

Superman: Here at the End of All Things

Ruins of Metropolis, Winter, 2022 (present)

And so the world burned.

Kal-el, son of Jor-el, floated above the ruin of the earth. Smoke and flame; fire and death, the blood of humanity soaking the ground, feeding energies the likes Kal had never felt on his adopted planet. Nuclear war was a horrendous, terrible thing to behold. Kal cursed himself. He'd gone away looking for something that was never there, only to return to find his beloved home world ripped by winds and tides and blood.

He wondered if perhaps mankind had finally gone too far, had loosed something. A thing that even he could not detect, let alone fight. In all of his travels, Kal had seen what confounded his mind time and again, a mind not accustomed to pure awe. The creature, Homo-Sapien, was capable of great dignity but equal darkness. Such secondary evil stirred something he wished very much to disregard yet could not: *Primary Evil*. Something old. Older than even his birth planet.

And again, his heart broke as he saw the blood, the burnt bodies, the global

suicide of the humanity that Kal loved with all of his heart. Steel bent and twisted, falling to the ground and to its knees yet again that day. A little god shook the earth with his wailing.

And so the world burned.

"And why is your heart so troubled, Kal of Krypton?"

The voice stirred Kal, his tears stopped, his ears heard.

"Little... *god*."

Kal turned and looked over his left shoulder. Behind him stood the tallest man he had ever seen. Behind this man, the sun split the clouds of dust and destruction and burned out the man's face against it. *Light*. For a moment, Kal saw nothing but light. He stood and turned, for the first time in his adult life forced to look upward to make eye contact.

"Where did you come from," he asked the tall man.

At this, the tall man spread his arms wide, palms opened upward. "Why Kal," he said, "*I came from the sky*. Just like you."

Kal did not flinch. "Who are you?"

The man stepped forward out of the light and smiled. Kal felt his heart skip, though he could not say why.

"My name, " the man said, "is El."

The man turned and walked away; he clasped his hands behind him and spoke as he walked.

"I ask you again, Kal of Krypton: why is your heart so troubled? Did you not expect your humans to end this way?"

A small rage stirred in Kal. "I *loved* them," he said.

"Then, let not your heart be so low! A remnant has been spared."

Kal was in front of the tall man before he could turn back around.

"Where." It was less a question. More a demand.

"Safe."

A small red glow burned deep in Kal's eyes. "I suspect you already know what I'm capable of: *where*."

The tall man called El laughed. He fought but was disarmed by the sound.

"Son of Jor-el! I wish I had known of your people long before I found you. Your kind remind me of a kind here, on this wretched planet." Again, El spread his arms

wide. Kal felt himself losing patience, laughter or otherwise.

He calmed himself instead.

"Please, El; tell me where there are people. How many? Do you know their location?"

"I do. And I will give it to you. But I want something in return."

"Of course you do," Kal said. "Out with it, then."

"I want you to *kill God*."

Kal crossed his arms and for a moment said nothing. El never broke eye contact. Finally, he said, "You're joking."

"Actually, I am," El said. He slapped Kal on the shoulder and turned and walked away. Kal's left eyebrow went up involuntarily: he'd felt the blow.

Iraq, 2003

"Sitrep."

"Area is secure. No trace. No one's here."

"That is all."

"Sir."

The Commanding Officer turned to the civilian men waiting. "All right. For the next 22 hours, this facility is *contained*. My men have been briefed and it is understood to remain *outside* the premises at all times, on guard, no ingress or egress, barring the event of an unforeseen cluster hump, for that time period alone. The proper local authorities have been notified that interference is *severely* prohibited. They understand what 'severely prohibited' means because, despite any language barriers, even a sheep-humping savage knows how guns and rockets work. Do not, and I repeat: *do not* waste our time, gentlemen."

The water sloshed as the men made their way to the tomb. They marveled at the size. The coffin was at least fourteen feet long. Even though they knew what they would find, opening the gargantuan resting place filled them all with dread. What they were doing was beyond mere human right and wrong and each of them knew it, had accepted the fact.

They were toying with things that rendered the prospect of all out nuclear war miniscule in comparison. For their deeds just might blacken the whole of the universe.

And so they took what they came for and set upon a course of destruction.

All of the earth shook that night.

CERN, Late April, 2017

He was a nobody. A glorified janitor in a massive, high-tech, secretive headquarters housing some of the most brilliant scientific minds the world over. He should have gone home an hour earlier. But it had been insisted upon by the highest at the top that all employees attend the ritual.

Though not a religious man himself, he understood at the gut level what was happening: like a family gathered around a Christmas tree for the lighting, something big was about to occur. Something that made everyone very excited. He didn't know why. He didn't care why; he wanted it over so that he could go home and drink the beer that remained in his icebox.

The dance was the weirdest thing to him. He knew it was supposed to symbolize something, but to him it looked mostly like a bunch of idiots twirling

around and sometimes pretending to hump one another, then the sky, then the ground. Suddenly, the dancing stopped. The dancers split into groups. Great, glass panels with funky looking characters etched on them (he'd seen those one night and avoided them; they made his stomach feel peculiar, just being around them) lowered from the ceiling between the groups of dancers.

The dance continued around the glass panels.

At its finale, all the dancers fell on the floor, grouped in patterns that he could see but didn't recognize. The panels rose back up, far above them. Behind the prostrate dancers, the gigantic doors leading into one of the largest colliders began to open. Then behind him and the crowd, another set of doors opened. Big men in very strange clothing carried the biggest coffin he'd ever seen, like ancient guards carrying some kind of royalty, like a pharaoh or something.

They placed the coffin on the floor and the lights went out. Everyone in the room gasped. Then shouts rose up. The collider filled with electricity, like lightning, then a liquid like water suddenly filled it, then there was nothing but light.

And in that light, walking toward them in that light, was something great and terrible to see. Darkness; darkness in the form of man that *swallowed up* the light around it.

The glorified janitor ran for his life as everyone began to go mad. The

sounds he heard were sounds he'd try and fail to forget. He turned once and his hair was shot white in an instant. He had never believed humans could be capable of what those scientists, politicians, Princes, Kings, Queens and accountants were doing to one another, as the black figure towered over them.

He heard the coffin lid thrown open. He ran faster.

Ruins of Metropolis, Winter, 2022 (present)

The winds blew the ash all around them, circling and whirling and ducking; the air was at times hot and other times quite cold. Kal felt a shiver.

"Look, what do you want," he asked.

El smiled. "I want what *you* want, Clark: I want them to flourish. To *evolve* beyond this... this wretched state. They are capable of so much more."

Kal tried to ignore hearing the name his adopted parents had given him. He was more than suspicious of the tall man, yet small hope endured, if El in fact might know where there were people still living.

"I've never seen you before. Exactly when did *you* step into this picture, anyway?"

El found a large chunk of broken concrete and sat down on it. He stared up at the roiling sky full of char and ash, taking his time before speaking. Kal ignored his own impatience. The task was made infinitely more difficult because he could, quite literally, hear the blood of man seeping into the dirt.

Finally, El sighed and said, "I've been away a long time, Kal. Exiled, I guess you could say. Hell, it was my fault, really; I had a vision. An *idea*. For them, these genocidal, pathologically warped yet capable creatures." He turned and looked at Kal, holding his hand up slightly in front of him. "I expected more when I came back, I did. There were others, of course. Others who shared my vision. I left them to take care of things. You can see it didn't quite work."

Kal grabbed El's shirt collar and pulled him to his full height of eight feet. Kal's eyes burned, his voice nearly an octave deeper, resonating in the very ground.

"Two things I really despise: magic and men who convolute with riddles and doublespeak. *Where are the survivors?* You tell me now, this instant, without a single riddle, and *I don't break you.*"

The tall man chuckled. "Would you mind?" He pointed at Kal's hand holding his shirt. Kal released him. "Thank you. You *are* strong, aren't you? Anyway, as I was saying, my plan didn't quite work, now did it? And then I got

word that I would be allowed to return. So I did, only to find my heart torn by their bloody end. I'd lost hope myself. And then," he said, "I found you. Come with me, son of Jor-el. Together we will save what is left of our charges."

El walked away from Kal for about one hundred feet, stopped and turned.

"Come, Kal-el," he pointed downward, "strike the earth here." For a moment, Kal merely stared at the man, more dumbfounded than suspicious.

"Come quickly, now, my friend; we've not much time."

And so Kal floated toward El and dropped to one knee. "You might want to move away for this," he said. El smiled and merely gestured at the ground again. When Kal's fist struck the hardened, scorched earth a shockwave flew away that would have knocked down anyone standing within 50 feet. There was a crack and then the world tumbled away beneath them. Kal hovered as the dust settled, his red cape flowing, twisting and turning in the wind and debris.

"El? Are you down there? Are you all right?"

The baritone voice floated from the underground, the tone pleasant, the timbre soothing, "A bit dusty but otherwise unharmed. Once again, I am impressed, son of Jor-el. Your might is *astounding*."

Kal had never liked flattery. He'd never taken to receiving praise very well. He ignored the words. "Where are they?"

"Down here, of course. Follow me now."

Kal floated slowly downward, blowing dust and debris away with his own lungs.

"You must be *fantastic* at a party," El said. "Now, I must stress again that we haven't much time, Kal."

CERN, Late April, 2017

He looked around the room at the dead. *Acolytes*. Those who had possessed enough vision to see something greater than mere scientific discovery. He hated them. And yet he had always admired their destructive potential, so often masked by the veneer of some rationalized 'greater good,' they so loved to reference. There was a Greater Good, all right. But the tiny, fallen creatures rarely were able to so much as recognize it. The few elect had seen It, had known Its terror. Some had even documented it. A line from a poet floated into his mind, a truth about things few of them understood: "Abashed the Devil stood and saw how *awful* Goodness is."

He knew this to be true. He was the one who had been, was not and yet would be again. He had crowned pharaohs of old and given wisdom to men at

Crete; native tribes the world over had worshiped him, feared him and taken his instruction. So very capable, despite their tiny stature, more than once he had brought them so close, so close to that day, when he had stood again on the earth for the first time in so many ages.

But Goodness, awful and jealous, had ruined those plans, time and again.

Finally, he *was* again.

These resurrection men that called themselves peculiar names and spoke peculiar words had done a magnificent job. He felt stronger than he'd ever been, and no mean strength had preceded. Their technology lacked beauty and did more to ugly the world than transcend it, yet it functioned well. He could go in and out of his body, into their networks, at will and return the same way.

He walked out of the building and stood admiring a statue for a moment. Then he knew it was time to begin, time to raise up a broken, pathetic mankind into something more, something he could actually utilize.

And yet to rebuild, first the universe required an equal payment.

He was that payment.

A small cafe, New York City, Fall, 2021

She'd broken up with her boyfriend that previous night. The asshole didn't like her multi-colored hair that she'd spent a fortune on. He'd said it made her look like a child. So she'd slapped him and walked out. She didn't even miss him already. Guys were everywhere. All she had to do was swing her hair the right direction and her body would do the rest as far as men were concerned. Not even a dime per dozen. Maybe like a nickel. Maybe more like a penny. Whatever.

She sipped her coffee and tapped the table twice with her right hand. A virtual keyboard appeared along with a virtual screen in front of her, some two feet wide. She pulled up her Facebook page. At first, it was the usual crap; people breaking up, dumb friends posting dumb pictures, nothing that got her attention. And then she saw the one headline, "Hackers Break into Government Systems Globally, Nuclear Launch Codes Leaked. President of the United States Issues Statement."

She followed the link and scanned the article. Most of it read like gibberish to her, a lot of political talk she didn't understand. But the message overall was clear enough: "Do not panic."

That made her panic. She followed more links and watched in real time as more and more news outlets fed the stories to the world. World leaders were condemning the actions of the hackers, attempting to sound like they were all

united against these thieves. Even the Pope had issued a statement urging the world not to panic, for a Higher Power would intervene, and so they must all have faith in themselves and wait patiently.

And then for a moment the virtual screen went blank. She tapped the spacebar on the virtual keyboard in front of her over and again, noticing that it was beginning to fade in and out of view.

Then it came back up with one word in massive letters: "WAR" and a video of a mushroom cloud.

People began to scream and run out of the cafe. She sat and watched, ignoring them, waiting for the screen to show something else, something useful. She was frozen in her seat. The screams and yells from the exiting patrons faded. Someone tapped her on the shoulder over and again, finally giving up and running.

And then, finally, she saw it. The word war vanished and in its place was the face of something. Was it a man? She couldn't tell. Its eyes burned into her, bright against the dark outline of the face. The screen went blank again, only to light up again with bright, red words in bold print:

"EVACUATE NEW YORK CITY. MISSILE EN ROUTE. ETA: 2 MINUTES"

She cried out and ran.

She never made it out of the cafe.

Ruins of Metropolis, Winter, 2022 (present)

For two days El helped Kal find all the survivors in Metropolis. Kal knew that El possessed power. There were times when he stood by the tall man and could feel energy radiating from him; energy far more potent than a normal man. His most obvious power, Kal had noticed early on, was charisma. Each time they found another group of survivors, El had them orderly in moments. He'd never seen anything quite like it. As yet, El had not played any other hand concerning what power he might really have. Though it made him reticent to trust the tall man, it had been his interaction with the survivors that won him over.

All told, there were only 33,000 survivors. Before the devastation, Metropolis had been home to millions. Kal pushed back the pain so that he could push on with helping them. Among the survivors had been police, firemen, National Guard and other public organizations. They helped them set up shelters underground, shoring up the tunnels, so that people could avoid radiation in safety and numbers. Water and food would be difficult but they were alive. To what end, Kal couldn't allow himself to think about.

Late in the evening, he found El sitting in a chair far from everyone else. As the people busied themselves, wondering why they were alive and trying to find new ways to survive, Kal walked over and sat next to the tall man. For a while, neither man spoke. Eventually, it was El who asked a question.

"Kal, what if I could tell you who orchestrated this?"

Kal kept himself from his immediate response and simply replied, "How could you possibly know such a thing?"

El chuckled. "Ye of so little faith," he said. "Have we not found every survivor in this poor city, thanks in part to me?"

"Yes," Kal said. "And though I am grateful for your help, I don't know how you knew, I don't know anything more about you than I knew before, other than you seem to have a heart for them."

"I do, indeed," El said. "As to my... well, I'm quite old, you see. Ancient, to put it in modern terms. I know them. I know how humanity thinks, how it operates. I've been around since the beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Of them. Of *us*. Of all of it, Kal. Much like you, I've loved and hated and loved them again for my entire life."

"How do you feel about them right now," Kal asked.

"I've already told you. I want to see them evolve. Beyond this. Into what they were meant to become." El let the words hang in the air. "Now," he said, "you didn't answer my question: what would you do if I could tell you who orchestrated this?"

"I would find him. And he would answer for his crime."

"That's putting it *mildly*, Kal. I can see what is in your eyes, the fire that burns there. Must you still be so diplomatic, even now, *after such wanton destruction?*"

Kal didn't answer. He merely got up and walked away, to gather his own thoughts. He wondered himself at El's last question.

Berlin, Germany, Winter, 2021

As soon as he'd sat on the throne three months prior, all the power he'd needed to set in motion his plan had become his. Getting mankind to war against itself had been easy. The Underworld was mafia. The Overworld followed suit, at times literally, at other times, covertly. By throwing one version in front of the other and giving the appearance of warring against the one, they had been shown long ago how to do anything they wanted, any time they wanted. Money had

always been the secret weapon. Money and their lusts, given to them so freely by his Ancestors.

With a few well-placed catastrophes, the tiny creatures attacked one another magnificently. But there had been one he'd heard of who could possibly stall his role as judgment. Getting rid of him had been much more difficult.

The internet had made that possible. The body the resurrection men had given him was crude in many ways and elegant in others. Being able to travel into the aether and onto their worldwide network had many advantages. So he simply sabotaged every network globally and convinced the scientific elite that the long-awaited asteroid was finally on the way, and there was only one who could possibly stop it. Causing their instruments everywhere to communicate this to them globally he had enjoyed immensely. The humans were clever, but not so clever as they thought. Recalling more ancient cultures and technology, he would never had been able to so easily command such power globally.

Getting this idea to settle properly into the one's head he'd needed gone had been most difficult. For *he* could somehow see past the aether and into the dark void and he could, if such an asteroid existed, likely see the cold object hurtling toward his adopted world. Or, in this case, this superman would know no such thing existed. It would be a problem, but not insurmountable by any means. He had discovered that the *ubermensch* was human and yet was not of *this world* of humans. And yet still, the mighty man *was* human, and he'd known for eons

how to toy with a human. Guilt, rationalizations and emotion.

He caused an outcry over the global networks. From the scientific community all the way to the man on the street, all one voice begging this superman to find out for certain if there was, in fact, an asteroid on the way that could destroy man and the earth. It had been a fascinating experience for him. Their networks had a crude familiarity; a quaint affectation of synthetic consciousness based on very old ideas brought to life by electricity. Among those networks goliath information conservatories reminded him of very old gods. Fatted and lazy, they were easy to infiltrate. Impersonation was even simpler, eventually bringing the entire world to both an online and real crescendo to overwhelm the one who was of another race of humanity. The superman would be powerless thanks to his heart for the fallen race he loved.

And as fast as the superman could travel, it would still give him time. Just long enough to scorch the earth and bring about the change.

Now he began his next task. He reached below the Altar of Zeus and lifted. Like Atlas of legend, he placed the altar, his new throne, on his back and walked toward Pergamum. There he would await the return of the so-called superman and destroy the last serious threat to his reign.

Well, he thought, until the ones in Tartarus awaken. He did not smile at the thought.

Far Away From the Earth, Summer, 2022

He felt the universe shake. Kal swore that everything in the entire, dark void shook. And then he *knew*. And so he turned and he flew. Faster and faster, the void trapping the sound of his screaming as he tried to simply break the laws of space and time.

No matter what, it was too late and Kal knew it. He had rarely been too late. As good as he tried to be, Kal himself understood that below the power beat the heart of a human. He'd never felt alien on Earth. Merely as though he'd moved to another country. Not another *world*. For despite his might, like them, his heart could break and destroy him. His heart was not accustomed to failing them.

But this time. Kal-el, son of Jor-el, fought tears that felt stronger than the weapons he knew his adopted homeworld had turned upon itself.

Kal felt he had failed. *No matter how fast he flew*, he felt that he had failed them.

Ruins of Metropolis, Winter, 2022 (present)

Kal walked back over and sat down next to El.

"Who did this, El? Who did this and why?"

El looked at Kal for a time before he spoke. Kal had never felt a gaze of that kind in his life. Kal suddenly noticed that if he focused *his* vision enough to see through certain solid materials, El simply disappeared from his view entirely. He wondered to himself once again, what could this tall man be hiding? *What is he*, Kal thought.

"Well," El said. He paused and then spoke slowly. "Do you know of the Altar of Zeus?"

"Yes," Kal said. "It's in Berlin. Or whatever is left of Berlin."

"Oh, I assure you, Kal my friend, that portion of Berlin still stands."

"I'm going to assume you're not going to tell me that Zeus is behind this?"

El laughed. Longer, Kal thought, than he should have. "No, but you will find that the one who orchestrated this is powerful. Extremely so, as a matter of fact."

"So, I'll find him in Berlin," Kal said, more a statement than a question.

"No, I didn't say that, Kal-el. I would expect that, by now, that altar is back on the hill on which it belongs."

"Pergamum?"

El's eyebrows shot straight upward. "*Very good*, Kal-el. Yes, Pergamum, in fact."

Kal stood, fists closed. "Exactly who or what am I going to find at that altar?"

"Oh, it only became an altar, Kal. It is a throne, in fact. And what you will find seated upon it is anger, pride, arrogance, power, strength, size, hubris and malice, personified. He is not what he was before. But he is now again and I suggest that you prepare yourself for him. This will not be an easy task."

"What is his name," Kal asked.

"You know, this is the part where I'm forced to say that he has *many* names. But I'll tell you his true name, friend Kal-el: his name is the One Who Rebels." El paused and leaned forward, looking deep into Kal's eyes again. "One more time, I want to tell you that this won't be easy."

Small rocks around Kal-el floated into the air. Dust and debris began to circle him. His red cape, darkened with blood and soot, flapped with what almost looked like sentience. "I certainly hope it won't, El."

Kal heard El laughing and clapping his hands, despite already being miles away from him.

Palais Coburg Hotel, Ruins of Venice, Italy Fall, 2022

The President of the United States found himself in a position he'd never encountered: *silenced*. The men in the room, world leaders, financial giants, and religious leaders—powers from around the globe—had made it clear from the outset of the meeting that the United States' usefulness had run its course.

At the moment, Russia and Great Britain were essentially dictating the fate of the world from that point on. The President had heard such rumors before. He had never been *completely* in the know. His job had been simple: facilitate global change. From the first shout the day he was elected, he'd known that this was his real job, aside from golfing and glad-handing American media. But he remained shocked to see that the power of The United States of America had diminished to errand boy. A part of him smiled at this, despite the loss of his own power at the moment.

The Prince of Wales declared that the West should immediately seize the ruins of the Middle East. Once and for all, the entirety of the cradles of civilization should belong to Western interests. To the President's surprise, it was unanimous. Then, the question of the one that they'd awakened came up. His destruction had been utterly necessary. Now that the Destroyer had done his job, his elimination would also be utterly necessary.

"What about Superman," asked the German chancellor. "He's the only thing on this planet that has a chance of killing that monstrous golem we built; especially considering what we shoved into it."

"Superman can likely do it, but convincing him."

"*Will be easy,*" the President spoke up, against what he'd been told. "All you have to do is wait until he sees it all, then tell him who did it."

No one in the room said a word for several minutes.

"Make the call, Barry."

The President of the United States pulled out a phone that accessed one of the few remaining global communication networks.

Descending Upon Pergamum, Turkey, Winter, 2022

(present)

The first thing that Kal noticed was that the man on the throne was massive. At least eighteen feet tall, if not more, Kal couldn't tell because he was sitting. The second thing that he noticed was that the giant was smiling at him.

He hit the giant hard enough that he should have gone flying for miles. Instead, the giant merely fell off the throne backwards, laughing the entire time.

"Yes!" the giant yelled. "The rumors are true. You *are* a superman!"

Kal shook it off and hurtled toward the giant again, intending to break his laughing jaw. His fist was caught easily inside the huge hand of the man on the throne.

Kal looked at the man's massive hands, then his face. "You're not human," he said.

"You are also perceptive, little one."

Kal forced his hand from the giant's own and clocked him in the jaw. The giant dropped him. "I mean, you're synthetic. That's not *flesh*."

"Again perceptive, little one." The giant was massaging his chin.

Kal stood looking up at the giant. He could have hovered and looked him in

the eye but he preferred seeming to be the one being deferential. He could tell already that this gigantic creature's hubris was astounding, as was his strength. He'd need to be smarter about him, despite the rage burning inside of him for what this monster had done to mankind.

"Before we begin," Kal said, "*who are you? Do you have a name?*"

"I have so *many*, little one!"

"This I've heard already, giant. *Give me a name.*"

"I'll do no such thing, little one. But I will *gladly* take your challenge."

Before the giant could finish speaking, Kal was some distance away. He was talking to himself as he planned the move, he could let go, be at his full strength. This one would not break like glass. He couldn't help but smile at this, as he so rarely was allowed to truly *let go* on his beloved planet. So many could die if he did. The giant had made a mistake in giving him the perfect opportunity.

In less than a split second he was on the giant again, hitting him in the chest so hard that the ground shook and rubble rolled down the hill away from the Altar of Zeus. Had anyone been nearby they'd have thought the sky had just cracked from the shockwave and sound wave.

Before the giant could get off the ground, Kal had his left leg. He whirled the giant into the air, flew upward to over one hundred feet and cast down the giant upon its own throne.

The Altar of Zeus did not budge. Kal dove straight down and pounded the giant over and over, until there was synthetic blood to be seen. For good measure, he shoved the giant's head onto the arm of its throne. He then backed up and hovered in front of the bloodied monster.

For a moment, the giant said nothing, other than a few groans escaping its synthetic lungs. Then, the giant looked straight at Kal, wiped the blood from his jaw and said:

“That all you got, little one?”

Before Kal could move, the giant hit him so hard that he ended up on the island of Ikaria in Greece. He sat up and shook his head, somewhat stunned. Mostly stunned by the power of this enemy. But he knew *everything* had a weakness. He sat for a moment and tried to keep the rage inside of him from overwhelming him. If he did so, the fight was lost. He'd never faced anything so formidable since having to deal with Darkseid. This giant already had more physical strength than the ruler of Apokolips. He wondered what other power he possessed.

“Well, Clark,” he said to himself out loud, “*every* man needs his ass kicked once in a blue moon. Guess it's my turn.”

And so Kal-el, son of Jor-el, Clark Kent of Earth, Superman of legend, flew upwards, ever upwards, to find the sun. Always it had been the source of his

physical might, his power. His spiritual strength had always been the heart that the Goodness of his adopted mother and father---and in fact all of Smallville---had instilled in him.

And yet, there was something more. He'd always known this. As he bathed in the brilliant light of the sun, a vision of El appeared in his mind, the sun like a halo behind the tall man. He had lived on the Earth for a short time in Eternity but enough time on the planet to know that his physicality was not his true strength. It had always been his heart.

It had always been his heart. His spiritual strength. The Thing that gave his physical might purpose. Otherwise, he was nothing but another myth, another tiny god humanity would honor with statues and stories and, if mankind survived its own demise, into the future. He had nothing he could recall from the tiny gods of man that gave him the desire to become nothing more than myth and legend. No matter whether he died on that day against the giant, it would be his heart that drove him, for there was nothing else.

There was nothing else.

And so Kal-el, Superman, determined in his heart to throw down the giant that sat on a very old throne.

When he flew this fast, Kal thought he could see Time. A physical Thing. A creature that roamed the Earth, seeking whom it would devour. He swore he could see it, Time, and so he flew even faster.

The giant did not know what happened. Kal-el, son of Jor-el, son of Krypton and son to the two best people he'd ever known, had no fear. He would defeat the giant.

He grabbed the giant by the throat and tossed him like a ragdoll. The giant laughed at him. Kal moved faster than human eyes could see, looking for a weakness in the giant's physiology. The giant caught him.

"You are not so fast, little one. And yet I am impressed!"

The words almost came out a whisper, "Shut up," Kal said.

The giant howled in glee as Kal lifted the Altar of Zeus onto his own, tiny back. Kal-el looked at the giant and said, "Your throne," he said, "is broken."

Superman cracked the Altar of Zeus as though it had been a concrete pretzel that had corroded to Swiss cheese.

The giant's smile was wiped from his face. He rushed toward Kal, who was ready for him. Kal merely stepped aside, pushing the giant into the ground. Kal then took the giant by the hair and broke the side of the hill of Pergamum, upon which the Altar had been seated. He pushed the giant down the hill, shoving his face deeper and deeper into the hard Earth, until he came to where he had thrown

down the altar.

"Why!" Kal shouted. "WHY DID YOU KILL THEM ALL?"

The sound of Superman's voice shook the Earth, cracked the pillars of the ruins left from the war, more monuments to Greek and Roman culture there than either in Greece or Italy, and made the giant's synthetic ears bleed synthetic blood.

And yet the prideful giant laughed. "It seems," the giant chuckled, "that I have underestimated you, *ubermensch!* For thou art truly mighty! But you have no hope. I killed them because it is time they *evolved!* It is time they became more than what they are. I would make them mine, I would build them up, *I would take them with me to defeat Eternity!*" The giant looked into Kal's eyes. "What will you do now, little one? Wilt thou kill me? You do have such power, do you not?"

Kal had his fist cocked for the full speech the giant had given him. He knew what the giant meant: would he kill him? Would he kill the architect of mankind's doom?

He decided.

The giant's eyes rolled back into its head.

Kal screamed in pain as a laser cut into his back. For a moment he was in shock because his back was actually being cut into. He whirled and the beam cut into his chest.

"Did you think I would not know your weakness," the giant howled. "For all of your power, your weakness is the essence of your own home planet? Human weakness, no matter where it's from, is always the same."

But Kal was too focused, too angry to be broken by his weakness. In just minutes, he had already crippled the satellite sending out the beam embedded with Kryptonian physical data. He didn't just cripple it, he brought it back to Pergamum with him. He dropped it to the ground next to the giant.

"You've killed the people I loved," Kal said. "You've destroyed everything that I have fought for my entire life. *You deserve nothing more than to be beaten until you cannot function.* GIVE ME ANOTHER REASON I SHOULD, PLEASE."

The giant laughed. "You know so little, *little god,*" he said.

Kal remembered someone else calling him little god. But he'd had enough.

"I see the rage in your eyes, Kryptonian. Kill me. I will rise again. I am the one who was, was not and yet will be again. You cannot end what I have begun."

"I don't have to *kill you,* giant. In fact, *I won't.*" Kal knelt down next to the giant's head. "Three of the enemies of my home world are in an eternal prison. A hypercube of misery that they deserved. Do you care to wager a guess what I intend to do with you?"

The giant coughed a synthetic cough. "You won't be given the chance," he said. His eyes rolled back into his head again.

Kal was suddenly blinded by light. He turned and could not look into the glow for a moment. Holding his hands up and adjusting his vision precisely, a human form began to appear. He knew the form immediately.

"El," he said to himself. He had to admit, he wasn't surprised.

"That's enough, child!" El said.

Kal watched as the giant began to curl up into the fetal position and began to wail out in pain.

"You have done enough here, child. You have broken my throne! You have taken it on yourself to usurp that throne and found yourself defeated by my servant."

Kal's ears heard 'my servant' and his stomach sank. He wasn't certain why.

"I have sent my servant and thou has been cast down, child."

Kal watched as the one he'd known as El merely pointed his hands toward the broken altar, the Altar of Zeus, and the ruins lifted and rose toward the hill of Pergamum. The Altar began piecing itself back together and then light flooded the altar and a larger throne took the place of the smaller that the giant had sat upon. Kal watched as the Altar sat down, fully reconstructed and larger than ever, on the hill, overlooking the land, the waters, the Earth---scorched though it was.

Then he watched as El grew from his height of around eight feet to over

twenty. He watched as light, blinding light, began to give way to darkness.

Kal floated down before the throne of El.

"*Who are you,*" Kal asked anew.

For a moment, El neither looked at nor responded to Kal. Then, he turned his head and smiled widely at him. "Kal-el, son of Jor-el," he said, gesturing his arms wide. "You have done for me what I simply did not want to do for myself. That boy, *that child* you threw down---I simply didn't want to be bothered. Thank you, Kal-el. Do you know what you've done for your beloved humanity?"

Kal said nothing.

"Well, what you have done is what you've always wanted to see: the condition of humanity improve! *I will elevate them. I will give them all they desire!* In return, they will be my children, my servants, my acolytes. They will be *mine.*"

Kal let El's words echo into the air. Then, to his own surprise, he smiled before he spoke.

"El," he said, "tell me something."

"*Anything,*" El said. Kal heard hubris veiled thinly by magnanimity.

"Why is it that every single dictator paints himself as the benefactor of all mankind? You're all the same. It seems it doesn't matter if you're a tiny, little human or a tiny, overconfident god."

He flew toward El.

He never made it to within ten feet. He was thrown back by a force he'd never encountered. As powerful as he was, the blow nearly killed him instantly. He fell to the ground coughing blood.

"Kal, Clark, *Superman*," El said. "you fit a purpose. A design. A *task*. And now, your time and purpose have run out. You are indeed mighty among men. Yet just as all men, you have forgotten what preceded you. Powers that built the entire universe. Powers that warred and fought before your Kryptonian ancestors had even been born."

Kal watched as the very Earth opened next to him. A crack that ran so deep not even he could see the bottom.

"Like my child, like many of my children, your time has come; for I have seen that you, Kal-el, are not sinless. You are a savior for a broken world. I will unite this world in a way that you cannot. But your vision and mine are not the same. You have no more use here. I accuse thee and cast thee down, as so many of my children have been."

Kal-el suddenly found himself bound in unbreakable chains. From there, he remembered little. There was darkness and fire, smoke and misery, a prison, bigger than anything he'd ever seen. Monsters and horrible things appeared in his vision.

And then Kal-el of Krypton knew no more.

Tartarus, Spring, 2022

Deep below the foundations of the Earth, in a gargantuan prison the Greeks called Tartarus, Kal-el languished. He had screamed, fought to break free from the chains. He had wept, again and again, at the fate of man and that he had found himself powerless against a force he'd never encountered. A force that had effortlessly manipulated him into setting up a throne of what Kal could only see as pure, Primary Evil onto the Earth.

He cried out again and again, "*What have I done?*"

Things of darkness and perdition laughed at him day and night. But for him, there was no night or day. There was perpetual darkness. His own. Hatred burned into his very heart, the thing he valued above all else. He wanted to give into it, wanted to give into the hatred and the rage. He wanted to find a way to kill the one he had set on the throne in Pergamum. *He wanted to murder that creature in cold blood.*

He could not help but notice that the things in the darkness did not taunt him while he harbored that hatred, when he let it rise and fester. As time wore on,

as he thought of what El could be doing to the fragile remnants of humanity, his resolve began to flee him. Darkness crept into Kal-el's heart.

He would find a way to break the chains. He would find the power he needed to murder the one on the throne. This he almost swore in his heart.

And yet that same broken heart would not allow the oath. He hated himself for this. Superman wept again, far below the Foundations of the Earth.

After over a month in chains, Kal-el saw someone walking toward him. Someone very large. At that moment, he didn't care.

"For Pete's sake," Kal said, "where the hell are you giant people coming from?"

To his surprise, he heard a laugh. A genuine one. The voice that spoke was baritone, amiable and terrifying.

"You are not wrong, Kal-el, in part."

"I know you won't tell me," Kal said, "but who are you?"

The huge man came into view. Kal figured around twenty feet in height, at least. Just like El, he sensed power. Power beyond his own, without question. He did not feel humbled.

"My name," the man said, "is Michael."

Just the fact that the man had told him his name without complication

changed something in Kal's heart. His hatred seemed more distant in that same moment. "What do you want of me, Michael? I am ruined."

The man laughed. Kal felt it radiated from likely the very opposite place that El's laughter had come from. The man did not have charisma; he had genuineness. Despite his best efforts against it, Kal felt that he trusted the man implicitly already.

"Kal, are you all right?"

"Well," Kal said, "I'm worse for wear. That's for certain, Michael. I have failed man. I know I'm not precisely one of them, but I loved them. And I failed them."

Michael smiled. "Yes, you did, Kal-el. You failed spectacularly."

"Not precisely what I needed," Kal said. He looked away from the brightness of Michael.

"Do not think that your power is given you for nothing, Kal. Do not think that you are perfect. You are not eternal, Kal-el, Superman. Every mortal must meet and face his demise." Michael stood and walked away a few feet.

"I have failures. I have brothers I have lost." Michael said. He continued, "my power does not *guarantee* victory." Michael turned and looked Kal in the eyes and finished by saying, "It is only my faith that will cement victory."

"Faith?"

"Yes. You understand faith. We have seen your faith in humanity. It is a faith we share, a faith we have fought toward since time immemorial. Your faith in them does not go unnoticed. It has been counted and weighed."

"Wait," Kal said, "this is a bit, well, *esoteric* to me, Michael. What exactly are you talking about? *What* faith? Faith in *what*? Who have you fought with? And whom do you fight with?"

Michael walked back over to Kal-el and knelt down. He looked at the chains and they broke like paper machete.

"Holy *shit*," Kal said.

"Kal, vulgarity does not suit you."

This time Kal-el laughed.

"Why don't you come with me, Kal-el? My forces could use one of your might. And your questions you will find answered."

"Your 'forces'," Kal said.

"Yes, my forces. My armies. We set out very soon and we could use such might as yours. And you could use our tutelage."

Kal-el raised his left eyebrow. "Ok. What are your forces setting out to do, exactly?"

"Dethrone the one you set upon the Altar of Zeus. It is time that petulant one met with his final lesson."

Kal rubbed his wrists. Then he stood. "Michael, you're twenty-two feet tall and clearly bulletproof. If you have an army, I'm guessing that they're all about your size, yes?"

"That is correct," Michael said.

"Then what in heaven's name do you need me for?"

"We need your *heart*, Kal-el." Michael said, "But first, even beneath the blood and grit, I find your attire no longer suits you."

"It's dark," Kal said. "The world seemed to stop liking the bright colors, so I dulled it a bit."

"The world knows thee not, Kal-el, not as we do." Michael put his massive hand on Kal's shoulder. "This does not suit you. Let me correct this before we are off."

"Ok," Kal said. He didn't so much feel anything but he knew that something happened in that moment. He wondered again, between Michael and El, what sort of powers were they? And why had he never seen them before, he wondered.

When he looked down again, his clothing shone brighter than he'd ever seen, even the day he'd discovered the Kryptonian relic and had put it on, never

mind it didn't even remotely fit him on that day so long ago. The blues, the reds and yellow; the *depth* and richness of the colors, he'd forgotten them himself.

Hope. When he looked down at his own clothing, Kal-el, Superman, *saw hope*. His hatred had left him. The darkness that had tried to force itself on him had fled. Kal-el was not disappointed to find that it had fled.

"Are you ready, Kal-el?"

But Kal-el was already in the clouds. He swore he could feel the man called Michael smiling as he caught up.

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Dothan, Alabama, 2015

