



Adventure Comics Annual #1

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The man who was not Morgan Edge watched the scenes of panic and destruction on the monitor from his darkened office, his face expressionless.

“This is Cat Grant for WGBS, broadcasting live from City of Tomorrow Plaza where a monster is on a rampage...” the slightly tawdry-looking blonde correspondent assumed just the right look of concern and fearlessness, while behind her could be seen the rubble of Metropolis Memorial Hospital’s quarantine wing and the recently-arrived emergency vehicles. “With me here is Chief of Staff, Dr. Leibowitz. Doctor, can you tell our viewers just exactly what happened here a few minutes ago?”

The camera panned to a slightly disheveled older man with a pinched-face. “It seems that a patient who had been exposed to concentrated and toxic amounts of the substance known as Green Kryptonite has undergone some sort of violent and possibly permanent transformation.”

“This is the same deadly substance from Superman’s long-destroyed homeworld of Krypton?” asked Cat Grant, glancing back at the camera then holding her microphone to Dr. Leibowitz.

“Yes, the very same. Normally, it isn’t harmful to humans, but this patient’s exposure was extraordinary... every cell in his body has become saturated with the Green K radiation, giving him freakish strength and abilities. He’s become a kind of Kryptonite *man*,” the doctor shook his head, as if stunned by his own words and their implication.

“Are you suggesting the person who caused all this destruction, who even now the police have cornered a few streets away— this Kryptonite Man, did you say?— is capable of killing Superman?”

The doctor seemed dismayed by the question, but Cat Grant wouldn’t let him off the hook. The camera closed in on him, focusing tightly on his sweaty face.

“God help us, but... *yes*.”

Turning from the monitor, the alien consciousness that was not Morgan Edge steepled his fingers and considered this unforeseen turn of events. It was only a matter of time before the Kryptonian arrived to contain this

mutant menace, but perhaps this was something more than even Superman had bargained for? He had always known the elimination of Superman would be the key to his subjugating this world, but so much the better if it was done for him.

He subvocalized a command, and thin steel cables snaked out from the ceiling, latching onto flesh-colored ports on his forehead, neck, chest and fingertips. Data and energy streamed into him and flowed out of him in equal parts, jerking the frail bag of flesh, and instantly he was everywhere in Metropolis: unobtrusively looking down from communications satellites, secretly peeking out from iPods and cell-phones, listening on police band radios...

This situation required close scrutiny, and Brainiac could afford to bide his time...

Adventure Comics

Annual #1: "Action and Adventure, Part Two!"

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Jimmy Olsen dashed across the Avenue of Tomorrow and slid into the shelter of an overturned police car, clutching his camera tightly to his chest. The enraged Kryptonite Man stood in a rubble-strewn intersection, taking barrage after barrage of gunfire from Metropolis' finest and shrugging it off— those bullets that didn't melt into slag before contact with his cracked, molten hide.

Only moments ago, this showcase thoroughfare was the thriving heart of the city's science and technology district, where the innovative and brilliant came to live and work, and where the rich and frivolous came to shop and play. Now it looked like a war zone, with a swath of destruction leading backwards towards Metropolis Memorial. The Kryptonite Man seemed to be furious— and unstoppable. He had stomped down

the posh Avenue of Tomorrow, so engorged with power that he had swollen to twice his size. His skin was a cracked and craggy shell of a sickly green, oozing rivulets of darker emerald between the fissures. Waves of energy poured off of him, melting the asphalt beneath his feet.

Leaning over the edge of the car, Jimmy's camera flashed. He got shot after shot of the monster tearing a street lamp from its mooring and swinging it like a club, scattering the policemen, before the metal of the pole itself melted in his radioactive grip.

Man-o-man, the Chief is going to love these pics, Jimmy thought. Unbidden, he remembered the advice poor Mr. Lytener had given him the other day to go out and look for some *"real action and adventure."* Well, he sure found it today!

The piteous roar of the Kryptonite Man caused Jimmy's hair to practically stand on end. The monster had spotted him behind the car and lumbered towards him. Jimmy lingered for one last shot ("Here's your front page picture tomorrow, Mr. White!") then threw himself out of the way just as the Kryptonite Man barreled through it, sending flaming scraps of metal in all directions.

Jimmy rolled on the ground, cradling his camera protectively. The air around him became superheated and he felt nauseous this close to the monster. He turned onto his back, gazing up in horror at the Kryptonite Man.

"Jimmmmyyyy...?"

Jimmy blinked, shielding his eyes. The tortured features looming over him were familiar to him, though much changed.

"Mr. Lytener?"

The monster that had once been Edward Lytener— amateur tennis champion, college valedictorian, and two-time recipient of the Seigel Prize— flinched at the mention of his name, then his features twisted. Snarling, he raised a hand to smash downwards upon the helpless young photographer...

Jimmy was jerked suddenly out of harm's way, the blow falling on empty concrete. The Kryptonite Man roared his frustration and rage at the red and blue streak that had whisked away his target.

"Suuuupermaaaaannnn!"

"You cut it pretty close that time, pal," Jimmy Olsen said as Superman sat him down on a low roof across the street, removed from immediate danger.

"You're safe here, Jimmy," Superman told him, already moving away to confront the Kryptonite Man. "Keep back. I may not be able to protect you if this gets out of hand."

"That monster's a friend of mine, Superman. His name is Edward Lytenger, and I don't think he knows what he's doing!"

Superman gave his pal a pained smile and stepped off into the air. "I know. I'll do my best to bring him in without hurting him."

"Just be careful, Superman!" Jimmy called after him, unslinging his camera again and positioning himself to photograph the coming encounter.

So it was that Jimmy had a ringside seat for the epic clash that ensued below him. The published pictures would show the Man of Steel bravely facing the poisonous green monstrosity. Titanic blows would be caught in mid-swing. The fury of the Kryptonite Man would stare back at tomorrow's readers of the *Daily Planet*, as would the determined expression of Superman. The pictures would show Superman's heat-vision slashing ineffectually across the hardened hide of his foe, and the Kryptonite Man slamming his enormous radioactive fists down upon a staggering Superman.

Through it all, Jimmy Olsen bore witness, taking the pictures people would need to see. He captured the pounding blows that could have leveled cities, the startling power and rage of two combatants evenly matched— though not for long. The Green K radiation quickly sapped the strength of the Man of Steel, and every second he grew weaker while the Kryptonite Man seemed to get stronger and stronger...

With growing horror, Jimmy realized Superman could not win this fight. Every blow Superman landed was weaker than the one he threw. His movements become sluggish, leaden. The Kryptonite Man assailed him without mercy, latching onto him and howling an inarticulate rage into Superman's face.

Sirens wailed as a team of S.T.A.R. Labs vans screeched into City of Tomorrow Plaza, and Lois Lane jumped from one of them before it had even come to a halt.

"Edward, stop! You're killing him!"

The Kryptonite Man turned his misshapen head towards her. She could come no closer because of the radiation that was pouring off of him in waves, but her cry had pierced the violent imperative that was driving him to murder. In his hands, he gripped the dazed Man of Steel. Superman's head hung limply, his eyelids twitching spasmodically.

"Loissss...?"

The Kryptonite Man dropped Superman, devoting all his attention to Lois Lane. He didn't even notice the men in white containment suits flooding out of the S.T.A.R. Labs vans, hefting bulky rifle-cannons. He stomped forward, reaching out for the object of his desire. "Loooooissss...!"

From his vantage point on the nearby rooftop, Jimmy Olsen saw it all play out. He saw the panic on her face, even as she held her ground, distracting the monster. He saw the unmoving body of Superman on a mound of rubble. And he watched as the Lab techs took position and fired their specialized weapons at the Kryptonite Man. Beams of laser-focused concentrated red sunlight snaked out and enmeshed the Kryptonite Man, snaring him in a crimson net. The monster roared, instinctively straining against his luminescent bonds. The sound was fearful, but the techs kept the beams trained on him. The effect was immediate: the cage of red sunlight began to neutralize the Green K radiation, causing the Kryptonite Man to stagger and fall. His bloated body began to contract and the sickly green rays emanating from him dimmed. One by one the beams from the red sun cannons failed, their charges spent, and the scarlet cage faded. But it had done its job: the Kryptonite Man, now a mass of

grey organic/mineral matter, slumped to the ground next to Superman and did not move.

Lois made a move to rush forward, but someone grabbed her arm, holding her back.

“Lois, no,” said a familiar voice. “There’s no telling what kind of radiation is lingering over there.”

Lois Lane looked up into the earnest, honest and bespectacled face of Clark Kent— for once at the scene of the action— and nodded. She knew he was right. She watched as the S.T.A.R. Lab techs rushed forward, Geiger Counters clattering, onto the battlefield. But her eyes were drawn towards the unmoving body of the Man of Steel, sprawled out next to the one enemy he could not stop...

Perhaps without realizing she was doing it, Lois clung to Clark, taking comfort in his solid bulk— which she had never noticed before— as they watched the clean-up team sweep the area with radiation dampners.

Jimmy joined them moments later, his camera dangling from the strap around his neck. “Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane,” the cub reporter’s eyes were red-rimmed. “Superman doesn’t look so good. He doesn’t even look like he’s breathing.”

Techs had crowded the bodies of the fallen combatants, scanning them with sensitive instrumentation. The trio of *Daily Planet* staffers watched anxiously, straining to hear or see what was going on.

“Superman’ll be fine, Jim,” Clark told them, with a certainty no one else shared. “It’s poor Edward I’m most concerned about. He didn’t deserve this.”

Hearing something in his voice, Lois turned her head up to him. “You can’t blame yourself for what happened to him, Clark. That’s not your fault.”

“He was covering my story, Lois.” There was an involuntary twitch in Clark’s jaw. “If I hadn’t shirked my responsibility, if I had been there instead—.”

“Then it would have been you lying on the ground right now,” Lois said with a stern expression, belied by the fierce grip she maintained on him.

She may have been about to say more, but at that moment, the Lab techs began loading the bodies into the back of newly-arrived containment vehicles. Lois broke away from Clark and Jimmy, but was halted by the Lab tech that seemed to be giving all the orders.

“Where are you taking them?” Lois demanded, craning her neck to watch as the bodies of Superman and the Kryptonite Man disappeared into the vehicles.

The Lab tech lifted the visor of his containment suit, one hand still upraised to keep Lois back.

“We’re taking them back to headquarters, Ms. Lane, please—”

“On whose authority? These men need medical attention!”

“On the authority of Mayor Irons and Director Ellsworth,” the Lab tech told her placatingly. “Only S.T.A.R. Labs has the resources and technology to save them now...”

Far below the streets of Metropolis, beneath even the world-renowned technological marvel that was its sewer system, lay a labyrinth of tunnels and chambers unknown to any of the surface world. There, malignant spirits of ancient malevolence laid cruel plans and practiced a depth of malice no human mind could fathom. They had come here from a dark place of fire and sin, when worlds were at war and gods strode the Earth. They had been left behind, unbeknownst to all, a cancer growing beneath the world’s skin. And they had a mission.

“Simyan, come here!”

The bestial face of the ape-like figure twisted into a snarl at the summons. He’d been performing a vivisection upon a human worker-drone who had wandered into their hidden lair, and he always hated when his

work was interrupted. Annoyed, Simyan loped across the blood-smeared floor, scattering the sycophantic sleezoids who bowed and scraped any time he or his haughty comrade crossed their paths. Simyan had asked many times if he could exterminate the lot of them, but Mokkari had stayed his hand: the sleezoids had inhabited this ancient place for tens of thousands of years— when it had still been called Muri-as— and might yet point them to the rest of the Four Cities, and the object of their mission.

Mokkari waited for him by a mammoth view screen, arms crossed over his chest. His pasty, yellowed skin was marked by black swirls but his eyes flared with a pale corpse-light. “Behold my handy work.” He gestured grandiosely at the image on the view screen, displaying the carnage on the City of Tomorrow Plaza.

Simyan stared for a long moment at the display, his head cocked, in his usual hunched posture. His eyes narrowed. “The Kryptonian is dead?”

“We dare not believe it,” Mokkari simpered, pleased with himself immensely. “Yet he lays defeated through our mischief!”

Simyan grunted in no small satisfaction. “The experiment you sabotaged. The Radion-infused Green Kryptonite...?”

“A single atom of it!” Mokkari crowed, holding fingers to his blackened lips, as if tasting it. “That’s all it took. That fool Abernathy never knew the difference, I’m sure, until it mutated the Kryptonite. What could kill a god could surely slay a Superman!”

Simyan’s lips curled around yellowing fangs and a deep rumbling laugh bubbled up from his broad chest.

“Perhaps it is time to make ourselves known,” Mokkari considered the close-up of Superman’s prone form. “Perhaps it is time to make Metropolis fear the Evil Factory...?”

“What the devil is the Evil Factory?”

Perry White emerged from his office, glaring around his newsroom for enlightenment. He didn't ask if they had heard the weird announcement, transmitted only moments ago, on all radio frequencies: if they hadn't yet, they soon would.

He was met with blank faces and puzzled looks. Only Lois Lane looked up from her keyboard, an expression on her face as if she were trying to recall something.

"Isn't that the name of Buck Fiddy's new CD?" Steve Lombard asked, glancing over from his usual station near the doughnut table.

While Perry snarled a response to the sportswriter, Lois wracked her brain... Why did that sound familiar? She had definitely heard that term before, and something about it raised the small hairs at the back of her neck.

"Whoever they are, they just took responsibility for killing Superman," Perry growled to the assemblage. "They claim to have sabotaged Dr. Abernathy's experiment, thereby creating the Kryptonite Man, and also promise to spread terror and mayhem throughout the city. I want to know if these people are for real, and I want to know yesterday!"

Lois tapped the end of her pencil on her desktop, and glanced over at Clark's desk, hoping that he could help jog her memory, but he wasn't there. Instead, Lois went to her laptop and connected to the anonymous and untraceable audio broadcast Perry had just heard: *"Your precious Kryptonian savior is dead, slain at the hands of the monster created by our sabotage! This is only the beginning of our symphony of terror. At the Evil Factory, we are fashioning this world's doom, from blood and horror and unadulterated malice. Lay you down to sleep, Metropolis, and wake to havoc and mayhem! We are the Evil Factory, and soon the smoke of our furnaces will darken your skies..."*

Well, they were mistaken about one thing, at least: Superman was not dead. She had just gotten off the phone with Professor Hamilton, who reported Superman was actually recovering quickly from his battle with the Kryptonite Man— no, with Edward Lytner. She refused to think of him as if he was some new supervillain. Edward hadn't asked for what had happened to him, and he had been her friend; he deserved more

than to be reduced to a label.

Your precious Kryptonian savior is dead... The words preyed on Lois' mind. What if she was the one who was mistaken and S.T.A.R. Labs was covering up Superman's death to avoid a worldwide panic...? What if the Evil Factory had indeed accomplished what Nekron, Luthor and Darkseid—! She snapped her fingers, realizing what she had been trying to remember. She rifled through her drawers for an old notepad from years ago, flipping through its pages until she found what she was looking for. Before the Apokolips invasion, she had been investigating the criminal organization called Intergang, and certain unsolved crimes of a particularly vicious nature. One of her sources had mentioned an 'Evil Factory' but it was a lead she had never investigated— and had forgotten about in the momentous events that soon followed. What did it mean that they had now resurfaced? Did they, like Intergang, indeed have ties to the Dark Gods of Apokolips?

Could Superman really be dead?

Lois could no longer sit at her desk. Slapping her laptop shut and shoving it into its case, she collected her note pad, her phone and her purse and headed for the elevators. She was Lois Lane. She was going to get the story.

Superman stood over the examination table, his Superman-Robot atop it and connected to an array of instruments and equipment. He had Reflecto's "S" shield chest-plate open, and was using his heat-vision to solder connections back into place. Across from him, wearing over-sized goggles, Professor Hamilton observed and monitored the instruments, his eyes wide as he took it all in.

"Amazing," the scientist kept saying. Superman had long-promised his friend a glimpse at Kryptonian technology, but Hamilton had never imagined how complex— how far advanced!— it was. It made even his most accomplished achievements pale by comparison. "This is light years beyond even Dr. Magnus' work on robotics... And you built this yourself?"

Finishing his work, Superman looked up, removing his own visor. "Not

exactly. My father— my birth-father, that is— was Krypton’s greatest scientist. I’m just following his notes. And actually, Reflecto here has an A.I. core much like Will Magnus’ Responsometer.”

“Marvelous,” Hamilton breathed, peering closely into the exposed chest cavity of alien circuits, servos and lighted cables.

Superman nodded, glancing over his handiwork. Reflecto had worked very well, but had taken a great deal of punishment from his fight with the Kryptonite Man, had, in fact, been badly damaged and almost completely drained of his solar charge. Working in secret with Professor Hamilton at his lab, Superman had been able to repair most of the damage, but there was no telling what effect Reflecto’s long-term exposure to the Green K radiation would have: Superman’s x-ray vision lingered on the discolored Inertron core and he thought, with some concern, that he would just have to wait until he got Reflecto back to the Fortress’s solar-chargers and powered him up again to find out.

The one thing that was certain was that the robot had lasted a great deal longer than Superman himself would have against the Kryptonite Man, and for that Superman was at least content. Long enough for S.T.A.R. to show up with the red sun cannons he had provided them, though the rare cartridges were now all spent. It seemed to Superman, that he had once again avoided a lethal encounter... Could this had been what the Legion of Super-Heroes had warned him about?

“You know, the world thinks you’re dead,” Professor Hamilton’s voice interrupted his thoughts. “Something called the Evil Factory has taken credit for orchestrating your demise. There was a broadcast earlier, but I figured you were too distracted to catch it.”

Superman raised an eyebrow. The Evil Factory? He had never heard of them, but they sounded like trouble.

“Confirms our suspicion of sabotage,” Superman said grimly. “But I’ll have to deal with them later. Any progress on Mr. Lytener?”

Professor Hamilton led Superman out of the secret lab and into the main complex, talking as they went. Heads turned and Superman noted the expressions of relief at the sight of him, and he smiled reassuringly back

at folks.

“Mr. Lytener’s condition is essentially unchanged,” Hamilton told him, navigating the various halls and lifts, accessing certain areas by pressing his palm to a scanner plate. “The exposure to the red sunlight has rendered him inert, but he remains in his transformed state and unresponsive.”

“Has he regained consciousness at all?”

“No. Nor are we detecting anything like conventional brain activity. It’s less a coma than a state of suspended animation.”

“Emil, what are the chances that we can reverse what’s happened to Edward?”

Professor Hamilton paused outside the door to a secured lab, turning to look back at the Man of Steel. “None, Superman. Edward Lytener has been changed on a molecular level. The man he was a few days ago no longer exists. He doesn’t even have blood anymore, but some form of Kryptonite sludge. Frankly, we can’t even figure out why he’s still alive...”

Inside the lab, doctors, scientists and nurses bustled around a vertically-inclined bed, to which was strapped the piteously-misshapen form of Edward Lytener. Wires were connected to his head, chest and limbs, and monitors recorded data that the brightest minds in the world were still struggling to interpret. No longer did his body glow a bright green, but was a sickly greenish-grey hue. Detectors in the room reported no trace of Greed K radiation.

“You’re alive...”

The words, spoken in subdued relief, came from Lois Lane. She was at Edward’s bedside, but had turned when Superman entered the lab. Superman noted her heartbeat— loud and quickened— and that she had made a move to come towards him, but had checked herself. He was surprised by his own reaction— disappointment that she had not rushed into his arms.

"I'm fine, Lois," he joined her at Lytener's bedside as Professor Hamilton went to consult a colleague. "Reports of my demise were premature."

"The Evil Factory," she nodded. "Any idea what that might be?"

"I was going to ask you the same question,"

She nodded again, her hands on her hips. "I may have a source, but I'll have to track him down. It's been a few years."

"Be careful, Lois. These people play for keeps."

She followed his gaze back to the unresponsive form before them. "I was hoping to get a lead from whatever they did to poor Edward. I thought maybe his doctors could isolate what caused his transformation— *Superman, what's wrong?*"

Without warning, he slumped. A wave of nausea washed over him and his knees buckled. He would have gone down if not for Lois, who caught him, though staggered under his weight. The world spun and he felt weak. From somewhere close, a monitor-alarm beeped rapidly and he heard the tell-tale *scritch-scratch* of radiation detectors coming to life.

Through drooping eyelids, the world was colored in a dim green glow.

"Get him away from Lytener...!" came Professor Hamilton's frantic cry. "His Kryptonian physiognomy must be—."

There was a violent crash and the sounds of panic all around him. Disoriented, Superman could only let his body go limp and allow himself to be dragged away. He had never felt so helpless...

A roar of rage filled his ears, and it seemed the whole world shook then went to black. After mad brief seconds of insensibility, he realized he was lying on the floor of the lab, Lois Lane's arms still wrapped around him, her body shielding his. She was looking backward, and cried: "No, Edward, stay back!"

The small distance that Lois had dragged him from the revived Kryptonite Man restored him a little, and vision swam back into focus. The lab

was in chaos, equipment overturned and personnel scattered or cowering. In the middle of it all, Edward Lytener had swelled into a monstrous size again, the air around him distorted by the radiation his mutated body was generating.

“Loooiissss...?”

Bright emerald eyes flared at the sight of her. But before the Kryptonite Man could get any closer, twin beams of heat vision slammed into him. And this time it was the real deal, not Reflecto’s much diluted solar-lasers. The Kryptonite Man was sent crashing across the lab, its rocky hide deeply scored.

Gently but firmly, Superman picked Lois off of him, and climbed to his feet. Vertigo gripped him, and every limb felt drained— but at this proximity at least he could stand. His eyes still glowed red, but he wasn’t sure if he had the energy for another blast.

The Kryptonite Man wasn’t down for long. He emerged from a pile of smashed equipment, and between the crags of his skin there boiled trails of noxious green, smeared across his hide.

“Looiiiissssss miiiiinnne!” Its bellow was plaintive and terrifying at the same time.

Moved by whatever she heard in Lytener’s cry, Lois took a step forward, only to encounter Superman’s outflung arm, keeping her back.

“Get out of here, Lois. This thing wants you.”

“Maybe I can get through to him, get him to calm down,” she protested, desperately wanting to reach out to Edward Lytener, the man who had been her friend.

With a single-minded intensity, the Kryptonite Man lunged forward. He was met again by Superman’s heat vision, only this time the Kryptonite Man held his ground, the beams searing into his chest with much less effect than before. The monster actually took another step closer, shrugging off the heat vision. Superman switched gears. Taking a deep breath, he exhaled an icy hurricane-force wind at his enemy. But the Kryptonite

Man had gotten close enough that the Green K radiation was starting to affect the Man of Steel. Into the gale, the Kryptonite Man advanced, and with each step, Superman grew weaker and the Kryptonite Man stronger.

“Looooiiiiissss... ” Deadly hands outstretched, greedily reaching for Superman and the woman he shielded.

Abandoning his assault, Superman staggered backward a step, and went down on one knee, the nausea washing over him again. The Kryptonite Man loomed over him, pulsing with power, his mouth opening in inarticulate desire. He was inches away...

Lois screamed.

With all the might he still possessed, Superman slammed his fists into the floor! The blow rocked the room— indeed, the whole building. The Kryptonite Man teetered, arms pinwheeling for balance. Beneath his feet, cracks spider-webbed, the very concrete disintegrating under his bulk. Abruptly, it gave way, the entire floor crumbled, collapsing into a gaping pit through which the Kryptonite Man fell with a piteous cry of frustration. Dazed, Superman slid towards the crumbling hole, but Lois grabbed his arm in both hands.

“Hang on, I’ve got you!”

Below them, the Kryptonite Man tumbled, his momentum and density— and seething radiation— sending him crashing through the next floor down, and the next, and the next...

Clinging to Lois’ hand, Superman looked up at her, and couldn’t help but smile at her own bemused expression at the juxtaposition of their usual circumstance.

“Lois,” he flung his other arm over the edge, already starting to feel better away from the influence of the Kryptonite Man.

“Yeah,” she grunted, anchoring him with all her weight.

“I can fly, remember?”

He emerged from the hole he had made under his own power, carrying her upright with him. He set her on her feet.

“I remember. And you’re welcome,” Her lopsided smile quickly faded however; she held up his hand in both of hers, turning it over so he could see the thin green tracery of veins. It was visible on his neck and face as well.

“Kryptonite poisoning,” she bit her lower lip. “Edward doesn’t have to hit you to kill you. You have to get to safety.”

Though buoyed by her concern, he shook his head. “That’s not what I do, Lois. There are innocent lives at stake...” He trailed off. In the back of his head, all this time, he still struggled with the import of the Legion’s solemn visit to honor him. Was he on the verge of some titanic struggle? Was he going to die? What he suddenly realized, what crystallized for him in the soulful, urgent pleading of Lois’ sapphire eyes, was that it didn’t matter. He was going to do what he had to do, no matter the consequences— and that was always going to be the case. He was Superman, he could no less.

It felt like a heavy burden had lifted from his chest. Now he could take the comfort and solace from the Legion’s visit that it was meant to impart. They were his friends and knew him better than just about anybody; they knew he would work it out.

With a warm smile, he pulled away from Lois, her hands falling out of his. He allowed himself a lingering glance, then kicked off and dove down the hole after the Kryptonite Man and whatever destiny awaited him.

Lois was stunned, certain he was going to his death. She whirled, searching for Professor Hamilton. She found him, dusting off his Hawaiian shirt and straightening his glasses, looking befuddled.

“We have to help him!”

The scientist blinked. “I’m sorry, Ms. Lane, there’s nothing we can do. S.T.A.R. Labs was never prepared for a rampaging...” his words trailed

off, as something occurred to him. He hesitated a moment, then snapped his fingers. "I have an idea! But I'll need your help..."

Liberated by his epiphany, Superman flew downwards into a battle he could not win but had to fight.

Son, problems should be solved by those who see them, his Pa had always said. That had always seemed like good advice to Clark.

Alarms sounded and emergency floodlights came on throughout the building as the aura of the Kryptonite Man wreaked havoc with S.T.A.R.'s environmental systems, and already Superman could feel the tell-tale demand on his own life-force. Up ahead was a green glow that could only be the monster.

Throwing caution to the winds, he poured on the speed, diving fists first straight at his lethal target, hitting the stunned Kryptonite Man as fast and as hard as he could. He drove his enemy down again, this time through floors of reinforced concrete and steel, into subterranean levels. The impact resounded throughout every inch of Superman's body, setting fire to every nerve and muscle he had, but he pressed on, gritting his teeth against the agony, pummeling continually at the Kryptonite Man with both fists.

After only seconds, even his prodigious strength faltered. He barely even registered that the two of them had hit a floor they did not have the momentum to crash through. Superman rolled, exhausted from his exertions and radiation-sick. The hands that held his head off the floor were etched in dark green veins, and his tired arms shook uncontrollably. The Kryptonite Man was in little better shape, reeling from the punishment Superman had inflicted upon him. But he was regaining his bearings, and soon would be upon the ailing Man of Steel.

As he had never known anyone else with such a propensity for throwing herself into danger, long ago— almost since the day he had met her!— Superman had attuned his hearing to pick up Lois' voice, just in case. No matter how softly spoken, or how many continents separated them, he could always pick out the distinct pitch and timbre, separating it from all

the other noise and distraction when she called for him.

“Superman,” her voice rang, clear as a clarion in his pounding head. “If you can hear me, get the Kryptonite Man to Sublevel 4! Professor Hamilton has a plan...!”

A quick glance up at the wall markings showed that he was on Sublevel 3, apparently in an empty storage bay. Close, but it might as well have been across the planet: almost every ounce of energy was sapped from him, and through bleary eyes, he watched the Kryptonite Man advancing angrily towards him. The world spun crazily, but somehow Superman managed to stagger to his feet; this close to the Kryptonite Man, that was all he was capable of.

“Loooiisss minnnnee...!” the monster roared, reaching out to throttle his foe.

A wild idea occurred then to Superman, which— if it worked— just might kill him as easily as if he stood there waiting for death to come.

“Wrong, Edward,” he grimaced, holding one hand up to shield his eyes from the intense emerald glow of his enemy. “Lois was never yours. And after what you’ve done, she will never love you. You’ve lost her forever.”

Somewhere deep inside the Kryptonite Man, Edward Lytner howled in anguish, hearing a truth in those words he could not bear to face. It wasn’t his fault. He never asked to be what he had become. He lashed out in all his rage and regret and frustration, his mighty backhanded blow sending Superman skidding across the floor of the room and slamming so hard against the wall it cracked. It wasn’t fair. He had had such a bright future, such a lot of promise... He had imagined a happy life with a beautiful woman, a successful career, adoring children... It had all been taken away from him. Stolen in the blink of an eye.

Superman’s calculated gamble had paid off: the blow the Kryptonite Man had been goaded into delivering had knocked the Man of Steel just far enough away for him to rally every last ounce of his strength. He rose off the floor, putting further distance between them, and unleashed a blast of heat vision that cost him everything he had left.

It missed the Kryptonite Man— but then, it hadn't been aimed at him. The superhot beams struck the floor *beneath* the monster, instantly vaporizing a large patch of it, the patch upon which the monster stood. With a furious scream, the Kryptonite Man fell through the floor once more, into Sublevel 4, and into the trap Professor Hamilton had sprung.

Superman watched the scene unfold through his x-ray vision. The monster landed in a room plated in lead, and otherwise empty but for a dozen evenly-placed dish-shaped radiation collectors on the walls. As soon as the Kryptonite Man hit the floor, the collectors flared to life, bathing the entire chamber in green, leaking up through the hole in the floor of the Sublevel Superman was in, forcing him to retreat to the farthest corner of the empty storage bay. But he couldn't look away: he owed that much to Edward Lytener.

Superman saw instantly what Professor Hamilton had done. The room into which they had lured the Kryptonite Man must have been the original containment chamber for Dr. Abernathy's K-Generator prototype. But instead of using chunks of Green K to power it, the Kryptonite Man became a living battery. The collectors obscured him in a penumbra of emerald radiance. Every instrument on the power grid suddenly flared to life, whether their circuit was closed or not: light and power flooded first the building, then the length of the Avenue of Tomorrow, then all of the City of Tomorrow Plaza and Greater Metropolis itself. An outside observer might have called the scintillating lightshow a thing of beauty, but all Superman could hear was the heartbreaking shriek of the man trapped in the middle of it.

The shriek became a pitiful moan soon enough, and not long after that, the Kryptonite Man collapsed, spent and drained of the horrible radiation that had so transformed him. His grey misshapen form had been secured under quarantine and transported to the damaged medical wing, where the best doctors and scientists in the world would work to cure him of his condition.

"He'll never be the same again, will he?" Lois Lane had asked Professor Hamilton days later, when Edward Lytener still had not regained

consciousness.

The scientist shook his head sadly and answered, "The best we can hope for is he will never be a *menace* again."

Lois had wiped away a tear at the pronouncement, and pressed her hand against the cylinder in which her friend lay, so much like a coffin. "Rest easy, Edward."

Superman had needed long hours of solar therapy at the Fortress after his near-fatal encounter with the Kryptonite Man, using Clark Kent's illness as an excuse to be away. And it gave him some time to think about the events of recent days. This wasn't over. The Kryptonite Man may have been defeated, but the Evil Factory was still out there, and he had a feeling they were going to be a whole lot more trouble. They had gotten to S.T.A.R. Labs, had all but declared war against him and Metropolis, and when the time came, he would have to face them. But that time was not yet.

When he did return, gliding quietly into Metropolis at night, he noticed Lois out on the balcony of her apartment, as if waiting for him.

"Beautiful night," she said wistfully as he floated down beside her, his cape gently settling around him.

"They're all beautiful, Lois, if you look at them the right way."

She seemed to take some comfort in his softly-spoken words. "Not every day is about action and adventure, huh?"

He smiled along with her. "Not every day," he conceded.

She turned back to gaze out over the city, and he came up beside her. For the space of a few perfect minutes, they stood in silence, simply enjoying the serenity of the moment, and each others' company. Then she said, "I think I'm in love with you."

She did not turn and look at him. She just let her naked emotion speak for itself.

The surprising declaration put him at a loss— not the least because of the sudden, fierce joy that arose within him in answer. With a sure and startling clarity, he realized he loved her too, and probably had from the day he first met her. He wanted to respond in kind, to take her into his arms and fly off into the night with her. He yearned for the thing he had been denying himself for so long... for what every other man yearned...

Every other *man*...

The warning of the Legion came back to him like a blast of icy air: *Which is why we have appeared at this pivotal moment, on the eve of your greatest struggles...*

He had no idea what was coming, but he was confident he would face it bravely and without reservation. But if anything ever happened to her because of him, if she was ever hurt by his enemies... He could not stand the horror of that thought: what he loved most, harmed simply because what she meant to him...?

Were the things given to every other man destined forever to be out of his reach? Realization dawned, and he knew what he had to do. Suddenly, a gulf was yawning between him and the person in the world he wanted most to be close to, and he had never felt so lonely in his life.

He had fought gods and demons and monsters. What he did now was harder than all of that combined.

“Lois, I’m... I’m sorry, but...”

He experienced her through every sense, heard her sped-up heartbeat, saw the flush of blood on her skin, and smelled the salt of tears in her eyes... Every instinct he had cried out for him to reach out to her, to enfold her within his arms. He did not trust himself to say anymore, certain that she would hear the lie. Instead, he did the only thing he could do: he rose into the air and flew away.

But that did not keep him from hearing the sound of her weeping.

EPILOGUE

The ancient planet Almerac had been laid to waste.

The sleek, black starships attacked without warning, filling the skies of the technologically advanced world, their beams of destruction lancing down to destroy whole cities. Almerac was a proud military society, had spent centuries striking fear into neighboring solar systems, and their conquests were many and total. But they lasted barely a day against this invader. Led by their warrior-queen, the Almeracians launched a fierce counter-assault. Last scion of the Blood Royale, a product of centuries of selective breeding and eugenic engineering, Maxima fought in the vanguard against the invaders, covering herself in blood and glory even after her consort Ultraa had fallen in disgrace. For a brief moment, it looked as if the fury of the queen— with her vast psionic abilities and super-strength— would overcome and save her empire... But then the invaders unleashed their greatest weapon.

A warrior without equal, she cut through fleets of battleships as easily as battalions of palace guards, leaving only bodies and blossoming fireballs in her wake. She met the queen herself on the field of battle outside the grandiose Palace Royal, and threw her down, claiming the victory in the name of her lord and master, the hitherto unseen commander of the invasion.

In the smoking ruins of Tae Tamrac, the capital city, the new rulers planted their flag: a field of black, unrelieved but for a distinctive red slash. Shocktroopers entered the city, marching inexorably along its colonnaded streets and occupying the Palace Royale.

In chains, Maxima waited in what had once been her throne room, but was now a bombed-out ruin littered with bodies. She was in shock— how quickly her world had fallen!— though an undiminished rage smoldered within her. Behind her, the warrior that had defeated her held her chains in one hand, and the flag of the conqueror in the other.

“He comes,” said the invader, with something like religious fanaticism in her voice.

At the far end of the throne room hall, the heavy doors were flung wide, and in walked one man, one figure of imposing height and girth, one

dread conqueror clad in burnished black armor adorned with spikes, and on his chest, the same slashing zig-zag that was on his flag. The metallic clang of his boot-heels on the marble floor was all Maxima heard as he approached, as all the universe fell away but this one man. She had been raised from birth in the House of the Blood Royale, was trained to rule and no one was more haughty or proud. But here...! Here was one with power and command in every step! No guards accompanied him—none, she could tell, were needed. The conqueror was unbridled confidence and arrogance. The overweening fact of his existence was his uncontested supremacy...!

The conqueror halted before her, towering over her. He looked down upon her and spoke from the depths of a hideous spiked helm. “Almerac is mine. All that you have is mine. If you are fortunate, I will allow you to join my harem. If you do not please me, you shall battle in the arena for my amusement.”

Maxima could only gape up at him, all of her defiance sapped by his sheer oppressive aura. Behind her, the warrior who had beaten her, the one who carried his flag, pressed down on her, causing her knees to buckle.

“Yes,” hissed the conqueror, and red, malevolent eyes flared from the shadows of the helm. “That is all that is left you, isn’t it? Kneel before me as my Tigress bids you, kneel as so many worlds and empires already have,” She was forced to her knees, her head hanging low, overcome with despair. “Kneel as so many will after you, as my iron fist closes around the universe. *Kneel before Zod...!*”

Not The End... !

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Food for the mind