal; the Fortress will rise again. Meanwhile we need to destroy this complex before the technology falls into human hands. Power down."

*"The Fortress will rise again?"*

"You have my word."

"But you can't..." Abby began.

"Of course we can," said Kara. "We'll still be helping humanity, after all."

"I really don't like the sound of this," said McGee.

"You think?" said Tony.

*"I will obey for the House of El."*

"I trusted you, Kara," said Abby. "Don't talk to me. Don't come near me. Never again..."

The last glimmers of artificial light vanished from the Fortress, leaving the chamber dimly lit by the Arctic daylight seeping through the crystals. And by a red glow as Kal-El sliced a new entrance open with his heat vision.

### **Flashback: Washington Navy Yard, twenty minutes earlier**

"This is the WayneTech SRV7" said one of the technicians, helping Gibbs and Ziva board the streamlined lifting body that sat inside the dockside warehouse. "SRV stands for Space Rescue Vehicle, of course. It's designed to fly up to ten passengers to or from Earth orbit, with Superman supplying the motive power, of course."

"We know all that," said Gibbs. "What's your point?"

"With Superman propelling you the acceleration could be incredible, I need to make sure that you're properly strapped into the seats, which you are, and that your G-suits are correctly fastened, and they are. I'm told that you've both refused to use a catheter..."

"This flight should only last around ten minutes," said Ziva, "and we may need to fight at the end. Catheters would slow us down."

"What she said," Gibbs said, "and make sure that the weapons cases are properly stowed."

"It's done."

"Here he comes," Ducky shouted a couple of minutes later. "Good luck!"

The technician scrambled out, and spun the handle to close the hatch. Seconds later the capsule flew out of the open warehouse doors, and first Gibbs then Ziva passed out under the relentless acceleration.

### **The Fortress of Solitude, 10.06 AM EST**

Gibbs and Ziva ran into the Fortress, Gibbs carrying two M-16s with drum magazines and a belt of grenades, Ziva a bulky metal flight case.

"Gibbs," shouted Abby, "She's lied to us! They're going to control Kryptonian technology, not release it."

"No they're not," said Gibbs. He gave Tony one of the M-16s. "Cover Ziva, she's got a job to do here."

Ziva pressed her thumb to a fingerprint scanner at one end of the case, then looked into a retinal scanner that emerged from a concealed hatch. There was a soft 'clunk' and the case opened. Inside the case were a Hebrew keyboard and an LCD screen. Ziva produced a key from a chain around her neck, put it into a concealed lock, and twisted it once to the left, once to the right, and twice more to the left. The screen came to life, displaying a message in

Hebrew.

"Is that what I think it is?" said Tony.

"I've only done this as a training simulation of a suicide mission," said Ziva, typing in response to a succession of on-screen prompts. "Since I wasn't expected to survive, it didn't much matter if it detonated early. But I will get seriously annoyed if you kill us all by your constant chitter."

"Chatter," said Tony, then covered his mouth with his hand.

There was a loud beep, and the screen cleared, except for a countdown that read 05:00 then changed to 04:59

"We'd better get out of here," said Kara, holding up the crystal and making sure that they all saw her put it inside the case. Ziva closed the lid, and they ran out of the Fortress.

"Everyone into the capsule," shouted Clark, "I can't tow the shuttle too."

**01:17**

The crystal began to glow softly, as the AI detected the radiation and became aware that it was in danger. Its sensors came on line, and tried to make sense of its surroundings.

**01:06**

After what seemed an eternity, the crystal finally cracked the first layer of encryption on the bomb's computer. There was more, of course, but human programming couldn't withstand Kryptonian science for long. It was almost through the third layer and into the core operating system, and beginning to realise that the computer could start the timer but couldn't stop it, when the countdown reached 01:00 and the bomb detonated.

The five kiloton explosion vaporised the crystal and most of the Fortress. A few seconds later Clark turned back from his headlong flight south, flew as close as he could without endangering his passengers, and erased the last crystal fragments with his heat vision. The occupants of the SRV7 felt the buffeting of the shock wave, but were never in danger.

**Over the Arctic Ocean, 10.11 AM EST**

"I'm so sorry," said Kara. "I had to convince Jor-El that there was still a chance for him, and the only way to do it was to have him think we were coming round to his side. Your reactions had to be genuine."

"You had us all fooled," said Abby, "I'm sorry for the things I said."

"It was perfect. I don't think we could have done it without you."

"Why an Israeli bomb?" asked Tony.

"Israeli?" said Ziva. "Israel doesn't have weapons of mass destruction, you know that."

"Riiight."

"But hypothetically, our Prime Minister might possibly be persuaded to do a favour for the American government, since you've promised not to run atmospheric nuclear tests."

"Okay... so how come it detonated a minute early?"

"You know those movies you love where James Bond stops the bomb at 007 seconds?"

"Yeah?"

"With an Israeli bomb he would be... how do you say it? Shut out of luck."

Tony felt a smack on the back of his head, and Gibbs said "What happens now?"

"Kal-El will fly us back to Washington," said Kara, "then he'll be coming back to clean up the mess and get rid of the fallout."

"How about you?" asked Abby.

"Well... it occurs to me that for the next few days I'm not going to be invulnerable. Someone will probably want to debrief us, but after that I'd really rather like to find out more

about the effects of alcohol while I have the chance, and mourn the passing of the last of old Krypton."

"I'm buying," said Gibbs.

## Epilogue

Kara woke in a strange bedroom, with an aching head and a queasy stomach, and confused memories of singing loudly and badly in Kryptonese. She looked around, trying to remember where she was, and noticed her costume on a chair by the bed. One of the walls was covered in bookshelves, including several copies of *Deep Six: Rock Hollow*, and she realised that she must be in Timothy McGee's apartment. A clock on the bedside table showed 9.05 AM; there was a folded note on top of it:

Kara,

Abby says to tell you that you're a lightweight without your powers; you flaked out after four beers. She and Ziva helped you to bed, and found some of my sister's spare clothes that should fit you. No urgency about returning them.

Ducky seemed to think your hands were healing well last night, so I hope that you'll be feeling better when you wake. I'm going to have to head in to work pretty early, if I'm not around please make yourself at home. There are some spare toothbrushes in the bathroom cabinet, also Alka Seltzer if that's any use to you.

You're welcome to hang out until you're ready to travel; if you leave before I get back just make sure that the door locks behind you.

See you soon, I hope

Timothy McGee

Kara climbed out of bed, discovering that she was wearing panties and an MIT T-shirt, and pulled on a dressing gown. Her costume smelled slightly of beer, her hands were still cut under the tape but the wounds were almost healed. None of her powers seemed to be working, but she was sure that time and sunlight would fix that.

Abby slurped some Caf-Pow, looked at the scrap of bloodstained gauze that sat in a Ziploc bag on her desk, and thought about temptation. It would be so easy to run the analysis, and Kara would never know... but of course Abby would.

"Did you log the chain of evidence for that?" As usual Abby jumped at Gibbs' sudden arrival.

"Not exactly."

"Then it's worthless."

"Oh, come on, Gibbs, aren't you just a little bit curious?"

"We have real cases to work, Abby, not to mention the final write-up on Luthor."

"Okay... I guess I was probably going to do this anyway." She dropped the bandage into a biohazard waste bag, and threw it into the incineration bin. "Though it would have been really interesting to see how compatible we are." She clicked on one of her favourite programs, and generated images of a child that might result if Gibbs and Kara were the parents. "So cute..." When she turned to show Gibbs the picture he was gone.

"Okay, Elf Lord," said Tony, leaning back in his chair, "you planning to sneak home for a nooner with Kara?"

"Nooner?" asked Ziva.

"He means sex," said Tim. "And no, Tony, unlike some people here I don't automatically think of sex with a woman I respect who doesn't appear to be interested in me. However hot she might be."

"Especially when she can throw you into orbit once she gets her strength back," said Tony.

"That might possibly be a factor."

"Men are pigs," said Agent Lee, passing by with a stack of file folders.

"Oink!" said Tony, then "Ow!" as Gibbs slapped the back of his head.

"Finish the reports!"

"NCIS agents aided by the FBI, Superman, and Supergirl have completed their investigation into the murder of Lex Luthor," said Annabeth Schott.

"A full report should be forthcoming in the next few days; briefly, the preliminary findings state that Luthor died as a result of brainwashing by a Kryptonian artificial intelligence which apparently perceived him as a threat."

"Yesterday NCIS and FBI agents took part in questioning it, and subsequently helped Superman and Supergirl to destroy the Arctic base where the AI was located. During the operation the base's power supply exploded; the blast was equivalent to a small nuclear weapon. Supergirl suffered minor injuries but is expected to make a full recovery, Superman and the agents are unhurt. Superman will be continuing environmental cleanup in the area for the next few days, and no fallout is expected to reach inhabited areas."

A forest of hands rose. "Norman first, then Janice."

The *New York Times* reporter asked "NCIS, is that like CSI?"

"Only if you're dyslexic. It stands for Navy Criminal Investigative Service. Janice, then Peter..."

"So," said Tony, "did you and Ziva find out, when you were putting Supergirl to bed?"

"Find out what?" said Abby.

"Is she a natural blon... owww! That's cold!"

"You need to change your trousers, Tony. And don't forget you owe me a Caf-Pow now."

"You spilled it on me deliberately!"

"You deserved it."

"He usually does," said Gibbs, smacking Tony's head again. "Got a report for me yet?"

"I keep thinking that I should be mourning him," said Clark, "but the reality is my father died with Krypton. I've spent much of my adult life trying to please an echo of an echo of the real man. I'm actually relieved that it's over."

"It leaves you with some problems," said Bruce Wayne. "You don't have secure communications and there's nobody to make super-strong clothes for you and Linda, or for your son when he's ready for them."

"I know."

"Good thing I happen to own a satellite phone network, three synthetic fibre plants, and

nearly a third of Gotham's garment industry. You aren't the only one with costume and communications issues..."

Showered and dressed in a selection of Sarah McGee's clothes that more or less went with her boots, Kara put the rest of her costume into a grocery bag, tied her hair back in a pony-tail, put on dark glasses, and left the apartment, making sure that Butch stayed inside and the door locked properly. After walking in the sun for a few minutes she turned back suddenly, and accosted the only other pedestrian in sight, a woman in her early forties with a coiled wire running from her ear to a bulging pocket in her jacket. "Excuse me... are you following me?"

"Yes, Miss Zor-El. Gina Toscano, Secret Service." She produced ID.

"Okay, so why is the Secret Service following me?"

"We've been told that your powers are temporarily out of action; the Director assigned us to make sure that you're safe."

"That's good of you. Okay, maybe you can help me with something. My cousin ought to think of picking me up sooner or later, but he doesn't know where I spent the night and we've just trashed our communications system, and I don't have any money. Any chance you could get me a lift to the Navy Yard?"

"Hey, Ducky," said Tony. "Could I get a concussion from being slapped on the back of the head too much?"

"Oh, I doubt it," said Ducky, "unless Jethro was unusually annoyed. Although I did know a man in Glasgow, now was his name Perkins or Peterson? Patterson, that was it. Anyway, he was slapped by an angry girlfriend, hit his head on the corner of a shelf, and spent three months in a coma. It was quite fascinating, a textbook example of a subdural haematoma, and by the time the poor chap came out of it his girlfriend had moved to Bombay, or as they now call it, Mumbai. I expected that he'd be unhappy, but... oh, I nearly forgot, would you like me to check?"

"Check what?" asked Gibbs, coming into the morgue.

"Oh, I was talking to young Anthony. Poor chap seemed to think he might have concussion. Now where did he go? Hasn't collapsed, has he?"

"I just saw him in the corridor."

"Never mind then."

"Oh, Tony," cooed Ziva.

"Yeah?" Tony was lying back in his chair, and had his eyes closed.

"Kara's here and she was thinking that she would like to get close and personal with you."

"With me? Really?" Tony sat up fast.

"That's right," said Kara. "Ziva wants to see some *Klurkor* moves, it's probably easiest if I start off by sparring with someone else while she watches..."

"I used to work with an agent who looked a lot like you," said Gina, "A guy named Simon Donovan. He was killed a few years ago. Any relation?"

"Not that I know of," said Gibbs, wincing as Kara slammed Tony to the mat again. "You look like a CSI I met once in Las Vegas, any connection there?"

Gina shook her head. Tony lurched back to his feet, rubbing his ankle, and Kara circled then suddenly stopped and said "I think we'd better leave it there."

"Tired already?" asked Tony.

"No, but my cousin is here." Superman was in the doorway, talking to Abby.

Suddenly a cell phone started ringing. Gibbs listened for a second, said "On it!" and headed back upstairs, shouting "Gear up; we've got a dead sailor in the Mall!"

"Gotta go," said Tony, limping after him. McGee waved as he followed them out of the door. Ziva pecked Kara's cheek, and ran to catch up.

"Okay," said Kara, looking a little lost. "I suppose we were just about done."

"It beats long drawn-out farewells," said Superman. "And you can always come back when your powers are recharged."

"You can be sure I will," said Kara, shaking hands with Gina and kissing Abby good-bye.

"Traditionally science toys are aimed at boys, but BalliToy's new line, *Linda's Laboratory*, will be aimed very much at the female pre-teen and teen markets, with an initial launch of twenty modular kits featuring innovative science projects with a feminine slant, supported by software and books. Many of the sets can be combined for more complex projects. BalliToy CEO Larry Powers said 'When we saw Ms. Lee's presentation it just bowled us over. Educators just love the experiments she's come up with, and the kids are over the moon, they can't seem to get enough of them. I've learned more science playing with this stuff than I ever did in high school. We'll be launching in time for Christmas 2009 with twenty kits; then releasing five new kits a month for at least the next two years.' California-based designer Linda Lee was not available for comment, but is believed to have earned a six-figure advance..."

*Toy Retailer* magazine, December 2008

#### Hardcover Fiction

1. ALIEN BONES: A KATHY REICHS MYSTERY, by Temperance Brennan.
2. FALLING BLOOD, by Constantine Weber
3. THE CHINA ACCOUNT, by Terry Forrest
4. DEEP SIX: ARCTIC ANNIHILATION, by Thom E. Gemcity.
5. DRACULA'S DAUGHTERS, ed. Charles Wells.

*Daily Planet* best sellers, February 2009

"When you consider that there are more than fifty percent more sailors than marines," McGee said the following May, "I can't help thinking we see too many dead marines."

"One is too many," said Gibbs, staring out over the crime scene. "Go get coffee."

McGee didn't know his way around Los Angeles very well, but earlier they'd passed a Starbucks a few hundred yards down the street. Half way back he noticed a blonde girl in shorts and a tight white tank top roller-skating down the sidewalk towards him, with an excited puppy following her on a long lead. She swerved left, McGee swerved right, the puppy dodged between his legs, and somehow they ended up sprawled on the ground, with the girl on top of him and the coffee spilled in the road. He was very conscious of her warm body pressing

against him. "Sorry about that," she said as she got back to her feet, "Here, let me give you a hand." She reached down and pulled him up.

"I think it was my fault." He rubbed the back of his head where it had hit the sidewalk a little too hard. "I'm pretty sure it was me," said the girl. "Hey, I owe you a couple of coffees."

"That's okay," said McGee, "I'm working, I get expenses; I'll just buy a couple more."

"Then I'd better walk back with you, just in case you've got a concussion or something."

"There's no need, ah..."

"Linda." She put her arm through his. "Linda Lee."

### **The End**

The Kryptonian words used at various points come from the Kryptonian info web site <http://kryptonian.info/vocabulary.html>

I have not attempted to make the speech grammatically correct.

Most of the background used in chapter III comes from the most detailed summary of the Supergirl movie I could find:

<http://www.supermanhomepage.com/movies/movies.php?topic=m-supergirl>

I've borrowed the term "survival zone" from DC comics since it was not used in the movie, and changed a few details to make the different movies work better together.

The Ron Troupe / Lucy Lane / Sam Lane relationship mentioned in Chapter VI is based on the comics, while omitting most of the baggage that comes with it, such as Lucy's role as an artificial "Superwoman." Cat Grant is based mainly on the version in *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. Thanks to Joshua Richardson for pointing out the most likely cause of the navigation error, also in Chapter VI.

Martha Kent's personality is based partly on *Superman Returns* and partly on *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*.

The Midnight Show and Johnny Nevada are from DC comics. Batman used the Matches Malone disguise several times in the comics. The version of Batman in this story is post *Batman Begins*, pre *The Dark Knight*, but for story purposes Batman has already had run-ins with several famous Bat-villains.

Riddles used in chapter IX (but not their answers) come from the 1960s *Batman* TV series:

Q: What is it that travels on all fours in the morning, on two legs at noon, and three at twilight.

A: A man.

Q: What is it that's always coming but never arrives?

A: Tomorrow

Q: What do you throw away that keeps returning?

A: A boomerang.

Q: How many sides has a circle?

A: Two, inside and outside

Abbreviations etc. used at various points

MCRT - Major Case Response Team, the NCIS team led by Gibbs.

IAFIS - Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System, the FBI national automated fingerprint identification system.

FCE 28260 - as described, it is an experimental drug targeting the hormones responsible for male pattern baldness.

BOLO - Be On the Look-Out. Bulletins posted by law enforcement agencies to give local police departments etc. the details of wanted fugitives.

Axis Chemicals, mentioned in chapter XII, appears in various DC comics and the 1989 film *Batman*; it is usually mentioned as the place where The Joker falls into a vat of chemicals and is disfigured, but this does not appear to be canon for *Batman Begins* / *The Dark Knight*.

Tony DiNozzo returned to the USA after the episode *Agent Afloat*, first transmitted on September 30th 2008.

Gratuitous crossover references in chapter XIII:

Nigel, the rock star with the accident prone drummer

- *This is Spinal Tap*

"...check out the pizza, Lester. There's like seven different kinds of cheese!"

"...working at the Buy-More until something better comes along..."

- *Chuck*.

"...and you are so an insensitive jerk, Logan, coming to a party in a 'Kneel Before Zod' t-shirt when there are people from Metropolis here..."

"...do that in Idaho, they'll lynch you."

"...no, he used to be Sheriff but he was fired after the murder, now he's a..."

- *Veronica Mars*

NB: General Zod and friends destroyed the town of East Houston, Idaho.

"...so Dawn turns to Celeste and says 'yes, we look alike, but on me it looks good!'"

- *Buffy and Six Feet Under* (Michelle Trachtenberg played Dawn in *Buffy* and Celeste in *6FU*)

"...sold his Cyberdyne shares and invested in Zeiratech, he's doubled his money..."

- *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*

"...P3 is so over-rated..."

- *Charmed*

"...statistical analysis based on flocking algorithms to find..."

- *Numb3rs*

Mark Harmon (Gibbs in *NCIS*) played Simon Donovan in *The West Wing*. Gina Toscano (*West Wing*) was played by Jorja Fox, who also played Sara Sidle in *CSI*. The *NCIS* double episode *Legend*, set in Los Angeles, ran at the end of April and early May 2009.

### **Acknowledgements**

Given that all Superman movieverse fanfic draws on the same relatively small body of work it will be no surprise that some ideas that have previously been used in other stories have found their way into this one.

In particular the secure Kryptonian communications links mentioned at several points derive from Mr. Beeto's *Family Reunion*, one of the first really long *Superman Returns* stories I read. This story also gave me my villain, in a throwaway line about "HAL running things at the Fortress;" that was meant as a joke, this story takes it literally.