

Paradoxes

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"I thought you were having lunch with George Thompson today," Alec Freeman told his old friend and commanding officer, Ed Straker. Freeman knew that Straker had scheduled a helicopter to fly him from Metropolis to Langley, Virginia, to meet with the man the NSA director had assigned to oversee the agency charged with keeping the USA safe from aliens from outer space.

"I thought so, too," Straker admitted. Freeman noted the worry in Straker's ice blue eyes. Another man might have missed the signs, but Freeman had been Straker's right-hand man in SHADO for more years than either cared to recall. He knew the blond man's tells better than anyone aside from, maybe, Straker's wife.

"Trask is up to something?" Freeman guessed. Jason Trask and his team had been a problem for SHADO since before there **was** a Supreme Headquarters - Alien Defense Organization.

"When has Trask ever **not** been up to something?" Straker asked. It was a rhetorical question. Freeman knew he didn't expect an answer.

"The director agreed with the IAC's assessment that Bureau 39 was an unwarranted duplication of cost and effort and under Trask's command, it was dangerously out of control."

"I'm sure Trask took that well," Freeman commented.

"He was ordered to meet with Thompson this morning in the director's office."

"Let me guess," Freeman interjected grimly. "Trask didn't show."

"If this thing with Trask goes down as badly as it potentially could, it could get very, very, bad... for the whole planet."

"Knowing Trask, he'll be planning on going after Superman," Freeman said. "We could just tell him we know we can control him."

"Do you honestly believe that madman would believe anything anyone said that disagreed with what he's already decided is true?"

Straker sighed and Freeman knew that once again there was much more going on than Straker was telling him.

"Ed, assuming Trask does have a way to hurt Superman, exactly how bad would the results be?" Freeman asked. "Are we looking at possible retribution from his people on New Krypton?"

"I wish it was that simple," Straker told him. "I think we could handle a simple

invasion."

"So, what has you so worried?"

"A dream," Straker said, making it sound like the most logical thing in the world.

"A dream?" Freeman repeated, trying to keep the disbelief out of his voice.

"A dream I had ten years ago," Straker continued. "I dreamed that you and I were in Metropolis and there was a Superman and Trask succeeded in killing him. And one month later, the Earth has hit by an extinction-level-size meteorite because Superman wasn't there to stop it."

"I wouldn't call that a dream," Freeman commented. "Sounds more like one doozey of a nightmare."

"Except that I'm not sure it was a dream," Straker said. "At the time, I made a check of all the known Earth-crossing bodies that would be big enough to cause that much damage. There was one. The orbital computations at the time showed it would miss the planet by a good margin."

"At the time?" Freeman repeated.

"I checked on its orbit from time to time," Straker admitted. "Last year its orbit shifted slightly. Maybe it got hit by another object, maybe something else happened but I doubt we'll ever know. In any case, it's going to intersect Earth's orbit and the Earth is going to be there when it happens."

"And even with the technology we have available to us from the Rokan-shou and the Aurisans, we don't have the ability to divert it, do we?"

Straker shook his head.

"Who else knows about it?"

"EPRAD, NASA, ESA, some astronomers," Straker listed. "Their calculations indicate it'll be a close miss. I ran my figures past a couple of the Rokan-shou navigators. It's not going to miss, unless we happen to have a helpful Kryptonian around to take care of it for us."

"Maybe we could tell Trask we need Superman," Freeman suggested, only half joking.

"In my dream, he knew and didn't care. And that's why I killed him."

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Freeman had tried not to show his surprise at how seriously Straker was still taking a dream he'd had ten years before. Besides, Trask was still alive. And it was just barely possible that Straker had read more into the dream that he should have. It was also just barely possible that Straker was mistaken about the Earth-crossing asteroid.

Straker refused to give Freeman any more details of the dream, or the asteroid. Straker tried to laugh it off, claiming it was just a nightmare he'd had a long time ago, but Freeman knew he was just trying to minimize the worry he'd caused by telling Freeman about it.

A call to an associate at EPRAD didn't help to confirm or deny Straker's assertion that Earth was in danger from an asteroid. Although Dr. Sascka confirmed that a body would cross Earth's orbit, all their computations indicated it would miss the Earth by a very comfortable margin.

Was it possible that Straker was wrong? Freeman hoped so. There was something perverse about saving the Earth from marauding aliens only to be taken out by an act of God

disguised as an asteroid.

The next few days simply confirmed another fact that Freeman already knew -- Trask and his team were cunning as well as ruthless and while Trask may not have been clinically insane, his utter focus on his mission combined with his total disregard for human life made him at least as dangerous as any of Earth's real enemies. Plus, pulling a raid on a major newspaper was never exactly a good idea, and trying to intimidate the Daily Planet... well, that qualified as utterly lunatic. Freeman had never met Perry White, but the man's reputation as a newspaperman was that he was no one to mess with.

"Do we know for a fact that it was Trask and his bunch at the Planet?" one of SHADO's local operatives asked during the emergency security meeting that had been called immediately after the raid.

"Trask didn't even bother to hide his face from the building's security cameras," Paul Foster told her. "In fact, it almost looks like he wanted to be identified. He certainly made no effort to get a legitimate search warrant, or to cover the fact that his was a fake. And I'm sure he could have gotten a real one, if he'd wanted to."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense," the younger operative complained mildly. Freeman recalled that her name was Rosario -- Connie Rosario. She was one of the newer, post-war, recruits.

"They were trying to get information on Superman," Straker told the group. "Trask wants Superman to know there's a government agency, legitimate or not, going after him. And he wants *us* to know that we can't stop him."

"Yes" Doctor Jackson put in. Despite the psychiatrist's many years in Great Britain and in the US, his Eastern European accent was as thick as ever -- when he wanted it to be. "Trask wants everyone to know that he and his people are above the law and not answerable to any authority outside of himself," Jackson continued. "He wants us and Superman to respond in a 'reactive' rather than 'proactive' manner, thereby justifying his own skewed preconceptions of the situation."

"Are we certain that his ideas are really that skewed?" someone asked. "I mean, what do we really know about this Superman?"

"We probably know more about him than he does about himself right now," Straker told the group. "After all, *we* know he's not the only alien living on Earth, but I doubt *he* knows that."

"General, considering the type of being Superman is... can *we* control him if we have to?" Foster asked, echoing the question Freeman knew was on everyone's mind.

Straker took a moment before answering. "Can we control him as in giving him orders and expecting him to obey without question? No. Psychologically, he's basically a well-travelled, rather idealistic, young American male," Straker stated. He paused a moment before continuing. "Do I believe there is a method to rein him in if his actions become threatening or dangerous? Yes. Do I believe there is something capable of hurting him, maybe even killing him? Also yes."

"Sir, do you mind if we ask what that something is?" Rosario asked.

"Element 126. It's a relatively stable transuranic and it's believed to be a fragment of his

home planet," Straker explained.

"And it can hurt him?"

"Yes, I believe it can."

Freeman could see the relief in everyone's faces. Handling a power mad human was one thing. An uncontrollable demi-god was something else entirely.

Freeman waited until he was alone with Straker before voicing his own concerns. "Ed, do we have any of this element 126?"

"Not yet."

"Do you know where we can get our hands on some if we need it?"

"I think so," Straker said.

Freeman snorted. Straker could be downright obtuse when he wanted to be. And it appeared that today he wanted to be.

"Does Trask have any?" Freeman pressed.

"Not that I know of," Straker said. "Not yet, anyway." He gave Freeman a sardonic grin.

"Do you have any doubt that he would have used it already if he had it?"

Freeman had to admit that Straker was probably right. Trask would never have passed up the opportunity to use whatever weapons he had available to destroy what he considered an intolerable threat to the planet.

Freeman also didn't want to admit it out loud, but he wasn't certain he wouldn't act exactly like Trask if their positions were reversed. As far as Jason Trask knew, he was charged with defending a helpless planet against an unknown enemy of unknown strength -- an enemy that may well have corrupted his superiors and kept him from being able to do his job.

"Ed, are we so sure that Trask is in the wrong?" he asked softly.

Straker had the courtesy to ponder the question before answering. "Alec, before the president authorized General Henderson and me to brief the heads of state of the great powers about the problem with our alien invaders, we had to have evidence that there was a credible threat. Evidence good enough to convince a congressional committee that there *was* a credible threat. Evidence good enough that if it came down to it, a district attorney could go before a grand jury and get a true bill against aliens from outer space on multiple counts of murder. How many innocent people did the Rokan-shui kill before we actually had enough evidence to go ahead? How many victims all killed with the same M.O.?"

"Thousands," Freeman answered.

"And Trask wants to set himself up as judge, jury, and executioner of one possible, not even confirmed, alien on Earth," Straker said. "There's no evidence that Superman's committed any crime, except maybe emigration law violations. No bodies, no missing persons, nothing except for Trask's insistence that lack of evidence of a crime is evidence of a conspiracy to cover up a crime."

"So, how do we deal with him? Shoot him, like in your dream?" Freeman asked.

Straker gave him a sharp look. "I don't recall telling you that I shot him."

"Well, running him down with your car might damage the car. And bombs aren't your style," Freeman said, suppressing the sudden chill he felt. He *knew* Straker had shot Trask,

but he had no idea how he knew.

"I should have had him taken out ten years ago," Straker admitted. "Unfortunately, Trask's supervisors didn't entirely agree with Jackson's assessment of Trask's mental stability. Besides he was useful in diverting suspicion away from us when we needed it."

"And now?"

"What do you think?" Straker's tone was flat. "If he or any of his people so much as sneeze, we need to know about it."

"Then it's a good thing that Paul ordered extra surveillance on them the moment we confirmed it was Bureau 39 that raided Daily Planet. But tell me, what if we do need to take him down? Do we tell the local authorities that the Bureau is a terrorist organization and let them handle it for us?"

"That's what we're supposed to do," Straker reminded him. "At least in the U.S."

"He knows an awful lot about us."

"I know."

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"George Thompson went out to the Bureau's warehouse about one this afternoon and he hasn't been seen since," Foster told Freeman later that afternoon.

Freeman didn't bother to ask if there was a chance that their security people had simply missed him leaving. Freeman knew better.

"Well, we knew Trask knew we were keeping an eye on him," Freeman said. "He'd make sure he had a back way out that wasn't in any city records. Maybe an underground tunnel to the basement of another building, access to the sewers, something like that."

"We thought we had all that covered," Foster told him. "We checked out the adjoining buildings right after Trask's bunch moved into the warehouse and we've been inspecting them periodically. Nothing."

"But he managed to get Thompson past us anyway."

"Or maybe Thompson hasn't left the building," Foster suggested.

"I'm told he had a pretty hefty list of appointments scheduled for today," Freeman said. "Not people you'd want to annoy."

Foster didn't respond.

"Anything else?" Freeman prompted.

"Only that the two Daily Planet reporters Trask seemed most interested in met with Thompson just before he left for the warehouse and one of them followed him there."

"Just one?"

"The woman, Lane. She and Kent split up and went in opposite directions right outside the building. We're not sure where he went. But neither of them looked exactly happy when they left Thompson's office."

Freeman chuckled. "They probably went there expecting answers and Thompson wasn't giving them anything except more questions." He sat back in his office chair and peered up at the younger man. "Maybe we should keep a friendly eye on those two reporters, too. After all, if Trask was interested in them, maybe we should be too."

"I'll get right on it," Foster assured him.

Freeman watched as Foster closed the office door behind him. George Thompson was missing. Freeman had no doubt that Trask or one of his people had arranged for an 'accident' to befall the government bureaucrat. Was this the final piece of evidence they needed to prove that Trask was as dangerously out of control as they believed?

Freeman doubted it.

Without a body, it was going to be hard to prove that Trask had anything to do with Thompson's disappearance. He could claim that he never got the order to disband his unit. Even with a body it might be difficult to prove anything. Trask and his people knew any number of ways to kill a man and make it look like anything but a murder.

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Freeman had dinner at his usual hang out, not far from his apartment. Big house salad, medium rare steak, a little cordial conversation with the waitress who thought he was little more than a harmless middle-aged bachelor.

Going home to his empty flat didn't seem especially appealing. Between thoughts of the asteroid and Trask, Freeman didn't really want to be alone with what was in his head. Getting drunk wasn't an option -- temporary forgetfulness and a sick headache in the morning. And he was getting too old for hangovers. He didn't want to socialize with anyone from work -- once upon a time it wouldn't have bothered him to call up one of the girls in research and ask her out for dessert and coffee, or to call Foster out to pub crawl with him. But Foster had a wife and family now and Freeman's mood wasn't going to be conducive to chatting up a pretty young thing.

He was walking toward the park beneath the Metropolis Bridge when he spotted emergency vehicles down by the water's edge. It looked like there had been a fatality. A jumper from the bridge, maybe. Or maybe something else entirely. He stood and watched as a gurney with a body-bag was placed in the medical examiner's van.

Freeman made mental note to get in touch with the M.E.'s office in the morning and find out who the poor sod was that the MPD had fished out of the drink. Freeman wasn't a superstitious man, and his flashes of psychic inspiration were few and far between, but right now he had the eerie feeling that the dead man's identity -- and he was certain it was a man -- was going to be a serious issue for SHADO in days and weeks to come.

Sleep did not come easily and when Freeman did finally fall asleep, his dreams were disturbing.

Freeman and Straker were crouched by a farmhouse porch -- from the landscape Freeman guessed they were in the Midwestern U.S. Straker was younger and armed with a high-powered rifle.

Jason Trask had set fire to a wooden shed with a padlocked door. Freeman knew there were people inside and he knew Trask knew and didn't care that he was committing cold-blooded murder. Freeman started to move forward but Straker stopped him. Freeman felt a flash of anger at the other man. Didn't he care that innocents were about to die?

Then the back of Trask's van burst open and a young man in jeans and a flannel shirt jumped out of it, running toward the burning shed. The young man inhaled the flames. Superman in civilian clothes? Freeman spared a glance in Straker's direction. The blond

man didn't seem surprised.

The young man broke the padlock on the door, ran inside then came out a few moments later. Trask was standing there, hands behind his back in an 'at ease' attitude -- or was he holding something out of sight? From his angle, Freeman couldn't tell.

Trask's expression was a sneer.

"Don't take another step," the young man warned.

"Fighting words, Mister Kent. Or should I call you, 'Superman?'" Trask countered. "A secret identity. Very clever."

The young man's grim expression didn't change. "You're going to prison. For murder, kidnapping, for abuse of power."

Trask simply smiled. It was the coldest smile Freeman had ever seen.

"But I'll tell everyone your secret," Trask said. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"I don't care. This ends now, Trask."

"Agreed. But the question is, for whom?"

Freeman stifled a gasp of surprise as Kent closed the distance between himself and Trask faster than the eye could see. Then Kent gasped in pain and shock. His knees buckled and Freeman could tell it was an effort for the young man to keep standing. Trask kicked his feet out from under him, sending Kent sprawling. Still, Straker didn't move.

"You think you're better than we humans, don't you?" Trask was ranting. "Flying around, oh-so-perfect and superior. But those days are over, aren't they?"

"You're... wrong," Kent managed to say.

"No. You're wrong. It's over, and I have won," Trask stated. He waved the green crystalline rock he'd been hiding behind his back and waved it in Kent's face. "This little piece of home is going to be the death of you, Superman."

Freeman heard sirens in the distance.

Trask must have heard them as well. He set the green rock beside Kent.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay for the services," he announced, turning to head for the waiting van.

Despite his pain, Kent reached for the rock. Freeman could see it burn his hands like acid as he picked it up. Freeman started forward once again. From what he'd seen, the rock shouldn't affect him. If he could get the rock away from Kent...

Again Straker stopped him, but this time instead of a rifle, the blond man had a small device in his hand. It was silver and had several buttons on the face. Straker pressed one button and...

Freeman woke with a start and it took him a moment to realize he was safely in his bed in his apartment in Metropolis. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had such a vivid dream. His heart was pounding and he imagined he could still smell the harsh smoke from the scorched shed.

Freeman laid back, willing his heart to slow down to a more normal rate.

Jackson had told him more than once that dreams were a key to the unconscious mind, that they reflected what the mind was working on 'underneath'. Freeman tried to analyze what

this dream might mean -- he knew from Straker that Superman was a Kansan named Clark Kent and he knew that Trask wanted Superman dead. Was his mind simply writing a script for the confrontation between Trask and Kent? Or was there something more that his unconscious mind had picked up about the situation?

He was almost afraid to ask.

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"The Metropolis Police fished Thompson's body out of the harbor last night," Freeman told Straker the next morning. He noted the other man didn't seem overly surprised at the news.

"Any evidence that Trask was involved?" Straker asked.

Freeman shook his head. "Only that Thompson's last known location was at the Bureau's Bessalo warehouse. There are witnesses to that. I've already dropped a friendly hint to one of my buddies over at PP-One that Thompson wasn't the suicidal type and that he had an appointment scheduled with a disgruntled employee."

Straker chuckled at that. "Disgruntled employee"? Interesting description of Trask." Straker sat back in his chair and contemplated the view outside his office window. "With Thompson out of the way, there aren't that many people left who can positively identify Trask or know the details of Bureau 39's mission, or how Trask had misinterpreted them."

"I'll have Paul assign some people to General Newcomb," Freeman said. "He'll be the next one on Trask's list."

Straker nodded and picked up the phone from his desk. "Get me General Burton Newcomb, please."

Freeman knew there was little love lost between the two men. Newcomb had been with James Henderson when he first uncovered the danger from U.F.O.s and had been instrumental in setting up **Majik** -- the 'above-top-secret' agency put together to put together to gather unassailable evidence of alien intrusions within the United States. That was back in 1947, less than a month after the now famous 'Roswell Incident'. Bureau 39 was the field operation arm of **Majik**.

But Henderson's plans had been much larger than **Majik**, larger than just defending the U.S. against alien marauders. The entire planet needed to be defended from them.

Henderson wanted an international paramilitary organization that answered to the United Nations Security Council, not the U.S. government. That was something Newcomb could not bring himself to support -- it was a given that the U.S. would be footing most of the cost for the new organization and, according to him and many of his associates, that should have given the U.S. some clout in the decision making processes within SHADO. And that simply hadn't been politically viable.

Henderson won and Newcomb lost. It didn't matter that Henderson's ideas on the matter had been given the backing of the President of the United States. It didn't matter that Henderson never got his fourth star because of his insistence that SHADO be international in scope and utterly politically neutral. And to add insult to injury, Ed Straker, Henderson's assistant was given the task of commanding SHADO. Burton Newcomb was never even suggested for the job.

Then for various reasons, only some of them political, SHADO had chosen not to bring the members of Bureau 39 into its operation. **Majik** was officially decommissioned and Newcomb's group was transferred to the control of a '*civilian*' intelligence agency. Officially, Bureau 39 ceased to exist. In fact, all records of its previous existence were classified above top secret. Burton Newcomb was shuffled off to an obscure corner of the USAF infrastructure to - supposedly - wait for retirement.

Freeman knew better. Newcomb had been charged with keeping Trask and his people under control. He'd done a credible job until he was forced to retire due to his age. And now there was little doubt that without Newcomb's restraining hand Bureau 39 had gone rogue.

"Well?" Freeman asked when Straker hung up the phone.

"He already suspected something had happened to Thompson," Straker said. "And he doesn't really care if Trask comes after him. He's dying. Maybe six months to live. But he also said that he had some insurance in place if anything untoward did happen to him, and that we need to move fast if we're going to get our hands on Trask's collection of alien tech. Stuff he told his bosses had been transferred to us, but hadn't been."

"How much are we talking about?" Freeman asked.

"A whole damned warehouse."

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Freeman assigned himself to the 'acquisition mission'. There had been rumors around SHADO for years that Bureau 39 had been keeping back many of their more interesting finds. Now they knew it was true.

Three moving trucks blocked the alley behind the 'furniture warehouse', and barricades were set up to block the adjacent streets. The doors to the building on the opposite side of the alley were wide open, making it look like the movers were moving things in, rather than out.

Freeman looked over the alley. The surveillance cameras and motion detectors had already been dealt with. The phone lines had been blocked -- anyone calling in or out would get a 'temporarily out of order' recording. Advanced radio frequency jammers were in place and the antennae in the building's roof had been 'disabled'. If Trask and his people were in the building, they were cut off from the outside world -- at least Freeman hoped they were. SHADO had no idea what alien tech Trask's people may have adapted for their own use.

"Sir, what about the rest of their security?" one of the security people asked.

"People usually just lock their doors and windows," Freeman said. "The only people who guard their walls and ceilings are banks."

"This doesn't look much like a bank," one of the drivers commented.

"Let's see what's inside," Freeman ordered. They had already checked the building out using the scanners at their disposal, but now they needed to actually look.

Drilling a hole in the side of the building took less than a minute, as did threading the miniature camera into the hole. A picture of the building's interior came onto a monitor inside the first truck. It looked like an ordinary warehouse except for the heavily reinforced door and the chicken-wire room partitions. Blue tarps covered odd shaped objects. File cabinets stood against the chicken-wire. The camera didn't pick up any movement until...

The heavy door swung open and two people walked into the warehouse. Freeman

recognized them from their pictures. Lane and Kent from the Daily Planet. *How the devil had they gotten past Trask's magnetic keycard lock and the second combination locked door?*

"Have we got sound?" Freeman murmured. The man in charge of the miniature camera handed Freeman a pair of headphones and turned on a recorder. Freeman watched as the two reporters started looking around the room, opening file drawers, seemingly at random.

"I don't know about this, Lois. Where is everybody?" Kent said. He sounded worried.

The woman shrugged it off. "Clark, the thing about luck is, don't question it." She peered at one of the photos then held it up to her companion. "Give me a break. I've seen this movie."

"Lois, these look like the genuine article," Kent protested.

"They're too good. It's got to be a set-up," Lane stated. Freeman stifled a chuckle.

"What if it's not? What if people actually travelled in these? People from far away..."

"There's a story here, Clark, but I don't know if it's UFO's," Lane stated, shoving the photos back into the drawer.

"I thought you were the one who said if it walks like a duck..."

"Don't quote me to myself, Clark," she grouched. Then she stopped and stared at him. "How did you...?"

On the monitor, Freeman caught Kent's glance at one of the folders just before the reporter slammed the drawer shut. The young man grabbed the woman's arm and led her away from the cabinets.

"What are you doing?" she grumbled.

"You don't like their pictures, let's see what else they have," Kent explained

"I suppose you think we're going to pull one of these off and find a U.F.O.?"

"I don't know what we're going to find," Kent said.

The woman shrugged off his hand and stood in the center of the floor. "Eeny, meeny, miney, mo..." she called out, pointing at the covered objects around her. She pulled off one of the tarps, revealing the shattered shell of an Aurisian escape pod. Lane stared at it, unimpressed. "This is just an Unidentified Salvage Yard."

Kent exposed a different craft. Another escape pod, this one was intact. "This doesn't look like any scrap metal I ever saw."

The woman seemed to reconsider her skepticism. "Clark, do you really think...?"

But the man had already moved on to a third tarp covered craft. This one caught the man's attention. Freeman couldn't see what was under the tarp, but whichever one it was seemed to strike a chord with the reporter. Kent's lips moved but the microphone didn't pick it up.

"Clark!" Lane called out. Kent pulled the tarp back over the ship and Freeman thought that he put something from the ship into his pocket.

"Somebody's coming," Lane continued. She obviously hadn't seen what Kent had done. But now the microphone picked up what sounded like footsteps from some other part of the building.

Trask and several of his men appeared, guns drawn.

"And how did you two get in?" Trask demanded.

"That's your problem," Lane stated. Freeman found that he was impressed by her aplomb while faced with Trask's obvious threat.

Trask wasn't impressed. "That's correct. Getting out however, that's your problem."

"People know where we are," Kent said.

"Like... Superman," Lane said a little too cheerfully. "He's going to come looking for us."

"Oh, I hope so. In fact, I'm counting on it," Trask stated. Freeman and his team watched in dismay as Trask forced the two reporters to go with him. Four of his men stayed behind to secure the 'exhibits'.

The ship that had attracted Kent's attention was the first one they moved.

"Find out where Trask is taking those reporters," Freeman ordered two of the security people. To the rest of his team: "Let's open up this can, swat the bugs, and salvage what we can."

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"How much did we get from the raid?" Straker asked when Freeman got back to his office.

"Three of Trask's goons, a lot of junk," Freeman answered. "It looks like they'd already moved the good stuff, or maybe they never had any."

"Any idea what the piece they got away with was?" Straker asked.

Freeman shook his head. "It was something that seemed important to Kent, though. I thought he was going to pass out when he saw it. ...and speaking of Lane and Kent, any idea how they managed to get through Trask's supposedly impenetrable security?"

"Oh, I'm sure they had help," Straker assured him with a flicker of a smile. "Just like they, and the Daily Planet Building, had help this afternoon to avoid getting hit by an air to air missile."

"Superman?"

Straker nodded. "Bureau 39 has been declared a terrorist organization. Interpol has posted a black notice on him and his known confederates. The FBI is not well pleased to find out he'd targeted government officials. Every airstrip in North America has been asked to keep an eye out for his plane. Luckily there aren't all that many Gulfstream Twos out there with jungle camo and missile mounts. Throwing two reporters out of one of their airplanes at 20,000 feet didn't do anything to endear him to his supposed masters as the NSA, either. And now half the U.S. military is falling all over the other half to prove that Trask didn't get the missile from them."

"Do we know where he *did* get it?"

"It's possible he traded some of his finds to some foreign power," Straker suggested.

"Or?" Freeman prompted.

"Or some arms dealer just happened to lose a couple of missiles in trade for something he had."

"Scary thought, arms dealers having access to tech that advanced," Freeman admitted.

"Assuming Trask gave them anything they could use," Straker said.

"Have we any idea where Trask is holed up?"

"He hasn't left the planet," Straker said. "And we're pretty sure he hasn't left the country."

"Well, we both know he isn't going to just give up," Freeman reminded Straker. "He's just going to lay low until he thinks the heat is off then go after Superman again."

"He won't stay low for long," Straker warned. "Lane and Kent humiliated him in front of his men, and so did Superman."

"I'm surprised nobody's said anything about me letting Trask take those reporters away with him," Freeman commented. "It could have gone very badly for them."

"What were you supposed to do? Break through the back door and get into a fire fight with him? You had no idea what Trask planned to do with them when he left. Besides, they were trespassing."

"It still could have gone very wrong," Freeman said.

"Yes, it could have," Straker finally agreed. "And we're damned lucky it didn't. We may not be so lucky next time."

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Freeman's dreams were filled with horrific visions of a cold dead world with a soot black sky.

"What's the date?" a young Straker asked a glum looking little man in an old-fashioned suit. Freeman couldn't place the man's name but thought he ought to.

"November 15, 1994," the man answered. His accent was cultured British with a touch of something else as well. "It is now one year since Nightfall collided with the planet Earth."

Freeman looked around at their surroundings. There was nothing but rubble a far as the eye could see -- broken concrete, twisted steel, broken glass. The air was dank and there were smells Freeman didn't want to identify. Half-buried in one of the nearer debris piles was an object Freeman was surprised to see -- the brass globe that had adorned the Daily Planet Building.

"Did anyone survive?" Straker asked. His voice was hushed and Freeman wondered if Straker was as shaken as he was. "Anyone at all?"

The little man's expression turned even more glum, if that was possible. "Lex Luthor had been told that his shelter beneath his building would be able to withstand all but a direct strike. But his engineers had underestimated the effects of such a large strike on the crust of the Earth. The crust cracked like the shell of a hard-boiled egg. The earthquakes... the volcanoes... not to mention the dust thrown into the upper atmosphere, blocking out the sun."

"Nuclear winter," Straker said. "How long until the atmosphere clears?"

"A thousand years, perhaps."

"And you say this all happened because this Superman person was murdered?" Straker asked.

"The best of Earth's technology was unable to divert the asteroid," the little man said. "You, Ed Straker, even brought in the help of the people you knew had access to technology not developed on Earth. All for naught."

"And why should we believe that this is anything but some fantastic trick?" Freeman demanded.

"Commander, what can I do...?" the little man began.

Straker didn't pay him any attention as he looked at the devastation around them. "This can't be real. But..." He shook his head. "I've seen the future and this isn't it. So if this is real we're looking at a paradox. They both can't be right."

"The future you remember will unravel, unless you stop Jason Trask from killing the one being capable of saving the Earth and saving the future."

"And if I don't?"

The little man looked at Straker with sad eyes. "Then the future dies."

-O-O-O-

"More bad dreams?" Straker asked Freeman on coffee the next morning in the cafeteria of their office building.

"Is it that obvious?" Freeman asked. Sometimes Straker was downright eerie in his ability to pick up what was going on around him.

"Want to tell me about it?"

"It's probably just my subconscious working overtime, what with Trask and Superman and Nightfall..."

At the mention of Nightfall, Straker suddenly went very still. "You dreamt about the asteroid?"

"You and I and someone else were in the future, one year after the asteroid hit the planet. It felt very real." Freeman took a sip of his coffee. "I don't usually remember my dreams, you know. I wonder what Jackson would make of this one?"

"Was there a date mentioned?" Straker was staring at his half-empty cup as though he could read something in the reflections.

"November 15, 1994."

Straker muttered something under his breath. It sounded like an obscenity, something Straker rarely indulged in unless it was for theatrical effect. Freeman was certain that Straker wasn't swearing for effect right now.

"It wasn't a dream, was it? It really happened, or *will* happen?"

Straker didn't answer.

"You were younger," Freeman continued. "We both were."

"Tens years younger," Straker said.

"That dream you said you had ten years ago... that wasn't a dream either, was it?"

"I thought it was at the time," Straker admitted. "But then I found the notes I left for myself about the asteroid."

"And now we have the real reason why you didn't throw a fit when Superman showed up," Freeman stated.

Straker managed a chuckle. "Knowing a little about the future does have certain advantages."

"You said you'd seen the future..." Freeman prompted.

"I experienced a possible future, one where my life was saved by people who won't be

born if Nightfall hits," Straker said. "But there are flows and washes and eddies in the time stream. Apparently, in at least one possible future, I survived the effects of the X-50 drug long enough to try to use SHADO's technology to divert the asteroid," Straker said, referring to an incident many years before. Straker and Lake had been trapped in a time bubble. In order to counter the effects of the bubble, Straker had used an extremely dangerous drug. The side-effects had nearly killed him.

"So, the future *hasn't* been written?" Freeman prompted.

"Well, I gather there are people who are very much invested in preserving their past," Straker said.

"Including the little man in the old-fashioned suit?"

"I surprised you didn't recognize him."

"I have a feeling I should have, but I didn't," Freeman admitted.

"He's a time traveler, Alec. A famous one."

"How can you be a famous time traveler?"

At that Straker actually laughed. "Well, if the first rule of time travel is 'don't get caught', then the second rule is 'tell the truth about it in such a way that nobody will believe it's the truth'."

The name came to Freeman in a sudden burst of clarity. "Wells. Herbert George Wells. He came to talk to you at the studios..."

-O-O-O-

February had brought its usual miserable rain. Freeman turned his coat collar up as he left his parked car to head for the main entrance of Harlington-Straker Studios. He wondered a moment at how much longer the studios would remain active as SHADO's cover. The war with the aliens was effectively over as of last Christmas. December 25, 1983, a day to be celebrated in history if the fact that there had even been a war wasn't so secret.

Freeman still wasn't sure he agreed with Straker's plan to allow the non-warlike faction of aliens to emigrate to Earth, but so far everything had gone well. They were sharing their technology with SHADO, and that technology was enabling SHADO to deal with the attacks from the violent alien factions. The peaceful ones called themselves the Rokan-shou. It was strange to realize after all this time that they had a name. To know that the aliens they'd been at war with for so long had faces and names and personalities.

Freeman nodded a greeting to Miss Ealand who was seated in her usual place in the outer office. The door to Straker's inner office was closed.

"He has an odd visitor," Ealand told him. "Claims his name is H.G. Wells."

"And you let him in there, alone, with Straker?" Freeman was horrified at the thought. Even though the war was over, there were still people who wanted Ed Straker dead.

"Mister Straker didn't seem overly worried," Ealand told him.

That statement didn't mollify him. He reached over her desk and keyed the switch to open the door to Straker's office. Then he hurried inside.

Straker was seated at his desk, hands steepled in front of him as he regarded his visitor, the man claiming to be H.G. Wells.

"I implore you, Commander, you must help me stop this Trask person, or all will be lost," Straker's visitor was saying.

"Well, I will say you have an interesting story, Mister Wells," Straker said. "But I make movies. You know... pretty pictures for the masses. Now, if you have a story treatment, I'm sure our acquisitions department wouldn't mind taking a look."

"How can I convince you that I'm telling the truth?" Wells asked. "I've already told you more than I should."

"But why ask me to take care of this problem," Straker asked. "If he's as dangerous as you say, why not just notify the police?"

"There are reasons that would not be advisable."

"Like they'd lock you up," Freeman suggested. "H.G. Wells died in 1946."

"I'm well aware of that, Mister Freeman," Wells said, a touch of asperity in his voice. "Nonetheless, I'm stating the truth. I am Herbert George Wells and Jason Trask is going to destroy the only person capable of saving the world, unless you stop him."

Straker shook his head. "Tell it to the Marines, Mister Wells."

Wells looked surprised at Straker's decision then his lips thinned with determination. "I suppose my only recourse is to show you that I'm telling the truth," he said, pulling a small device from his pocket. Alarms went off in Freeman's head as Wells reached across the desk to grab Straker's arm. Freeman reached for Wells and...

The office in the outskirts of London shimmered and vanished. They were standing under a soot black sky in the midst of the broken rubble of what may have once been a major city. It was hard to tell. Nothing moved and the place stank of death.

"What have you done?" Straker demanded.

"If you do not act, this is the future. Your future," Wells said solemnly. "Earth's future."

"What is this place?" Freeman managed to ask.

"It was Metropolis."

-O-O-O-

"Flashback?" Straker asked.

Freeman took a shuddery breath as he looked around the cafeteria. No one else seemed to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. "I'm guessing he had a way of blocking our memories, only now they're breaking through?"

Straker nodded.

"But you took care of Trask," Freeman said. "So the problem is solved, or was solved, wasn't it?"

"I'm not so sure, Alec," Straker admitted. "Think about it. The fact that there are people actively working to preserve the past implies there are also people actively working to change it."

"And how would we know?" Freeman asked. It was a rhetorical question. If the past had

been changed then everyone's memories, everything in books, reality itself, would have been rewritten.

"Well, there must be a way of knowing, otherwise how would the time preservation people know what to preserve?" Straker reasoned aloud.

"And you think one of those other people may be helping Trask?"

"I don't know."

-O-O-O-

There was nothing on Trask or the warehouse in the next day's Daily Planet, not that Freeman expected to find anything. The editor of the Planet wasn't going to print anything he couldn't verify and SHADO had made sure that nothing had been left in that warehouse. The *Inquisitor* had a story on UFO conspiracies and cover-ups. As usual, it was long on speculation and short on facts. It would have been funny except that the *Inquisitor's* allegations were much closer to the truth than they would ever be allowed to know.

Trask and his people had vanished. Where ever they were, they weren't using credit cards, or any identification the NSA or the FBI or SHADO knew about. They hadn't shown up at any of their known hideouts or bases. Freeman could only hope that SHADO or the NSA would find Bureau 39 before they made their next move.

The next several weeks Superman made himself useful, capturing a gang of bank robbers with invisibility suits. Then there was the group of cyborg athletes created by a sports surgeon. That one impressed Jackson -- without the use of alien tech, Doctor Sam Lane had managed to create prosthetics that were stronger and faster than the originals. Unfortunately, Lane's creations merely proved the adage that superior ability breeds superior ambition. The fighters he'd enhanced were little more than murderous brutes.

One thing Freeman had noticed about Metropolis even before Superman made his first appearance -- Metropolis attracted crazies. London had its share weirdness, not all of it alien related, but Metropolis had more than its fair share. Cyborgs, children with artificially enhanced intelligence, invisible bandits, serial whatevers who targeted weddings, mad scientists. Of course, Gotham City was no slouch in that area -- they had a costumed vigilante with some serious toys squaring off against insane master criminals and serial killers.

It made his old job of simply fighting aliens seem positively pedestrian.

Then, finally, they had a lead on Trask and his people.

"There's some weird stuff happening in Lowell County, Kansas," Foster announced, finding Straker and Freeman in Straker's office. "A supposed full EPA investigation into toxic chemical misuse on a farm owned by a man named Wayne Irig, only the alleged site isn't on any published lists, no complaints had ever been made against Irig, and the EPA only has one investigator in the area. But get this, Irig found a strange crystal on his property last week and sent it off to the state university to be analyzed. It was nothing they'd ever seen before."

"And now it's missing?" Straker asked.

"And bulldozers are tearing up Mister Irig's farm as we speak."

Straker nodded his thanks to Foster then turned to Freeman. "Get packed, Alec," he ordered. "We're going on a little trip."

"Who do you want to take with you?" Foster asked.

"A couple people who can pass for FBI, at least one sharpshooter," Straker said. "Let the local FBI office know that we think the Bureau may be in their backyard and we'll contact them if we need them."

"You know they don't like being left out of the loop," Foster warned.

"I think they'd like being told it was an NSA matter even less," Straker responded.

-0-0-0-

They were in route to Kansas City on a SHADAIR jet. Although SHADO rarely needed to move equipment across the planet to combat alien threats any more, they had kept the airline that they'd created for cover. It turned a tidy profit as well as giving them virtually instant access to fast transport.

"You're convinced it's Trask causing all the commotion in Smallville?" Freeman asked.

"Aren't you?" Straker asked. "Besides, don't you want to see the annual Smallville Corn Festival?"

"You're joking, right?"

Straker chuckled and shook his head. "The Corn Queen Pageant, the Husk-Off, the Corn-O-Rama, popcorn, creamed corn, corn-on-the-cob."

"You sound like a travel brochure," Freeman complained mildly. Straker's joking was evidence that the other man was feeling confident that the situation was relatively under control.

"Trask isn't going to go down easy," Freeman warned. Straker's expression turned more solemn.

"I know that," Straker admitted. "He knows we'll be coming after him. But we do have an advantage. We know *who* he's after and where *they* will be."

Freeman lowered his voice to a near whisper. "But if someone is helping Trask, someone who knows these things, what are we supposed to be able to do about it?"

"Well, we have to try," Straker said. "Sometimes that's all we've got."

-0-0-0-

Smallville was the quintessential Midwest American town. Train station, grain silos, county courthouse, a town square. The town square featured a band-shell. There was a banner sign strung across the band-shell that read "Smallville Corn Festival." It was a well organized affair, complete with a cute logo that reflected small town charm.

"If Irig's around, somebody here will know about it," Straker commented. "That's the great thing about a small town."

"But will they talk to us?" Freeman asked.

"We can always listen around," Straker said. He nodded his head in the direction of Lane and Kent. They were talking to a woman in a khaki sheriff's uniform. "Rachel Harris," Straker murmured.

"I beat Fordman in last year's election just by promising to buy a couple of computers," the woman, Harris, was saying proudly.

Lane gave her partner a skeptical glare. "Old time's sake?"

"Clark took me to his senior prom," Harris announced with exaggerated cheerfulness. "So, when did you two...?"

Lane broke in with "We haven't! We're on assignment for the Daily Planet. We *work* together."

The sheriff didn't look convinced. "Really? Completely professional, huh?"

Kent broke in before Lane could get started with a rebuttal. "Rach, see, the reason we're here is... do you know where Wayne Irig is?"

Harris shook her head. "Haven't seen him. You know how he keeps to himself." Her radio squawked. She listened to her earpiece for a moment before starting away from them. "Duty calls," she announced. "Well, Lois, we'll have to swap Clark stories later."

"So, Mister Irig is missing?" Freeman murmured.

"I would have expected the local law officers to have been apprised of the situation," Straker commented.

"She could have been lying about not knowing where Irig is," Freeman suggested.

"Maybe," Straker conceded. "Or maybe she's out of the loop."

"The EPA field liaison is a Carol Sherman," Freeman said. "Forty, divorced, no children. Good work record, highly regarded by her superiors. Exactly the kind of person Trask would use as a front."

"I've assigned one of the kiddies to go out to tomorrow and talk to her," Straker said, referring to the security detail that had come with them to Smallville. Straker didn't often comment about how young SHADO's operatives seemed now. Many of them were young enough to his children. But this very serious trio, Madison, Westcott, and Lupinski, seemed even younger than most of the newer operatives. Suddenly Freeman felt far older than his actual age. Field work was something best left for the young.

Not that it would matter in a month. It wasn't going to be announced until the last possible minute, but astronomers with EPRAD and other agencies had finally confirmed what Straker had told him a month ago -- an extinction-level-size meteorite was going to hit the planet Earth unless Superman was able to stop it.

-O-O-O-

The night sky was filled with stars, more stars than Freeman had seen in years. It reminded him of nights back home in Australia at his uncle's ranch. Stars so bright and so close you thought you could just reach out and touch them. Freeman had hated spending his holidays at the ranch. He had hated how the dry landscape simply went on and on. He had hated his cousins, their self-absorbed disdain for anything out of the ordinary. He had hated the sheep.

But he had loved the stars and the wide open skies.

"It's not close enough to see," Straker said in the darkness. The RV they'd rented in Wichita was dark. Freeman assumed the three youngsters were bedded down for the night. 'Youngsters' wasn't exactly the proper term, Freeman readily admitted. All three were well trained SHADO operatives in their mid-twenties and he was sure they slept the sleep of the innocent and righteous -- unlike himself and, seemingly, Straker.

"How long before it can be seen?" Freeman asked.

"It won't be visible to the naked eye until it's almost on us," Straker said. "I'm told there's a companion rock that's ahead of it by a day or so. That one should miss the planet, but it

should be noticeable."

"Have you told Kate?" Freeman asked, referring to Straker's wife of ten years.

"I didn't have to," Straker said. "She smelled the death on me when I came home after that little trip. She did some research. I never ask her or Jackson for details, but they both told me that the weave of reality was torn and there were two futures depending on a single frozen moment."

"And what does that mean?"

"I have no idea," Straker admitted. "But that's why we're here."

-o-o-o-

Freeman wasn't certain how long it had taken him to finally fall asleep. First it had been worry that had kept him awake then it was the quiet. Despite being born and raised in a small town in Queensland, Freeman was by nature a city boy. He loved the bustle of London and now Metropolis. Quiet was simply something that didn't happen in the city.

In the morning, Westcott went out to look for Sherman while Madison and Lupinski went to talk to Sheriff Harris and Police Chief Parker. Freeman doubted the three would uncover much, but there was always the chance that Lowell County law enforcement knew something.

In the meantime, he and Straker were dressed in jeans, flannel shirts, and work boots, trying to not look too out of place while keeping an eye on Lane and Kent. Freeman didn't look too alien, but Straker... Straker would never be mistaken for a farmer. Even in jeans and a flannel shirt he looked like he should be wearing a suit or a uniform. At least Freeman knew how to slouch properly.

Freeman was the one who ended up at the table at the open-air diner.

"This place has been here for I don't know how long," Straker had said. "As I recall, they had apple pie that was out of this world."

Freeman settled himself at the nearest table to Lane and Kent. It was a good place to keep an eye on them. Straker was watching the crowd.

"Don't mind my friend, Lois. She's from Metropolis'," Lane mimicked at her partner.

Freeman stifled a grin -- it wasn't polite to get caught eavesdropping.

"You were coming off a little... 'intense.'," Kent said.

"Clark, intensity might be a crime in Smallville, but in Metropolis, it's a survival skill."

Kent had the good sense to keep quiet as Lane put her cell phone on the red vinyl covered table.

"All right. Four hours in City Hall. What do we know?" Lane continued.

"We know that in twenty years, there were no permits and no citations on the Irig property," Kent stated.

Freeman already knew that officially there was nothing of interest to the EPA or any other federal agency on the Irig farm. Irig had been an honest and careful steward of his land. But there was nothing official about Trask's mission -- assuming Trask was even here in Smallville.

His ruminations were interrupted by the arrival of the waitress with ice water and menus for both tables. He smiled a thank you. Her name tag read 'Maisie'.

"Haven't seen you around here before," Maisie observed.

"Buddy of mine insisted I should start my retirement by seeing the famous Smallville Corn Festival," Freeman told her, putting on an American accent. He'd been told it wasn't too bad.

"Retirement? Shucks, you look like you've got a lot more miles in you," Maisie said with a grin. "Maybe I know your buddy."

Freeman shrugged. "Name of Smith... moved away years ago. But he swears the Smallville Café used to have the best apple pies in all of Kansas."

"We still do," Maisie boasted. "I'll be right back for your order," she added, moving on to the next table. "Clark Kent! Your mom said you were here for the Daily Planet. So this must be Lois."

"How'd you guess?" Lane grumbled.

"I'm Maisie. How's the writing coming? I love to read a good romance novel."

Lois glared at Kent. Freeman couldn't see Kent's expression, but his body language was telling.

"I must have accidentally mentioned it to my mother. She may have..."

"...accidentally told the whole town," Lane completed for him.

"Oh, that's just Smallville for you," Maisie said. "Everybody knows everything about everybody else."

"So why haven't I heard any dirt on Clark?" Lane asked.

"With Clark, what you see is what you get," Maisie said as she handed them menus. "I'll be back in a jif."

Again Freeman stifled a grin. 'What you see is what you get'? Kent was Superman, an alien, so much more than just 'Clark'.

"Ow!" Kent cried out, staring at his finger as a drop of blood appeared. "I'm bleeding."

"Haven't you ever had a paper cut before?" Lane asked.

Freeman held his breath. *Superman* was bleeding. Element 126 was real. It could, and had, negatively affected Kent. And there was no way to tell how long it would last. Maybe it was already too late to save Earth.

Lane didn't look up. "Put it in your mouth, Clark. Suck on it."

Suddenly Lane's cell phone rang. She grabbed it, knocking a glass of ice water over.

"Lois Lane. Mister Irig? Where are you?" Lane practically yelled into her phone.

Freeman could hear Irig's voice through the phone speaker. At least Freeman assumed it was Irig. "I think I'm just outside of Salt Lake City..."

"Salt Lake City?"

"I just got in my Winnebago and decided to go visit my sister. Been on the road so long, hardly know where I am," Irig said. Freeman pulled his own phone out. SHADO had access to technology that civilian companies could only dream about. He tapped in a text message to Straker and then one to his assistant back in Metropolis. Irig's statements hadn't sounded right.

"Mister Irig, I'm going to put you on with Clark Kent," Lane said. She quickly handed the phone over.

"Hello, Wayne. Can you give me a phone number where I can call you back?"

"Can't see one here," Irig said. "I'm at a truck stop."

"What did the EPA guys tell you about the work they're doing on your property?"

"Just that they needed to do some digging."

Once again, Freeman was hit with the feeling that something was seriously off with Irig's response.

"Wayne, is everything okay?" Kent asked.

"There's no problem," Irig insisted. "Looks like somebody else needs this phone now. Goodbye, Clark."

Freeman heard the phone on the other end click.

"Wait! Wayne!" Kent yelled into the dead phone.

"He couldn't wait to get off the line, could he?" Lane commented.

"Wayne's never been much of a talker," Kent said, but he sounded bothered.

"He *said* he was calling from Salt Lake City. But it could have been anywhere," Lane observed.

"You mean like Smallville?"

"Anything's possible."

Freeman's phone chirped and he checked his text messages. 'no rv registered to irig smallville'. Not exactly a surprise, but it confirmed that Irig had lied to Lane and Kent. And chances were very good that if Trask and his people were involved, then Irig hadn't been taken far.

-0-0-0-

"Kent got a paper cut that bled," Freeman told Straker when he caught up with him.

"Which means that someone has some Element 126 around and he was exposed," Straker reasoned aloud.

"Trask?"

Straker shook his head. "I doubt the Kents would be so relaxed if they'd seen Trask around."

Freeman watched the Kents as the three sat on a picnic bench watching Lane canvassing the locals.

"Did the kids come up with anything?" he asked after a moment.

"Sherman is lying through her teeth about the Irig farm being contaminated. She had a fax listing the farm as an EPA site, only Washington has never heard of it, and she was seriously stressed about *something*. Westcott's credentials should have been good enough to get her full cooperation and full access to the site but Sherman denied her access, said it was too dangerous. Westcott also thinks she saw one of Trask's men out there, but she can't be positive."

"And the local law?" Freeman prompted.

Straker shook his head. "Sheriff Harris didn't seem too worried, but she did agree to check things out later today. Apparently Irig is something of a recluse, so him not being seen for weeks at a time wasn't a serious concern until Kent mentioned it, and then Lupinski asked her about him."

Movement at the Kent table caught Freeman's attention. Kent had left the picnic table to walk over to one of the carnival attractions, the one where you swing the hammer, ring the bell, and win a prize. The top level on the bell pole had 'Superman' as the top rank.

Kent swung the hammer, but the ball only went up to 'Better Luck Next Time'.

"That's not good," Straker murmured.

The dance band in the band shell had started a jaunty tune and Kent and Lane joined the dancers. To Freeman's unpracticed eye it looked like the two reporters were at least average dancers and maybe even better than average. The dancing went on until well after dark and the pair looked like they were enjoying themselves.

When the dancing was done, Lane and Kent went back to the hammer and bell. Lane handed a ticket to the barker and Kent swung the hammer. The ball came closer to the top this time. Two more tries and finally the ball hit the bell with a satisfying clang.

The barker held out two prizes for Lane to pick from -- a teddy bear and a Superman doll. After a moment's consideration, Lane chose the teddy bear. Kent seemed surprised by his partner's choice.

"Looks like he's started to recover," Straker said quietly as Kent led Lane into a crowd. Then he nodded toward two grim looking men who looked even more out of place in Smallville than Straker did. The men turned to follow the reporters. "And those look like two of Trask's people."

-O-O-O-

Another long and sleepless night. Straker had called for extra operatives to help with surveillance of both the 'clean-up site' at the Irig farm and the Kent farm. Madison and Lupinski had reported back that the two men watching Lane and Kent at the carnival had followed the reporters to the Kent farm. One had stayed to watch the farm while the other went on to the Irig place. There was still no sign of Irig, but the equipment storage areas and temporary crew quarters were under armed guard. Only, officially, there shouldn't be anything there that needed guarding.

Madison was supposed to look for the Element 126 at the Kent farm after everyone there had gone to bed, but with Trask's man watching, Straker deemed it too great a risk. Freeman hoped that Straker, and his own dreams and memories, were right and Trask wouldn't make his move against Clark Kent until the afternoon and that they'd be in a position to rescue Kent if they needed to.

"Why didn't Wells just tell us we needed to be here now to stop Trask?" Freeman asked. "Why all the complication of grabbing us ten years ago?"

"If that's your only question, you're lucky," Straker commented. "I asked one of the Rokan-Shou scientists about it. His best guess was that at that time I was still 'temporally disjointed' enough from my exposure to a time storm *and* people from the future, that I would have been partially immune to any temporal changes in the event of a problem. Also being a new husband and father, I might be a little more open to his suggestions. But I still don't see how I could be immune to temporal effects that hadn't happened yet."

"Maybe it was that other part that Wells was counting on," Freeman suggested.

"Or maybe he wanted to make sure you were immune then *and* now, sir," Westcott

suggested.

Freeman hadn't even heard her approach. In nightgown and robe and with her hair down, she looked even more like a little kid than she did normally. However, the earpiece half-hiding in her hair belied the impression -- a little.

She didn't seem to be aware of Freeman's visual inspection as she continued. "We know the Rokanni were experimenting with time manipulation, sir, and even though they haven't managed actual time travel..."

"As far as we know," Straker interjected.

"As far as we know," Westcott conceded, "but we do know that others have managed it, including your Mister Wells. Doctor Jackson believes..."

"Ah, Doctor Jackson..." Straker said with a bemused tone. "He sent you along as back up? All I asked for was a couple of FBI types and a sharpshooter."

"Well, SHADO's two most senior officers taking off half-way across the country to track down a renegade military unit didn't exactly thrill the security types. Not to mention the General's wife."

"My beautiful, charming and talented wife is ticked off because I didn't tell her that I knew that the pivotal point in time was so close," Straker said. "She and Ginny Lake are working on plan B. With any luck at all they'll come up with something."

"I thought we didn't have technology that could stop an extinction level event object," Freeman said.

"We don't," Straker agreed. "But we may be able to save something."

"Less than a month," Freeman commented. "Not much time, even with a superman on our side."

Westcott frowned and raised one hand in warning. "Perimeter breach," she murmured.

"Local?" Freeman asked.

Westcott shook her head. "Not unless the locals are in the habit of wearing military issue camouflage fatigues and carrying shotgun mikes."

"Do we know how much he heard?" Straker asked.

"Hard to say, sir," Westcott admitted. "Our perimeter barrier distorts sound waves, so he probably didn't get much until he was close enough to be detected. But what he did pick up was transmitted back to his base."

"The Irig farm?" Straker asked.

"From what we can tell, yes, sir."

"I'd wondered how Trask knew about the asteroid," Straker said with a sigh.

"And now we know," Freeman said.

"And now we know," Straker agreed.

-0-0-0-

It took a long time for Freeman to fall asleep. He knew the perimeter was secure but part of him started with every strange sound. He could hear Straker tossing and turning in his own narrow bed, but Straker had always been a light sleeper. Maybe it was fear of the nightmares he was sure to have that was keeping him from drifting off.

He was with young Ed Straker again and Wells was with them. Freeman wasn't sure of

the location -- maybe Smallville, maybe not. They were standing near a barn.

"And what makes you think I'll go along with your demands that I kill Trask so I can save the world?" Straker was saying.

"I've already shown you what will happen if you don't," Wells said.

"And I'm supposed to simply believe you? How do I know you're not working with the aliens?"

"You know what Trask is capable of," Wells said. "Do you doubt that he will do exactly as I've told you?"

Straker sighed. "I'm simply a soldier, Mister Wells. Not a policeman, lawyer, judge or executioner."

"Pardon me if I don't believe that you are simply a soldier, Commander," Wells said with a sad little smile. "History says you are much more than that."

"And I'm just supposed to take your word for it?"

Wells sighed heavily. "Commander, I had hoped I wouldn't have to..." He stopped to listen. Then Freeman heard it -- voices coming closer. Wells beckoned them to get out of site.

"And you believe everything that panty-waist collaborator says?" Trask was saying.

"I called someone I know over at the NIA," the younger man with him said. "They confirm there is one, maybe two, ELE size objects headed this way. They couldn't confirm that either of them would hit, but their estimates are that we don't have the ability to divert even one of them. But they also said General Zeitlin was planning to contact Superman if the scientists didn't come up with something."

"Superman!" Trask sputtered. "Zeitlin's a damned fool if he thinks Superman's going to do anything but use this as a chance to subjugate us, make us grateful for his beneficence then make himself a king, inviting all his alien compatriots here to lord it over us. And I would rather the damned asteroid kill the whole planet than have a single human being bow down to some freak!"

"But sir..."

"You know what happened to Thompson when he questioned the mission, don't you?" Trask demanded.

"Yes, sir."

Trask and his man disappeared behind the building.

"Thompson?" Straker said, keeping his voice low.

"The civilian assigned to demobilize Bureau 39. His body was found in Hob's Bay."

Freeman could see the indecision in Straker's face. It was obvious to Freeman that Trask was insane -- no reasonable person would condemn the entire world to a horrible death to 'save' it. Straker was dedicated almost to the point of obsession -- at least he sometimes seemed so -- but even on his worst days, he would never put the entire planet at risk to eliminate one lone alien.

"Trask refused a legal order to demobilize his unit?" Straker asked.

Wells nodded.

Resolve settled on Straker's finely honed features. "I'll do it."

"There is a complicating factor," Wells added.

Straker glared at him but the Englishman didn't seem to notice as he continued.

"Trask has in his possession crystals of Element 126. Those crystals must be not allowed to fall in the hands of Superman's enemies, or enemies of Earth."

"And how do you propose we get those crystals away from Trask before he manages to kill your Superman?" Freeman asked.

Wells gave him an enigmatic smile that reminded Freeman of Jackson when he was up to something.

"I'm a time traveler, Colonel Freeman. We'll use time."

-O-O-O-

"Another bad night?" Straker asked over coffee.

"You're telling me that all this doesn't keep you awake at night?"

"I'd be lying if it said it didn't," Straker said.

"Trask has some of that poison. And since we don't have it, I assume we didn't retrieve it."

"I'm not sure what happened to it," Straker admitted.

Freeman had another flash of memory -- Straker pressing the button on the 'time controller' Wells had given him and nothing happening...

Time didn't freeze as Freeman had expected. Straker swore under his breath as he picked up his rifle. As if in slow motion the thrown crystal shattered against an exposed stone. The sparkling pieces fell into the pool below.

"Oh, very brave. And very foolish," Trask told Kent with a sneer as he reholstered his gun. "Now, let's see. Who should go first? You, or the human traitors who have sheltered you all these years?"

Freeman heard Straker give a little snort of annoyance as he raised his rifle to aim. Kent had picked himself from the dirt and charged at Trask, knocking the older man off his feet. But the effort seemed to have taken its toll on Kent. Or it could have been the poison.

"You're right, Superman. I don't need a gun," Trask said, picking himself up. Trask was a trained killer, but Kent was strong and desperate -- and in Straker's line of sight.

Then, Kent managed to knock Trask down in the pool. Sirens were wailing in the distance and getting louder.

"Go ahead. Kill me. I would have killed you," Trask taunted. Kent let go of him and Trask splashed back into the water.

"That's not how I work," Kent said before turning his back on Trask to stagger out of the water.

Several Lowell County sheriff vehicles skidded to a stop in the barn yard. Uniformed officers piled out along with Lane and a couple of civilians.

But Trask wasn't really down. He'd had a small gun hidden somewhere and was aiming it at Kent's exposed back.

"Clark!" Lane screamed.

"Alec?" Straker's voice broke in.

"Wells's little time gizzy didn't work," Freeman said flatly.

"No, it didn't," Straker said.

"And if that poison ends up in the water and Kent is exposed..."

"It could well kill him anyway," Straker completed for him.

"Is that why we're here?" Freeman asked. "To finish what we couldn't do then? We both saw the poison go into the water, but if Earth is to be saved, there can't be poison in the water. And Trask can't get off his shot even though he was too close to miss."

"Exactly."

"So, what's the plan?"

"If we move too quickly, we create an insurmountable paradox. We'll see our past selves. And they might see us."

"And if we move too slowly, we run the risk of Kent getting killed. You didn't answer the question. What's your plan?"

Straker held up his left hand, showing Freeman what he was holding against his palm -- a white electronic device that looked remarkably like the one Wells had given Straker so many years before.

"We have people watching Trask and the Kents," Straker added. "The pond is at the Kent farm. We'll wait for Trask there. I also would rather the senior Kents didn't know we're involved. I'd like to avoid family complications."

Westcott came into the RV. "Trask let Wayne Irig go. His men followed him to the Kent farm. Trask's people have also grabbed Lane and Kent and it now looks like Trask is breaking camp."

"Have Lane or Kent been hurt?" Straker asked.

"Trask bundled Kent into one of the vans and it looks like he intends on taking him with them."

-0-0-0-

Straker and Freeman were in place, hiding in the shadow of the barn when Trask tossed a match onto the trail of gasoline and set fire to the shed where the Kents and Irig were tied up.

They watched as Kent burst from the trailer and extinguished the blaze then went inside to release Trask's captives.

"Clark! Behind you!" Mrs. Kent yelled.

Trask had started for the van but was now returning. From his vantage point, Freeman could see that Trask was holding a green crystal behind his back.

"Don't take another step," Kent warned.

"Fighting words, Mister Kent," Trask sneered. "Or should I call you 'Superman'... A secret identity. Very clever."

"You're going to prison. For murder, kidnapping, for abuse of power," Kent said, determination written across his young face.

"But I'll tell everyone your secret."

"I don't care. This ends now, Trask."

"Agreed. But the question is, for whom?"

It was just like in Freeman's 'dreams'. Déjà vu multiplied a hundred times. Kent moved toward Trask only to find that the other man had element 126 in his possession.

A movement caught Freeman's eye. A man in odd clothes was standing and watching the fight. Freeman didn't recall seeing the man before but he seemed to be cheering Trask on. Then Freeman noticed something in the man's hand -- a small white, familiar device.

Freeman tapped Straker's shoulder and pointed out the man.

"A member of the opposition, no doubt," Straker murmured.

The fight went on as Freeman remembered. Then Kent was down. Trask was ranting. "You think you're better than we humans, don't you? Flying around, oh-so-perfect and superior. But those days are over, aren't they?"

"You're... wrong."

Trask taunted Kent with the green crystal. Freeman could see sweat beading on the younger man's forehead.

"No. You're wrong. It's over, and I have won. This little piece of home is going to be the death of you, Superman."

There were sirens in the distance. Trask placed the poison beside him and started away toward the van.

Then everything *stopped*.

Trask in mid step, the watcher, even Kent. Nothing moved. Even the air was still.

Straker hurried over to the crystal, picked it up and replaced it with a similar green crystal from a bag Freeman hadn't realized Straker had with him. The poisonous rock went in the bag as Straker hurried back to the shelter of the barn.

Then Straker pressed a button and time resumed.

Kent, still on the ground, reached out and picked up the rock. Summoning his waning strength, Kent threw the rock away from himself, toward the pond. The rock shattered into dust, sparkles taken away by the wind and falling into the pond water.

Trask turned back. "Oh, very brave. And very foolish. Now, let's see. Who should go first? You or the human traitors who have sheltered you all these years?"

Kent picked himself off the ground and charged Trask, knocking him off his feet. But the effort seemed too much for Kent and Trask knew it.

"You're right, Superman. I don't need a gun," Trask gloated.

Trask was a highly trained street-fighter. But he wasn't a young man, and Kent, despite being poisoned, still had youth and the strength of desperation on his side. Finally, both men tumbled into the pool.

"Finish him, kid," Freeman urged silently, even though he knew he'd seen this scene before.

"Go ahead. Kill me. I would have killed you," Trask taunted. Kent let go of him and Trask fell back with a splash.

"That's not how I work," Kent said before turning to stagger out of the water.

Several Lowell County sheriff vehicles skidded to a stop in the barn yard. Uniformed

officers piled out along with Lane and a couple of civilians.

But Trask wasn't beaten at all. He pulled out a small gun and aimed it at Kent's back.

"Clark!" Lane screamed.

Sheriff Harris pulled her service revolver. A shot rang out -- or was it two shots? Trask fell back in the water. Lane ran to her partner, embracing him. Harris stared at her revolver as if not quite sure what happened.

"Clark!" Lane screamed.

Straker squeezed off a shot and Trask was down. He disappeared beneath the surface of the water.

Sheriff Harris had her gun out and was looking at it oddly. Freeman wondered if she'd managed to get a shot off as well.

"Gentlemen, I think your job here is done," Wells said. Freeman hadn't heard him approach. "If we stay longer, I fear there may be complications."

"Your device didn't work," Straker said with a glower. He made no move to hand it back to Wells. "Time didn't stop. The poison made it into the water."

"There was interference," Wells said simply. "But I have every faith that the problem has been, or will be, solved in time to save the Earth."

A time door opened. Freeman could see Straker's office on the other side. "It's time to go home, gentlemen," Wells said, waiting.

Straker and Freeman went through the time door. It closed behind Wells.

"We've seen the future," Straker said. "What's to stop us from changing it?"

Wells smiled. "Like SHADO, we have ways to make people forget."

Freeman saw a flash and ...

-0-0-0-

Like so many things SHADO had been involved in over the years, it was in the paper -- but not *all* of it was in the paper. It rarely was.

"And, in the end, Jason Trask's obsession caused him to search for a mystical rock he alone imbued with destructive powers, and to confuse one reporter with the target of his fixation, Superman. He came to see his strange visitor from another planet where he was not, and to see enemies where there were none. It was an obsession that for Jason Trask would prove fatal," Freeman read aloud from the Daily Planet. He and Straker were back in bustle of Metropolis. Freeman, for one, was glad to be back.

"Luckily everything worked out," Straker commented. "General Zeitlin is already planning on how he's going to ask Superman for help on that little problem we know is coming up."

"And the item you retrieved?"

"Research has it in a secure place. Don't want it to fall into the wrong hands," Straker said with a smile. His expression turned more somber. "Some of Trask's people managed to evade us. We'll catch up with them, hopefully before they hurt anyone else."

"But we still don't know what tech they may have gotten away with."

"Very true. Research has been keeping an eye out for unusual technological

breakthroughs that might indicate other-world influences. Of course, someone like Luthor or Wayne would be smart enough to cover their tracks if they were dealing with off-worlders."

"Or time travelers?"

"Exactly. Though I do wonder what Luthor is really up to with building that bunker of his beneath Lex-tower. Can't be because of the asteroid... that wasn't even confirmed until recently. And the level of secrecy around it..."

"Inside information and he doesn't want questions about how he knows?"

"Maybe. Or maybe he's just up to things he doesn't want questions about. And his security is almost as good as ours."

"Speaking of security, we're covered in Smallville," Freeman said. "Since Trask was pretending to be a federal agent, the FBI swooped in, collected all the evidence including the body. The poor sheriff's on tenterhooks right now, but she'll get the news that the investigation's cleared her before the week's out."

"Good. I'd hate to have to try to explain how Trask ended up with two slugs in him," Straker said. "And Harris seems like a good officer." He took a sip of his coffee.

"Do we have any idea why the time device didn't work the first time?" Freeman asked after a moment. The question had bothered him ever since he realized what had happened.

Straker leaned back in his chair. "Virginia thinks there may have been interference from a similar device being used by someone close by. The man in the odd clothes, probably. We managed to get a picture of him, even got his fingerprints, but we haven't been able to identify him. I have a hunch he's a time traveler like Wells, only with a different agenda."

"An anti-Superman agenda?"

"Possibly."

"So, why did the device work this time?"

"Not the same device. The one I had this time was based on alien technology. Not nearly as powerful as the one Turner used... it can only create a time bubble of several seconds, but that's all I needed to make the switch. We figure it used a different frequency and so whatever blocked Wells' device didn't work on ours."

"Hurrah for the aliens then," Freeman said, not bothering to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. There were still unresolved issues with having 'aliens' living on Earth. Having one super-powered one around was only one of the possible issues. But now SHADO had a way of dealing with him, if it needed to.

Only time would tell if they'd ever need to. And time was a lot more complicated, and a lot less forthcoming, than most people knew.

Strange Visitor (from another planet) and *The Green, Green Glow of Home* were written by Bryce Zabel.

Comments and critiques? **Deborah Rorabaugh**