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Krypton: centuries ago

A young scientist faces the disembodied faces of the science council of Krypton.

"Members of the science council, I am sure that you can see the advantages of this technology. Our society has just emerged from the bloody conflict of the clone wars. This "Birthing Matrix" will allow Kryptonians to subtly modify our genetic structure so that our DNA will no longer be viable for such purposes, to safeguard our race from ever falling victim to the avarice of those who would seek to usurp the power that only Rao can give."

The floating heads spoke in unison.

"We shall consider your proposal Yar-vee."

The science council, slow to think, was swift to action. After a year of consideration, birthing matrixes were implemented and for centuries Krypton's sons and daughters were born through science.

Earth: Now

"He's been gone for days. No one has seen him." Lois tapped her pencil absent-mindedly on the edge of Perry's desk. "I've even contacted the Justice League; they haven't had any contact from him. No one has since that fight with that guy over Metropolis"

"Is your concern as a reporter or something else, Lane?" Perry tried another headline on the paper mock up he was looking at.

"Both."

"Then your editor says, there's obviously a story here, Superman just doesn't disappear for days unless something's up. Try his last known contact, go from there. Your friend says, he's been gone before Lois, he's Superman, he deals with things that, lets face it is often beyond our scope. Don't worry, he'll be fine, he is Superman after all."

Lois went back to her desk picked up her phone and began to dial the number for Captain Maggie Sawyer, she stopped, hung up the phone and started for the elevator. This would be better in person.

Fortress of Solitude: Antarctic

Dr Xadu stared up at the large smooth crystal face of the monitor. An earthling calling himself the Calculator shimmered into view.

"Who is this? How did you get this connection?"

"Hello good sir. My name is Dr. Xadu, I would like for you to put the word out through your community, that I have something that those of your kind would be very interested in."

"My kind?"

"I believe on earth the term is criminals. To continue my research it has become clear to me that I will need to, how would you say, go underground? And for that I will need large sums of money."

"And that interests me how?"

"I am willing to sell my prototype to the highest bidder. I will send you the time, location and specs for the prototype over this connection. You should be receiving it now."

The Calculator looked down at his screen and his mouth fell open. "Is this for real"?

"I assure you it is Sir. There will be full demonstration at the time and place of the auction."

"Of course there will be a small fee for my brokering this event."

"Of course. End connection"

The fortress computers terminated the connection scrambling the signal so it couldn't be traced back.

Dr. Xadu touched a crystal on the console and the monitor showed a shadowy figure in a large tank of fluid.

"Computer, progress report on subject Kon-1"

"Subject life processes functioning at one hundred percent. DNA degradation at zero.

Excellent, begin termination protocol."

"Unable to comply."

Dr. Xadu had reprogrammed the fortress' computer systems, not all of the systems were as subservient as others.

Dr Xadu shifted one of the crystals in the console.

"Yes Dr. Xadu, installing termination code now."

Krypton: sixteen months before its inevitable destruction

Lara rubbed her swollen belly as she padded softly into the lab where her husband worked over meticulous calculations.

Jor-El looked up from his work. "How's my own little birthing matrix"?

"Stop it", Lara chided. "I can't believe that I let you talk me into this. You know the council will be furious if they find out."

"They won't find out Lara, not until I'm ready for them to know. This is the only way to show them that to ensure the future of the Kryptonian race we must abandon the birthing matrix technology. It's stripping Kryptonians of their genetic stability."

"I know your research husband. Kryptonian's genetic viability is slowly declining, in generations you predict that Kryptonians will revert back to stone carrying magthors."

Jor-El laughed and patted his wife's stomach. "Well, that's an oversimplification, but basically yes."
Jor-El turned back to his work.

Lara laid a hand on his shoulder. "Is there something wrong?"

"If these calculations are correct, Krypton's bio-diversity is the least of our problems. Please sit down Lara, these readings are from Krypton's core."

Earth: Now

A pool stick hit hard against the pool table snapping it in half. Slam Bradley brandished the broken end at the men that slunk back from the detective, back into the smoke filled shadows of the bar. Bradley grabbed the one nearest him and threw him hard face down onto the green, beer stained cloth of the pool table. He leaned down into the guy's ear.

"There's talk, Mousey, something's going down, what have you got for me?"

"I got nothing Slam, honest I ain't heard nothing."

"Too late to get smart with me mousey." Slam swung the pool stick behind him and held it out like a sword, the guy who was sneaking up behind him stopped. "Take one more step Dufus and I put this through your ears."

Dufus slunk back into the shadows. "I didn't do nuthin."

Slam grabbed mousey by the collar and slammed the broken cue down on the table. Mousey was a mere slip of a man and easily man-handled by Detective Slam Bradley, who nearly threw him out the back door of the bar. He forced him into the corner made by the trash dumpster and the wall. Slam blocked his exit.

"Look, I know that there's been stuff on the computer, something about a meeting and I want to know what it is, you get me?"

"Allz I know is, only high rollers need apply, something big is going up for sale."

Slam, reached into the pocket of his trench coat. "Who can tell me more mousey?"

Mousey's eye's grew wide as he watched Sam's hand. "Talk to guy named Dobson, over at the old Willis building."

Sam drew his hand out of his pocket and shoved several wadded up bills at Mousey. "Here, take this get cleaned up a little." Sam turned down the alley and started to walk away, "and for Gods-sake eat something" he called back. Mousey was already gone, probably back in the bar buying more liquor.

The Fortress of Solitude: Antarctic

He could barely move. The kryptonian drugs that Dr. Xadu pumped into him were keeping him sedated. The red radiation had stopped giving his body time to heal before the next round of [bold]test[/bold]. His head lolled to the side. He could see Kara on the table a few feet away. The drugs muddled his mind. He had to do something. He mustered enough concentration to send a blast of heat vision at the thin line of tubing that ran down into her arm.

Metropolis Police Department SCU

"It's not really my beat Lane." Maggie Sawyer sat down behind her desk. "I asked Superman in as more of a consultant for Slam Bradley. I just

figured he had taken care of the perp and dropped him off at star labs as usual."

"Do you know where I can get in touch with Bradley?" Lois asked.

"Hold on I'll make a call." Maggie picked up the phone as Lois gazed out the window scanning for any sign of the familiar red and blue blur. It wasn't like him to just take off, especially now that they had solidified their relationship. He would have gotten word to her some way.

Maggie hung up the phone. "Bradley just reported in. He's chasing down a lead."

"Where?"

"You know I can't tell you that Lois. You're going to run right down there and interfere with a police investigation. Besides like I told you, not my beat. Maybe somebody at Bradley's precinct would be more forthcoming, you know they've always been jealous of the media attention SCU gets, the right sort of attention might make them sing like a bird."

"Thanks Maggie, I owe you one." Lois called back as she left Sawyers office.

Why do they have to always hide out in the creepy old abandoned buildings, Bradley thought. There was a time when the criminal element had some class. Not like it is nowadays, when any street thug with a gun and low morals can peddle enough crack to make himself the self proclaimed king of the street corner. They'd buy a big car and, what was it they called it, "Pump" it out and still live in some ramshackle apartment. Been in this game too long when the criminals have changed and you haven't Slam. That's what his partner told him. The next week he was caught in hail of gun-fire from one of those "pumped' out cars and died in the street. Slam decided then he would get out of the business. That was three years ago.

The front door hadn't been used in years, Slam gave it a shove with his shoulder, the door creaked in protest and gave way. Inside was dark; the

air was fetid like meat that had been left sitting out for days. Slam fished around in his pocket for his pen light and twisted the head on the barrel. The little beam of light bored through the darkness. He was in the lobby. On the walls hung pictures of what the facility had looked like in it's prime, still a dump, thought Bradley. Guess when the surrounding area started to go downhill people cared less and less what kinds of pests they had to put up with.

"Hey! Dobson! You in here!" Slam called out, and rubbed his thumb along the handle of his gun. A little snub nose .38. The guys gave him a hard time over it, when they all had their "glock and speils" as Slam called them. But he would tell them, doesn't matter what you use boys, if you're good enough whoever you're shooting at is still dead.

Slam opened another door; it led out onto a platform with a ladder that led down onto a large warehouse floor. He slashed the beam around the darkness. Several large barrels and what looked like truck parts lay around the floor. He thought he heard something skitter in the corner above him. He swung the light around; there was nothing there but cob-webs.

Then he heard it, it started slowly like air leaking from a tire. A voice raspy, like talking through gravel.

"Why are you here?"

Slam drew his gun and pointed it with the beam of light as he swept it around the room.

"I'm looking for Robert Dobson."

"Why?"

Slam continued to sweep the room with the light as he slowly descended the stairs, taking care to not make any sound on the rough metal grating.

"I was told he would have some information I need."

"What kind of information?"

Slam continued swinging the light looking for the source of the voice.

"I'm not playing twenty questions with you. I want to talk to Dobson."

Something wet and slimy dropped on Slam's hand, he instinctively shined the light up to the ceiling where the drop had come from. The more insect than human being known as the Hellgramitte dropped from the ceiling. One of the six insect arms that wiggled at his side knocked the gun and the light from Slam's hand. Hellgramitte's human arms grabbed Slam by the shoulders and pulled him toward his face with the large bulbous insect eyes and the pincer like mandibles that sprang from his jaws working in and out like a hungry man licking his lips.

"You are talking to Dobson", he hissed.

"Put me down insect."

"Why should I?"

"So you can stop the bleeding."

"What bleeding?"

Slam Bradley cocked his head back and with all the force he could muster smacked his forehead into Hellgrammites all too human nose. There was a thick wet crunching sound. Hellgramitte dropped Slam and staggered backwards. His human hands covering his nose that was gushing blood while his insect ones waved about at his side.

"You stunobabid, you brode my node!"

Slam picked up his gun and flashlight. "So grow a new one."

"Dats damfibians you bidiot."

Slam grabbed one of Dobsons insect arms and placed the barrel of his gun up against his side where it joined his body. "Bet you could stand to lose a few of these too."

"Whad the hell are youb crady!"

"Police shrink thinks so. Tell me about the buzz on the computer, something big is going down with this Xadu character. What is it?"

"Pidd off I'm not telling you nubbin."

The sound from the little snub nose .38 filled the warehouse and proved to be just as effective as any glock and spiel.

The Fortress of Solitude

The fuzziness was back. There was something there, just beyond his reach, no not reach, which was wrong. His vision, his sight just beyond his sight. Yellow it was yellow. Clearer, now sound, something tinkling in his ear, tap, tap tap, no not tinkling, someone speaking.

"Kal, Kal, Kal,"

His vision cleared; his mind still muddy but focused. Kara was bending over him, calling his name.

"Kara", Superman managed a weak smile and tried to sit up. He was still woozy.

"Careful, I just disconnected the drugs. I don't know how long it took me to come out. I figured you must have zapped the line the drugs were in."

"The IV, yes, I managed to just before I went under." Superman stood to his feet and teetered a little.

Kara caught him.

"Easy", she said, "give the drugs time to wear off."

"No time, Xadu?"

"I don't know, as far I can tell he's not here."

"We have to move Kara, get out of the fortress."

"What? Why?"

A particle beam struck the maid of might in the shoulder spinning her

around to the floor.

A robot guard approached and unleashed another blast toward Kara.

Superman intercepted it, the blast throwing him against the wall.

"Uhgnn, Xadu, reprogrammed fortress for his own use. Be ready for anything." A panel door slid open and four Superman robots walked through.

"Test specimens are awake, breep, initiate Xadu protocol 15. Destroy them."

Kara breathed deeply. "That's not just anything, that's *something*." She sped towards them at a blinding speed; too late to hear Kal's warning cry.

Two of the robots struck Supergirl at the same time, causing her body to be hurled back several hundred feet and into the crystalline wall; shards shattering and flying everywhere.

Superman zipped to the left, having just missed the projectile that one of his robots had thrown at him. It had been too close; there wasn't room for error at this point.

Taking to the air, he glanced over to see Kara rising from the debris. She was tough and he was thankful for that. He dodged another piece of equipment milliseconds before it struck him. This had gone on too long already.

"Initiate *ultimate over-ride*," he called out. "Voice identification; Kal-El. Codeword: Talon."

At once, all four of the robots halted, as if frozen in time.

Supergirl flew up to hover next to her cousin. "Wow, I'm impressed. That was a brilliant idea."

He smiled a sad smile at her. "Wish it had been mine. It had been Batman's idea." The use of past tense still stung as he had said it.

This did not go unnoticed to Kara who cleared her throat. "Come on, let's find the doctor and finish this."

Superman nodded in agreement as they took off.

Dr. Xadu heard the commotion, and cursed in Kryptonian. He had what he needed – a success. But if he couldn't get out of the Fortress with it; everything he had worked for would be for naught. He should have known better; the house of El had always been a stumbling block.

No matter, he thought to himself, he had other tricks up his sleeve. He went to the crystal counsel and began to rearrange several of them rather hurriedly. He just needed enough time to get his project or weapon, depending on who the highest bidder would be, out of harms way.

He could feel the vibration of the complex shift as he finished replacing the last crystal. Now he was in charge of the entire place. He wondered if Kal-El really understood everything that had been given to him. Xadu couldn't imagine that he did, or that he would even know what to do with the power at his fingertips.

"You're both too late," His voice echoed throughout the fortress as he watched them defeat the robots. "You have both given me the tools I need to create the ultimate weapon. How ironic that the House of El will cause the downfall of the planet that its remaining survivors have sworn to protect.

"You're not getting away with this," the voice of Superman shouted as he hovered above his home away from home.

Xadu laughed, the sound bouncing everywhere. "I already have, Kal-El. And now, I'm going to show you a function of this Fortress that your pathetic father was too afraid to show you. A Kryptonian weapon that will send a seismic pulse directly into the heartland of the country that you call home; devastating towns and crops for years to come."

He saw the look of surprise on their faces; watched as they halted in

midair, uncertain of what to do next. "You didn't know, did you? You thought Jor-El trusted the last son of Krypton, but you were wrong. Say goodbye to Kansas... *Superman.*"

They could feel the unfamiliar humming around them, as if something was building.

"What do we do?" Kara asked.

Superman floated there in silence, his mind racing with possibilities. "Fortress, power down," he called out. Not to his surprise, nothing happened.

"He's got complete control now." Supergirl said.

"No, he just thinks he does. Fortress, Omega Override activate; twenty second delay."

Every crystal began to glow a scarlet red as the somber voice of Jor-El began to count backwards from twenty.

"I'd rather destroy this place than see you use it as a weapon of mass destruction!" Superman shouted. "Twelve second, Xadu. You power it down or we all go up in a huge ball of green kryptonite."

There was no answer at first, but suddenly the unfamiliar humming began to decrease. It wasn't until the countdown had reached three seconds that the man of steel gave the word to shut it down.

"Batman again?" Supergirl asked, obviously impressed.

Superman shook his head and with that boyish grin and a wink, replied, "James T. Kirk. Come on, I think I know where he is."

They flew around a rarely used area of the hideaway, only to find several man sized test tubes suspended in mid-air, some kind of counsel having been smashed in front of them, and a large hole in the ceiling of the fortress.

“He’s gone,” Kara noted with frustration.

Superman nodded in agreement as he examined the tubes. “One of them is missing. You can tell where it was hooked up.”

“Kal!” Supergirl gasped in horror. “There’s something in this one.”

He walked up to the tube, peering intently into it, then recoiled in horror as well as he realized what they were looking at. It was some kind of deformed human that was floating in a light blue liquid. His naked body was twisted, a third arm just underneath his right one. His eyes were wide open, the look of the dead covering his face. His face...

“Great Rao, Kal! He looks like a younger version of... ”

“... me.” Superman finished the sentence; a chill running down his spine.

To be continued!

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