

STARWINDS HOWL
THE EPIC STORY OF KRYPTO THE SUPERDOG

BY ELLIOT S! MAGGIN

The men had no smell. It was the pup's job to learn to live with this abomination.

The men with no smell knew the pup had tried, but trying was immaterial. They required performance and proper performance involved biting down every ancient instinct the pup's ancestors had ever left to him. They required the pup to prove he could have a function in the world of the men without a smell. Having to do so was an abomination as well.

The pup had no name. He had no home. He had no family except for these other caged beasts who smelled nothing like him. He had no dreams or hopes or happiness. He had only a species – he was a “dog,” a little white one – and a job. And he had the twin fears of failure and punishment.

In this place there were endless rows of cages, enclosed by hot light from above. It was the only place the pup had ever known. But the pup had memories that were not places in his experience. There were sweet smells of ... something. It was not memory; here was where he was decanted so memories were still growing and they were not pleasant at any rate. It was something else. It was a distant howl.

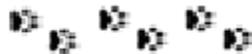
It was a howl whose faraway whisper the pup heard only for a moment or so at a time. Like now, here were the men with no smell again to give him pain.



The men named their world after its ice. “Krypton” was the word their language used for the thick white sheets that covered most of the habitable surfaces of the big world. Centuries ago, when animal life was new once again – new for the last time – to this old world, it was the dogs who made it possible for the men to survive here. They smelled out the heat.

Krypton was a failed star, an oafish lump among the bodies of the firmament, hardly even a planet at all. In the chase of stellar wind that kicked up the clots of nova fruit like dust devils into the gravitational pockets of the galactic sector, the puddle of nitrogen, oxygen and heavy elements that became Krypton was barely a belch. Off in the distance were the young clutches of bursting fire: the white dwarfs; the blues in chill conflagration; the oranges and greens; the one red giant that edged closer with every millennium; all blowing light and ether wind out across the dusty void. Krypton should have been a yellow star, a G-type, and it was ever so close. For all the fireworks at its molten core, Krypton never did gather the critical mass necessary to throw off its cooling outer shell and toss its burnoff out among the starwinds. Instead of melting and burning in a borning burst of golden flame, Krypton’s shell froze into an irregular surface of what came to be mountains and seas.

Before a billion years of its life had gone, Krypton was no longer a seething rock floating in the void, but fell into a wide orbit around a distant star. It became a subject of the red giant that was the largest product of the nova in which Krypton, along with the local cluster, was born. As it does on virtually all worlds, life rose here. Then, as it does on virtually all worlds, it died and rose again a hundred times. Here and there, life takes hold and for a short while, in some places, it flourishes. On Krypton, it never took hold until the planet that ached to be a star had nearly given up.

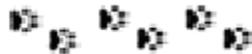


The two men stood outside the hot light with a pail of food. It was good food: strips of slaughtered beast, roasted just enough for the scent to drift lightly to the pup’s nostrils. The men wore padded clothing and facemasks to protect them from the pup, and when they brought the food they wore nose guards to shield them from the smell. Either they would feed the pup or not. If they fed him this time, he would be happy enough.

The pup leapt and slavered within the confines of the hot light. One of the men with no smell took a strip from the bucket and held it just beyond the hot light. The pup sat up spiffily, wagging his tail behind him so hard his butt began to scrape against the floor. Then, instead of extending the meat through the hot light so the pup could snatch it, the man reached his other hand – a dead, odorless hand; a petrified stick of a hand – to try and touch the pup on the fur.

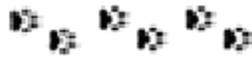
Not long ago the pup would simply have snapped at the hand and he would have seen no food for hours. Now he simply dropped his ears and eased down his forelegs to put his chin down between them. The result, in the pup's experience, was the same and the passive approach required less effort. Perhaps the men considered this progress. Instead of leaving, here they were stepping right into the cage of hot light, one carrying the bucket and the other holding out his sheathed hand in front of the strip of fragrant toasted flesh. Slowly, they both came forward and slowly, the pup edged back away from them along the floor.

They did this sometimes. If the pup's behavior started to get predictable, they would do something new. Somewhere deep in his being, the pup appreciated the humans' ability to initiate new twists on an old conversation whenever they felt like it. That ability was what made the man the dominant partner most of the time in this dog-man duality. The pup knew this – if not in his brain then in his soul – and he bit the one with the extended hand anyway. This time, for the first time, he got right through the glove and drew a few drops of red blood. It was tasty.



Men and dogs were linked, in a Universal sense, to a far greater degree than either these men or this dog understood. There were recurring patterns to complex life that had nothing to do with the chance and circumstance through which men fancy that life arises.

Men do not know about it. Dogs do not think about it. It works better that way.



The pup's entire acquaintance with Jor-El was during a time when the man was desperate. The pup did not know Jor-El when he was not desperate. He might have liked him better at some other time in Jor-El's life. In his youth, Jor-El was rather promising and hopeful; rarely desperate about anything. In the brief time he lived after the pup knew him, Jor-El graduated from desperation to resignation. The resignation came at a mellow time for Jor-El that the pup never got to see.

Jor-El came to the facility, ostensibly looking for a pet for his congenitally ill infant son. In fact, Jor-El had an infant son who was quite healthy as infants go, but the facility's function was to train companion animals for the congenitally ill, and Jor-El did not dare risk a requisition for a laboratory animal. It was very important that the Science Council remain unaware of any freelance activity going on at Jor-El's home lab.

"I cannot seem to find the requisition just now," the young woman at the reception station told the tall dour man as she played her fingertips along the gridwork of records on her desktop filing complex. She knew who Jor-El was, of course. Everyone knew who Jor-El was, since the incident with the solid gold airship he built when she was still just a girl. Courtesy ruled, of course, that she must not do or say anything to indicate that she would consider special treatment for this rising star on the ruling Council, he certainly could not hope to maintain any sort of anonymity in this public place. Everyone knew Jor-El.

"Then perhaps I can expedite the process by explaining what I was looking for," Jor-El suggested, "and you can straighten the datawork at your leisure."

All right, the young woman thought, now here is a procedural dilemma. Does the great man want special privileges because of his prominence? Certainly he does not have the time to watch me riffling through my clerical nightmare. Or is he simply ignorant of prescribed procedure and might he be embarrassed if it were perceived that I went out of my way to slide him through this minor annoyance?

Behind her, a doorway slid open and the voice from it asked, "Miri, do you have a healing stick?" It was Roy-Jo from the wrangling detail, still in his

disposable isolation suit, carrying the tan visor hood in one hand and nursing two bleeding fingers hanging off the other.

“In a moment,” the receptionist told the technician. “You were saying, sir?” Apparently she had made the decision to make it easy for the celebrity and let her career fall where it may.

“I need a small pet for my son,” Jor-El said, “to prompt him to respond to stimuli more efficiently.”

“Yes,” Miri said as the technician rooted through a cabinet looking for something to soothe his dog bite. “Something furry, perhaps? Children love furry things.”

“Furry,” Jor-El repeated, thinking only of how he might obtain a creature that fits into a small space, but whose biology was roughly a microcosm of a human’s. “Furry would be fine. Perhaps a rodent of some sort?”

“How about a dog?” the technician suggest as he managed to stop the bleeding.

“A dog, yes. A rodent or perhaps a small dog,” Jor-El said. “A gentle one,” he hastened to add, “and small,” before he realized he had already said that.

“Got just the candidate,” the technician smiled and disappeared back through the doorway.

Perplexed, the receptionist looked up to see Jor-El gathering himself about him again. He was a terrible liar, he thought, but the notion that Jor-El might be hiding something never entered the receptionist’s head.

“Would that be all right?” she asked the prominent scientist who suddenly seemed to be as befuddled as she.

The technician reappeared with the little white pup. The pup wore a restraint suit to hobble his legs and muzzle, and he was in a closed translucent box.

“Children love dogs,” the technician said.

“All these hindrances,” Jor-El noticed the layers of protection between the dog and the rest of the world. “I do not have much experience with pets. Is this necessary?”

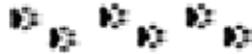
“Standard,” the technician waved off the receptionist from answering. “He will be fine when you get him home.”

“We were in the presence of greatness,” the receptionist said when Jor-El left with his new charge.

“Yes, I recognized him too,” the technician confessed, wiggling and bending the wounded digits of his right hand. “The Golden Folly man. He was my biggest hero when I was young.”

“And you gave him a problem pet anyway?”

“What’s he going to do? Complain and return the thing?” the technician laughed. “The world’s going to end sooner than that.”



The world could end any day, actually. According to Jor-El’s calculations, the disaster was already about a generation late. In the beginning, Jor-El thought – hoped –that his calculations and his conclusions about them must be wrong because by all indications “it” should already have happened. “It” was his internal euphemism, his personal code word for all the tearing and ripping and noise and death that his calculations showed: the end of the world. The uncertainty factor in the mix was the human element: the degree to which people and their technology had unwittingly extended Krypton’s life.

In the early days of Krypton’s human settlement, people had to spend most of their days on all fours, compensating for gravitation so strong that muscles either hardened or killed their owners. Hearts expanded and often burst with the strain. Legs bulged and toughened and sometimes became too heavy for the muscles themselves to carry. Calcium took root in the joints and the tendons and, in the relatively sedentary, fused motionless in the night. Natural selection never took so severe a hit as when the humans tried to adapt to the air and minerals and killing gravitation of Mother Krypton, but once a

generation of humans stood upright and snatched at a breath of air again, it was the dogs who found the path to the future.

The dogs who accompanied the first shipwrecked settlers on this world took to the planet far more quickly than did their masters. Dogs grew strong here, foraging among the forests, growing their lungs from one short generation to the next, leaping tall shrubbery in a single bound. Dogs were adaptable. They had to teach their humans to be this way as well. They did this on the icepack.

It was not many generations before natural selection among humans made them as well adapted to this big dense world as dogs. Soon, humans began to move northward and southward from the lower-gravity equatorial regions, and they took their dogs with them. Somewhere in the history of dogs and humans – wherever, on whatever outpost across Creation that history occurs – dogs always distinguish themselves. On Krypton they distinguished themselves when they saved the lives of their humans who explored the icepack. What the dogs found on the ice was not only survival, but wealth.

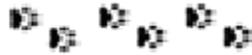
Under site after site, all the way up and down Krypton's icepack – a glacier more massive than most habitable planets – there were huge pulsing reserves of thermal energy, belching up from the molten core of the planet. Where flumes of planetary heat licked up close to the surface, colonies of energy-feeding microorganisms – like the blue-green algae of Earth's oceans, in quantities both complex and extensive – took root and grew. The dogs sniffed out the soft, meaty deposits of microscopic creatures. Whenever they did, the dogs' humans acquired not only food, but a power source great enough to fire up a new city.

For ten thousand years, the Kryptonian civilization grew over the whole planet in cities whose energy usage, in the end, nearly equaled the volume at which the planet was producing thermal energy. Humans spent the heat at an increasing rate as their cities and population swelled. Ultimately, they burned away the pulsing core of the planet enough to defuse Krypton's destruction for a time – a pulse that comprised a generation or two in human terms but a nanosecond in the life of a planet that always longed to glow as a star.

Had the canines not found and the humans not harnessed the energy of Krypton's core, then destruction would not have been delayed, Jor-El would never have been born and could have spared the Universe the pain of the derision to which he was subject. As it was, however, Jor-El did discover

impending, overdue doom, but he never realized how simple it might have been to divert it.

“It.”



Beside being synonymous with “ice” in the local language, the word “Krypton” came from an old legend and no one ever figured out authoritatively which meaning came first. Folklore held that the male and female humans who founded the race, shipwrecked spacefarers, were named Kryp and Tonn, respectively. The infant Kal-El never heard that story, but he did know how to say “ice.” The pup was the color of the world’s principal surface – before the swarm of civilization hit, at least. So that was the infant Kal-El’s first response to the pup:

“Krypto,” the child said, holding out a hand toward the little white animal’s soft nose. The pup was the color of ice. “Krypto,” the child said again, and Krypto sniffed at the baby-scented fingertip.

Horrified, Jor-El told Lara, the child’s mother, “Get the child away from that thing. It’s a carnivore.”

“A prodigy, I told you,” Lara said and waved away her husband’s alarm.

Before the pup knew what a name was, he had one.

Baby scent, Krypto tasted through the buds of his nose. Sweet. Kal-El’s fingers felt for the pup’s soft nose and just brushed the white fur of his ear as Krypto backed away, but the curl of his upper lip never materialized. This odd little man-like thing was much too fascinating. And it smelled good.

“Krypto,” Kal-El said again and leaned forward off the tripod of his legs and balancing hand and tumbled forward over the floor of the family room.

Jor-El made a move to rescue his son from the impending assault of the vicious creature that, in a lapse of judgment, he had brought into his home. Instead, Lara held back her husband’s arm and shrugged.

Krypto warily circled Kal-El limited by a radius just longer than the length of a baby's reach. Kal-El rolled back up to his seat on the floor and reached for the pup again. The child stood his ground, reaching outward without moving, perhaps hoping to grow a bit so that his hand reached to where the furry beast stood.

For perhaps a hundred heartbeats Krypto circled Kal-El – a lifetime, it must have seemed, to both of them. Earnestly, seriously the way human infants are serious without being solemn, the child turned his outstretched hand as best he could to the puppy's direction, the beast ever just out of reach. And in a moment, at whose initiative none could tell, the puppy's wet red nose brushed against a baby fingertip. Deeply moist. Milky. The dog nose came back for a better inspection. Pulsing. Rich hot blood vessels. A touch even softer than the sniff of the pup's nose.

Then the boy leaned further forward, again lost the balance of his tripod of limbs and rolled onto the pup.

The pup yelped. Leapt backward. And Krypto's first thought was for the baby's safety. It's a baby. Helpless. Soft-boned. Sweet-smelling. And the pup raised his head, meaning to find the baby's scraped skin and lick it smooth, but suddenly the pup was in the air, looking around in all directions, and the world went dark.

"Enough of this," Jor-El's voice snapped from somewhere so close it must have been inside the pup.

"Enough of what?" Lara wanted to know.

"Our son does not need to consort with laboratory animals," the man said, and Krypto's paws and head reached around for purchase, found something creased and malleable and used his teeth to find his place, and Jor-El yelled, "YOWLLP!"

And the pup was on the floor again, scurrying toward the child, licking his nose and his eyes and the pitted place under his chin and his eyes again and for the first time Krypto noticed another creature's eyes.

"The creature!" Jor-El spat out.

And the eyes were deep and light, and Krypto could see his own eyes in them.

“It. Bit. Me.”

And Krypto could not take his gaze away from this man-child’s eyes.

“It did not bite you, Jor-El ...”

And could not turn his nose from the man-child’s scent.

“... it just touched you. It has no hands. It touches with its teeth.”

And rubbed up the fur of his body against the man-child’s belly.

“Touched me with its teeth? Indeed ...”

And tasted the taste of the man-child’s face and the perspiration on the pit of his upper lip and the phlegm on his chin.

“... touched me with its teeth!”

And the baby said “Krypto,” over and over until the dog’s tongue caught in the boy’s throat and he had to spit and giggle.

“Well I’ll just put a stop to this.”

And the baby got little strands of white hair over his tongue and eyelashes.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.”

The child lost his balance again and landed on top of the dog’s belly.

“I won’t?”

The child’s hair and the collar of his coverall landed in the dog’s mouth and Krypto chewed on it until it was as wet as a gnawed bone.

“You won’t. Look at them ...”

And Kal-El bit down hard on Krypto’s nose and Krypto scraped at Kal-El’s bottom with his paw and they both had red marks down them.

“... they love each other.”

And the child cooed. And the pup snorted with contentment. And they loved each other.



Space travel involved no new scientific discoveries or breakthroughs. It was strictly a technical problem. Also, it was a cultural one.

Krypton was lavish with resources, varied landscapes and cheap energy. There was so much thermal energy belching up from the huge world's core that it was all a profligate human could do to spin his or her excess offworld. The moons, replete with popular vacation spots, flew in tight orbits – one of them within the planet's breathable atmosphere, in fact – and provided enough exotic surrounding to suit anyone's tastes. No one starved on Krypton. No one suffered. No one lacked for any material thing or any spiritual support. Krypton was Heaven. Why should Kryptonians travel? They were already here.

Then there were the pirates. Krypton's star was on the edge of a cluster that lit the evening sky with a coarse conglomerate of lights that rivaled the brightness and far surpassed the splendor of the local red sun. Few of the worlds within a lifetime's travel of Krypton supported humanoid life, but the trade routes of space mariners connected the stars of this sector in a complex web. Always there were hundreds of freighters full of teamsters of one humanoid race or another carrying goods from one star system to another on multigenerational missions. And always there were the pirates in their tiny, dangerously unstable dimension-hopping clipper ships, preying on the families of space traders. Every once in awhile a pirate clipper would accidentally – or desperately – re-space within throwing distance of Krypton.

“The Big Rettubzzash,” Jelassian called the enormous green world. The term “rettubzzash” defied translation. It still does.

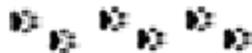
Jelassian was once commander of a fleet of sixteen pirate clippers, but the dangerous probability fields surrounding them in hyperspace made it impossible to keep them in control of an outside commander for very long. One of them vanished into imaginary space, another into a private proprietary quasi-galaxy and thirteen others simply vanished one or two at a time under circumstances involving various degrees of ambiguity. The only ship

remaining under Jelassian's command was the Tootz, once the flagship of the fleet, and its eight-member crew. This was fine. What with all the payrolls, information files and mineral shipments Jelassian had taken over the parsecs, he and the crew of the Tootz were rich beyond the dreams of Brainiac.

Jelassian and his crew were wealthy pirates. They were wanted for murder, theft, violence, threats of violence, crimes of intention, sweating in a public place and whatever else might be unlawful in any given culture among the thousands of cultures in the hundreds of star systems and extraplanetary outposts where they had practiced their profession. Most of their comrades and crewmates were dead or lost beyond recovery. They were tired. They needed to retire, live in a little bit of luxury and a lot of security, and spend their wealth. If, however, you were a pursued criminal in virtually every corner of the galactic sector and several bordering dimensions, security anywhere was a tenuous option. They were wanted virtually everywhere they had ever been – except on the Big Rettubzzash.

Kryptonians simply did not know from pirates. They were never much of an issue here. Once in awhile, like the legendary founders, Tonn and Kryp, spacefarers would try to make a landing somewhere and the craft would be smashed by the terrain or the reactionary gravitation of the planet, or a crevasse would swallow them whole, or they would become part of the root system of a forest out of which they could not gather the strength to crawl. If once in awhile a wandering space traveler came upon an actual denizen of Krypton, he had better hope it was a human. At least that way the wanderer might be summarily imprisoned rather than summarily eaten. But Kryptonians as a race were so much hardier and stronger than anyone else around, it seemed, that even the thoughtful and intelligent creatures who dominated the world might accidentally flail through the body of an off-worlder as if the alien were made of smoke. Unlike the other life-supporting planets in this star cluster, Krypton was in no danger of being plundered. Except that one time.

But, Jelassian wondered, what about Krypton as a retirement community?



“The prototype craft is ready for the animal to test it,” Jor-El told Lara, as close to excitement as he was getting in these troubled times.

“Krypto. I wish you would call the poor creature by its name,” was Lara’s response.

“Its name,” Jor-El mumbled and rolled up onto his back to meditate himself into sleep. Things had gone better in Jor-El’s life than they were going these days.

Jor-El was not always a famous crackpot. When Kandor was the seat of planetary government, he had even been a respected voice: the voice of nearly the majority. In those early days all the resources of a strong economy could be turned to what was – even without Jor-El’s apocalyptic zeal – at least a preventive measure. But one day, the multi-generational ark that was nearly set to launch from the capital vanished with the city itself. This was a disaster that even Jor-El could not have predicted. Neither Krypton’s government nor Jor-El himself ever recovered from the cratering of the city of Kandor. Authoritative sources never could agree on an adequate explanation for the anomalous disaster. Krypton’s geological hiccups had always been unpredictable and dramatic. This was probably just another parenthetical belch of the planet that cost those million lives and temporarily staggered the world’s economy.

Still, after Kandor vanished, people had dreams – the vivid kind that the ancients once associated with prescience – of the voices of Kandorian relatives and friends calling out to them from ... somewhere. The stories were eerily similar. Tiny voices came from a very small, tight place. Then the dreamer would wake and tell the dream’s story or not. Perhaps in another time there would be some credence placed on these instant folk tales, but these days it was psychologists to whom the public turned. Mass delusion, the psychologists said, understandable under the extraordinary circumstances. When Jor-El “heard” from a Kandorian first cousin and woke in a cold sweat, he dismissed it as readily as most of the remaining public now dismissed his fully verifiable predictions of planetary doom. By morning it was just another lost reverie.

“Krypto!” the baby called. “Krypto!” and any words Kal-El offered after that were drowned in a flood of slobber and slurping and wrestling on the nursery floor.

Mornings on these dark days in Jor-El and Lara’s home, ironically, were punctuated as never before with play and laughter. Neither Kal-El nor Krypto knew that this would be the last of their mornings together.



Jelassian had a habit of assigning nicknames like “The Big Rettubzzash,” but pirates in general had an avuncular nickname for Krypton. It was “The Black-Hole Planet.” Nothing ever left. It was as dense as a newborn star and as dark as the pit. From a more conventional planet with crusted frozen oceans, life should at the very least have reflected so much that astronomers in nearby systems might at first have mistaken it for a star. It was so heavy that space itself contracted around it. A dull green glow, the backwash of starlight that collected in its atmosphere, reflected downward to streak Krypton’s daytime sky with red-shifted luminous clouds and light its nights with a phosphorescent pink. The light radiated from every horizon. The days were barely brighter than Krypton’s nights.

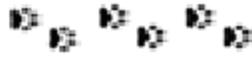
It took an enormous expense of energy to launch anything from the world’s surface. Even a nuclear-powered vessel designed to accelerate across lightyears of space needed to tap the thermal energy of the planet’s underground in order to trigger a reaction big enough just to escape Krypton’s terrible attraction. Even on a world whose population’s profligate use of energy had actually slowed the planet’s self-destruction, Jor-El realized that his use of so much power in one burst would certainly attract attention. He gave himself the chance to make the only test of his prototype starcraft.

Krypto did not like Jor-El very much, but the boy did and that seemed to make it all right when the man picked the pup up from a nap that day. By the time Krypto was far enough past his grogginess to realize that Jor-El was wearing the same gloves without any smell that the men without a smell wore back in the caged place, he was already in another cage.

This cage was not hot light. It was hard, like sweet rock. It clanged when Krypto pawed at it. He could curl up on a small pad and watch out a window narrower than Krypto’s head. Through it, he caught glimpses of Jor-El walking here and there past the cage. It was musty here. Air blew past Krypto’s face from a hole somewhere near the pads. Jor-El was feeding him air, but it did not smell like real air. This was no good. Krypto wanted to be with the boy.

Jor-El sealed shut the tiny spacecraft. All he needed to do was launch it offworld, monitor its high orbit, and guide it to a soft landing where he could verify the passenger’s life signs. If the beast leapt out and bit him, that would be verification enough. If the creature simply had a pulse, however, the family-sized craft would be a better gamble than an extended stay on Krypton.

It was coming.



“You want to retire on Krypton?” Sharena wanted to know. There was incredulity in her voice. It seemed there was usually incredulity in her voice. She had come to realize that no matter what Jelassian decided, it was rarely something she could reasonably have expected. And no matter how hard she tried, she could not figure out how to edit out the incredulity. “No one’s ever come back from Krypton.”

“What do you mean ‘no one?’” Jelassian rumbled, sitting at the piloting console with his limbs occupied in the plasma pools. “Somebody must’ve been there and back. Else how do we know what’s there?”

“Legend.”

“Legend,” Jelassian repeated. “Fire falls and glass forests. An advanced scientific culture of people who have no ambitions to leave. And more gold than a body could find on a hundred worlds and a thousand teamster shipments.”

“Gold. Of course. You believe the stories about the gold,” Sharena snorted – or rather she did what a being with air gills rather than a nose does instead of snorting.

“You have ridden the probability fields with me these parsecs,” Jelassian insisted. “You know that all legends live. Somewhere.”

“Somewhere again. Somewhere your lost crew members live in luxury. Somewhere else they rot in a dungeon. Somewhere.”

“Exactly. It is all a matter of what you make most probable.”

“And you are probably a cutthroat pirate.”

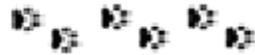
“And you probably enjoy it.”

And Jelassian shivered his limbs through the labyrinth of his plasma controls. Space rippled before them, and in their path appeared Krypton. Probably.



Krypto felt the rush of acceleration tear at his body. He felt his breath leave his lungs and he fought to snatch it back. He crushed down neatly, evenly against the mat in the floor of the tiny cage as though a big Krypto-shaped hand were pressing him from above, flattening him. The sound started out deafening, then faded, as though it were coming from very far away. Krypto worried that he was losing his ability to hear.

Then suddenly everything was still. The crushing ended. The sound was silent – but Krypto could hear the gentle hiss of the air coming from the hole by his mat. He could raise his head. He could untwist his neck and stretch his bones. The window showed only blackness, and there was barely room for the pup to stand and the air smelled like it had already been breathed, but he was all right. Probably.



“What was that?” Sharena wanted to know.

“Krypton,” Jelassian told her, a dream of opulence in his voice, “the Big Rettubzzash.”

“No,” Sharena said. “I mean the little flash of light along the southwest horizon.”

“Krypton lies before you, and you concern yourself with a flash of light?”

“See what its signature is.”

“What do you think it is? There are all sorts of bizarre natural phenomena in this planet’s gravity field.”

“What does it look like?”

“It has a thermonuclear signature. Too small to be a craft. Probably a small probe.”

“Remember the stories about the gold spaceships?”

“Gold spaceships?”

“Gold was supposed to be so plentiful on Krypton that they built their travel vehicles out of it.”

“I don’t believe those stories.”

“You believe all the others.”

“I believe they’re possible.”

“So it is possible that little probe is made of gold.”

“Or they could be looking for us.”

“Good, Jelassian. Now you turn cautious on me.”

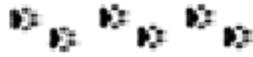
“What do you want me to do?”

“Go get it,” Sharena said. And they did.



Krypto was weightless. For a creature of Earth to be weightless for the first time is a little upsetting and disorienting. For a Kryptonian, used to gravitation like that of a small star, it is like dying and going to heaven. Krypto had no time to be disoriented. He was too euphoric. There was no place to float, the craft was so small, but the pup felt no weight. He felt no cares. He could go anywhere, be anything, all here in this tight little place.

Then there was a jolt.



“Is there something wrong, Jor-El?” Lara wanted to know.

“Not yet,” Jor-El said. “I’ll get it.” He punched a switch and spun a dial and studied a monitor. “Or maybe not,” he said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I lost the prototype.”

“What do you mean ‘lost’?”

“I can’t find it. It was on the tracker and now it is gone.”

“Do you have any telemetry?”

“Sure. Lots of it. It all stops when the craft vanishes. It’s like ...”

“Like what? What did you do with my son’s little dog?”

“Oh Lara stop it. We cannot argue about this.”

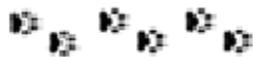
“You could have gotten a rodent. But instead you bring home something furry and friendly and you shoot it into space and lose it.”

“We must not fight, Lara.”

“Why not?”

“Because we have no time left.”

And the ground shook.



It was all Jelassian could do to transport the probe aboard and drag himself into a probability pocket before the pull of a freak shoot of Kryptonian gravity yanked him under.

“What was that?” Sharena gasped, wiping the surprise off herself like a spill.

“The probe or the concussion?” from Jelassian, shoving his forelimbs back into the plasma soup to stabilize the ship.

“The probe is in the transport bay according to the running cargo report. The ship’s systems are classifying it as ballast.”

“You’d better change that classification before the system dumps the garbage again.”

“Damn,” Sharena said – or said, in her own nameless language, something like it that did not particularly defy translation. “That’s how we lost that whole schooner full of molybdenum ore that once,” and she rolled down a menu beside the “ballast” designation and reclassified the probe as “harvest,” just in time.

Then the Tootz spun about and Jelassian and Sharena on the bridge and the six other crew except for Thummp lost their footing and saw the planet and its star and its environs all rumble by the nearest portholes. Thummp did not lose his footing, after all, because he had no feet. He did get pleasantly dizzy, though, as he adhered his liquid structure against a wall of the cargo hold and the Universe spun around and around.

“We’re going to jump,” Jelassian said.

“When?” Sharena was about to say, but said only “Wh – ?” or rather the equivalent of “Wh – ?” in the language she shared with Jelassian. In their language, to be fair, the equivalent of “Wh – ?” takes quite a bit longer to say than does its equivalent in any current language of humans on Earth. It was still a shock when the ship’s emergency systems suddenly took control, dumped all waste and ballast and other non-essential mass out a transport lock and into the void and ruptured the equanimity of every sentient and beast aboard – including Thummp this time. Then an outlandish rogue prominence of Kryptonian gravity licked off the planet and would have shattered the pirate craft. But the Tootz shifted randomly along a time channel that varied between

about a month and about three centuries – by Earth measure – and re-formed somewhere out of danger.

When the Tootz rematerialized – what seemed like a moment later – the big red star was still the dominant light source in the sky.

“Odd,” Jelassian said, getting up from the deck.

“Odd?” Sharena wanted to know. “Is that all you can say? Odd? ‘How are you?’ you might ask. And by the way, ‘How are you?’ and I’m fine I think, thanks.”

“Very odd,” he said.

After awhile – after watching Jelassian regather his personal systems, focus on the plasma control pools like a neutron beam, try any number of permutations of any number of explanations of what was perplexing him – finally she said:

“What’s going on, Jelassian? Want to tell me before the rest of the crew come in and you don’t notice they’re here either?”

“The planet is gone,” Jelassian offered, absently, continuing among his calculations and probability charts.

“How likely is that?” Sharena was skeptical.

“Pretty much inevitable at some point. It’s just a question of where.”

“How could it be gone?”

“Gone. Trying to determine this.”

“Does it have something to do with the harvest?”

“Think not. Not directly. Ah. Here.”

“Ah. Where?”

“Here. Look here. Krypton is nowhere along the orbital path it followed, though the Galactic timestamp says we moved ahead less than two-and-a-half years -” two-and-a-half Earth years, approximately, which is about the length of a standard Galactic half-century, if it matters – ”the Big

Rettubzzash is nowhere nearby. But I tried a Systemic mass survey and it comes up with an amount of matter in the orbit of the red star that is almost identical to where it was according to the telemetry before we made our leap.”

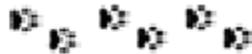
“What are you saying?”

“What I just said.”

“Which means?”

“Krypton’s mass has been redistributed to the outer edges of this star system. It’s blown up and it is all heading across the rest of the Galaxy. In little chunks.”

Sharena thought about that for a moment, then said, “Wow -” or whatever it is her species said instead of “wow.”

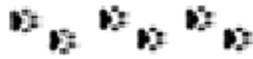


Krypto grew up as a pirate dog. It was fun. He sniffed out booty among the settlements and transport craft that his masters came upon. He found meat and stone and precious metals. He even scoped out chunks of technology, which was especially valuable to Jelassian and his crew. Krypto was a nasal genius, and over time Jelassian, Sharena and the others even began to take in other dogs from among the communities from whom they exacted tribute. Nip, Yowl and Boof were eventually Krypto’s three comrades in the small cargo lock on the aft of the Tootz that became their kennel. There was food, there were companions to scratch, and a robotic grooming rig sucked off the sweat and vermin of a hundred worlds and ships. Life was good.

It never occurred to Krypto to question the right or wrong of piracy, of taking the possessions of the people living out their lives on generations-long interstellar flights. There was room in Krypto’s little dog mind for only one principle.

Krypto knew only loyalty. Loyalty above all.

That was why he never forgot the boy.



Then came the day of the fire. Jelassian was very careful to keep ahead of his local technology. The trouble with probability travel, however, was the likelihood that you would eventually stumble into something you could not possibly expect. In space, the unexpected is rarely good news.

Unexpectedly, the good people of the planet Burgos decided to crack down on piracy. Usually the adventurous people who set out across the heavens have little choice but to do this. They are adventurous by default. On worlds whose primary determinant of effectiveness is ancestry, the space mariners are generally people of uncertain or questionable lineage. On planets whose major concern is economic, they are usually people who would be quite poor were they to live out their lives on their homeworld. Among civilizations whose greatest preoccupation is with worldly accomplishment, travelers and teamsters who first set out are invariably those who have accomplished little in their lives and hope for better on behalf of their descendents. And so forth. Once upon an eon, word reached Burgos – a planet whose people tend to be preoccupied with celebrity – that there was born aboard a Burgosian teamster transport a little girl of such overwhelming beauty and charm that she became an iconic figure back on the planet of her great grandparents' birth.

Her name was Rayna, not that it mattered to anyone but the assembled multitudes of Burgos. She did not live very long. A subspace pirate galleon detected the engine signature of the Burgosian teamster truck and summarily sacked it. The pirates – a not-very-capable collection of cutthroats of whom Jelassian never approved at any rate – slaughtered most of the inhabitants aboard, took whoever would submit into slavery and enriched themselves on the truck's cargo of genetic samples and historical memorabilia. It seemed, at the time Rayna's ancestors set out on their voyage, that the Burgosian culture would soon succumb to an outbreak of a highly communicable disease. Rayna's forebears had answered the call for people of little note who were as yet uninfected, to found a new Burgosian civilization in the light of some distant star. Burgosian scientists – a team of them, led by a new celebrity who nonetheless was credited by history for single-handedly laying waste to the plague – developed a cure long before Rayna was born, but by then several dozen trucks had gone out across the stars to salvage a culture that was now quite healthy.

As word of the progress of the rescue missions began to come back to Burgos, however, charming little Rayna came to symbolize the hard-driving, admirable spirit of those who put their lives and the futures of their descendents at risk in order to save the spirit of Burgos and everything Burgosian. When pirates sold Rayna into slavery and she was lost to history – and several centuries later the world of her ancestry found out about it – all of Burgos was enraged. A crash program developed new technology based on what were, on Burgos, the theoretical notions of probability navigation. By the end of another generation, the law enforcement troops of Burgos had the capability – as well as the will – to seek out and destroy those it defined as lawbreakers through a deep range of possible locations in time and space. Their target was interstellar pirates, so they came after Jelassian.

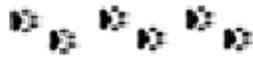
None of Jelassian's crew – certainly not Krypto – had any idea of the sociopolitical dynamics that motivated the paramilitary forces of the planet Burgos to seek out the Tootz in deep space somewhere off the shoulder spiral of the Milky Way Galaxy. The Burgosians found the pirate clipper cruising in the light of a yellow star. Without hailing the ship for a possible surrender, they delivered a volley of late-model sublight crude energy artillery in the direction of the Tootz' hull and the ship's automatic defense systems kicked in just fast enough to avoid all but the first round.

The concussion rattled the ship, but its systems had already jettisoned nonessential mass. That included anything short of shelter and life support systems. Through some insight or instinct, Krypto grabbed Boof by the nape of his neck and yanked him off the kennel deck when the entire loft of the deck sealed itself off and went careening into the darkness. The other two dogs were safe somewhere among the crew.

The ship spun with the concussion, and Krypto saw incoming fire out a porthole as he dragged the startled Boof down a hall. Those heatwaves would never reach the ship. Others would.

The Tootz shifted to a random acute angle of itself within dimensional space and materialized in an analog of the spot it had left. Jelassian broadcast an all-clear, and out that same porthole Krypto saw a volley of crude energy identical to the one they evaded. It materialized and attacked the ship precisely as it had a moment and a dimension-shift earlier.

Only Krypto ever saw what hit them.



Nip, Yowl and Boof were gone, and here was Krypto, wondering why he was alive. Krypto had thought about this sort of thing before. He hung in space among the wreckage of the Tootz, drifting. Boof was near him, giving off no light, no smell. And as Boof froze his colors changed.

Colors?

Krypto could see colors. Dogs could not see colors. Did that mean he was no longer a dog? Krypto did not know what colors were, except that he could see them here.

He waited a moment. He thought maybe they would go away, the way when a human wakes to see the aura bathing a lover, the human waits a moment and the aura vanishes and the human thinks it was just imagination. But the colors did not go away. The void itself was the same: as thick with dark as a glacial pool. That was comforting. But the stars were different, dull and bright and clown-faced, exhaling translucent rings of color over their immediate space like overfilled lungs. The closest star, this sun blowing such an abundance of light across the cold, danced in great prominences in a color that someday he would understand to be called “yellow.”

He was hanging in space. Was he breathing? He looked at himself. There was nothing to breathe. Probably he would need to breathe sometime, but not any time soon. He looked at the big yellow sun and thought to draw closer. It did not hurt his eyes. He could look right at it. Into it. It had texture, a surface like any other object in the sky. He had not thought before of such fireballs as things with surfaces; he had never been able to look at them before. It had shoots of flame like a pool of rolling water firing up into space. It had canyons and gullies and subtle variations in color and never mind seeing color anyway, but Krypto wanted to know how his perceptions got this subtle. He was remembering things he did not understand when he first experienced them: the patterns of the wiring under the console of his destroyed spacecraft; the size of the Universe; the way the follicles in his nostrils lined up when he smelled the skin of the baby Kal-El.

Where did these things come from? Was he dead? And if he was dead and out of his body, then where was his body? And if he was dead, then why

were his dead friends not dead the same way he was dead – floating around here where he had died, waiting to see what would happen next?

For awhile Krypto drifted, looking at the sun. He had been thinking idly that he would like to look at it more closely. Then he realized he was looking at it more closely – that it was bigger than it had been before.

He knew now that the Universe was too big to understand. He understood that. It would no longer be a matter of finding a really high hill to get to the edge of it. But then he realized that sun was getting bigger. Or Krypto was getting closer.



No one had predicted the photonucleic effect, not that Krypto would have paid attention at any rate. In the billions of years of the Universe's history, despite the ongoing distant possibility of such things, there still are quite a few things that have never happened. Despite the fact that atoms are composed mostly of empty space and their electrons shift willy-nilly from one quantum level to another; and despite the fact that it is theoretically possible, no cannonball shot at a fortress wall has ever quantum-shifted in such a manner as to cause the cannonball to pass harmlessly through the wall as though neither was ever in the way of the other. This was possible on a theoretical level and might still happen, but it never has. It still might: the Universe is scheduled to survive for quite awhile longer. The likelihood that a cannonball somewhere will pass through a fortress wall somewhere once, however, goes up dramatically as the age of the universe extends into the quintillions of years. Another thing that had never been observed before was the consequences of the photonucleic effect on a living creature.

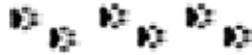
The photonucleic effect is a very specialized astronomical phenomenon. It takes place when an object native to the influence of a red giant star enters the influence of a small G-type star. Every object in the Universe, organic or inorganic, has a distinctive signature based on the geological and cosmological characteristics of the environment in which it was formed. Rock from a planet whose gravitation is light would be less dense than rock of the same atomic structure, but from a world like Krypton whose gravitation is greater. Similarly, the musculature and cellular density of an animal born on one world must be different from that of the same species of animal born on another, or in

deep space. The gravitation and magnetic fields acting on a creature during its growth necessarily define its eventual form as surely as does its genetic code. In fact, if twins with identical genetic codes were born in space, and one was raised on dense Krypton and the other on Earth, the one raised on Krypton would be far stronger than the one raised on Earth – assuming the Kryptonian twin survived at all. This is all, of course, no more than a thought experiment. It almost never happens.

Inorganic matter that originally formed in the orbit of a red giant like the star of Krypton almost never makes its way around interstellar space into the system of a yellow star. It is simply unlikely in the extreme. When, rarely, it does happen, it tends to develop an unstable and unpredictable radioactivity at the molecular level. Rocks spray off a steady stream of isotopic particles that may have unpredictable effects on their surroundings. A particle of the remainders of the world of Krypton might glow with what appears to be a rainbow light and its radiation could cause a plant to mutate irrationally. Organic exiles of a red giant star system are particularly susceptible to the inorganic radioactivity of elements with the same cosmological signature. But organic matter from the vicinity of a red giant – the living chemistry of plants and animals – has a wholly different response to yellow star-sun influence.

Where non-living matter becomes unstable and radioactive with this dislocation, living things develop an enhanced stability. The first thing that happens under the photonucleic effect is that the nucleus of each of an organic creature's cells grows a carapace – a temporary shell that shields it from external harm. This happens very quickly, from the outside of the organism – the cells in direct contact with yellow starlight – to the most internal cells of the organs, in less than the time it takes to draw a breath. For a moment, the organism is suspended in a comatose state, but the moment is too brief to notice. In that moment, the nucleus of every atom in the organism quakes. Each electron in every carbon or hydrogen atom in every molecule of its body jumps outward by one quantum level. The nucleus unbinds, its protons and neutrons and other subatomic particles loosening, expanding the binding space between them by the merest fraction of an angstrom. The molecules of the transplanted being's body do not actually grow, but the physical space that the solid parts of them take up thus increases exponentially without increasing the organism's actual mass or proportions. The organism becomes harder, tougher, more durable, better able to navigate the changed environment in which it now finds itself.

Perhaps something in the biology of those rare humans and canines and other chunks of biomass that were able to survive and eventually flourish in the vicious environmental soup of Krypton allowed for this response to such a displacement. Maybe it was simply a cosmic joke. Certainly the photonucleic effect was one of those delicious little bonuses built into the Universal circumstance back before that instant of Creation that Earthers call the Planck Epoch: the conception, under a supremely implausible nexus of events, of a theoretical super-being. This, against all likelihood, is what happened to the little dog Krypto.



He was flying through space.

It did not feel comfortable.

It felt grossly unnatural.

It was.

His paws and hindquarters began to flail in all directions, as though unconnected to the rest of his body. His chest heaved, in a reflexive search for air that was not there. The star was getting closer. Was it the star that was pulling him to it or something else? He began to shift back and forth as he moved. He thought he would start tumbling, falling, but he did not. Instead, he just shifted from side to side irregularly, his weight rolling as though he were standing still. And Krypto realized he was in control.

He pulled his front paws in and bent his rear legs toward him as though he were sitting up. He cocked his head in the direction away from the big yellow fire. For a moment he felt the tug, like a big wind, of the star – but he resisted it. He looked off in the distance. There was a planet there. It was too far to look like anything but a small distant star, but he knew it was a planet and it was just beyond the horizon of the star. He did not know how he knew it was a planet, but he did. He knew he had to go there, and he felt himself moving in that direction. He felt himself moving before he knew he was doing it. Then he was moving there fast. He felt the pull of the star off his right shoulder, pulling like a howling fire, but it meant nothing to him. He did not even have

to resist its gravitation for it to have no more effect on him than he wanted it to have.

A wave of energy suffused Krypto in an excited rush. He howled an enormous wave of sound in a space where there was no matter to vibrate into sound. And the vibration from the dog's steely throat was so powerful that a molecule of dust in the neighborhood of the beast vibrated like the aft end of a hound shaking off the rain. And it found other molecules hanging out in the vacuum and set them aflutter. And underneath the reverberation of the howl vibrating through his head to his ears, Krypto could discern the slightest of distant bellows underneath, as the sound came back through space to him in the relay among isolated molecules amid the nothingness. His bark was so loud that he could hear it through the vacuum.

It is fortunate that Krypto had not yet studied elementary physics. This would have struck him as weird.

It was not weirdness, but rather the rush of sensation that fascinated Krypto just now. There was the sense of movement yet none of the sweep of wind on his skin. He realized that, to something watching him move through space, he would look like a statue of a dog. Nothing on him, not a hair or a lash, fluttered as he moved at this unspeakable speed. There was the slight pull on his skin in all directions as the internal balance of his system pressed outward against the vacuum of space. There was the thing like hunger in his chest when he simply opened his mouth a bit and the residual air in his lungs blew out. There was no pain in this. There was no pain in anything. It was a strange, uncomfortable feeling, though, and Krypto sucked inward at the vacuum to try and get back a whiff or even a molecule of the air he had lost. That was when he first picked up the scent of the boy.



Somewhere in the dark recesses of Charon, a moon of Pluto that Earthbound astronomers had yet to discover or name, Clark Kent sat on an outcropping of methane ice that was roughly the shape of a chair. There, he worried. Today he was worried about biology. His biology. He had changed.

Clark had just saved a planet and this troubled him. He was not troubled that the hundred-thousand-odd intelligent hydra-like beings on the planet would

now live rather than being fertilizer and volcanic ash. That was the good part. The troubling part was that he was able to do such a thing at all. He wondered whether he would be able to do something like this again. He wondered whether he would try.

It was as far away from home as he had ever been. That was, as far away from Earth as he had ever been aware of being. He had told Ma about it the first time he went into space and she was horrified. When Pa came in and found her pacing back and forth and wringing her hands and Pa asked what was the matter he managed to calm her down, but the next day Clark found Pa at his desk poring over a pile of newly borrowed library books about the way the Solar System is built.

“It’s not really that way,” Clark said, tentatively.

“What’s not?” Pa wanted to know. “Your space traveling?”

“No,” Clark said, “space. It’s not.”

“You mean the scientists are wrong after all?”

“No, they’re right. As far as they go, I mean. But it’s bigger.”

“Bigger?” Pa asked him. “Bigger than infinite?”

“Yeah.” Clark told his father. “Infinity is a lot bigger than these guys think.”

The Kent home was modest. The roll-top against the wall of the dining room doubled as Jonathan’s office and study. He sat in a ratty-looking but comfortable swivel chair with a big book called *The Grand Tour* on his lap. The book was the size of a geography text. It was full of artists’ renderings of the nine planets of the Solar System, along with descriptions of the planets and their satellites – as far as astronomers knew. Next to the desk was a wide, endlessly reupholstered chair where Martha generally came to sit after she finished the kitchen work. Jonathan insisted that he did the dishes or the drying or the reordering of the kitchen after the occasional dinner, but Martha could never quite put a finger on when the last time was that he did this. Jonathan closed the big book.

“Do me a favor, Clark,” Jonathan leaned over to talk softly with his son.

“Sure, Pa. What?”

“Your ma gets all het up about this stuff. I know you’ve got to stretch yourself like any boy your age. Just you’ve got farther to stretch than most boys. But don’t be talking about all this space stuff with your ma, all right?”

Clark nodded.

“Just another thing, though,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah Pa?”

“When you get the chance, would you please tell me everything you think I can handle?”

Clark grinned a wide grin. “Hey Pa,” he said, “see that picture of Europa in there?”

Jonathan turned to the rather spare artist’s conception of one of the four big moons of Jupiter. “That one?”

“Yeah, forget that,” Clark closed the book. “Think of a big frozen ocean with icy dunes rolling all over the surface like very slow tides. And below it – maybe just fifty or seventy feet in some spots – a colony underwater of like anemone kind of animals. No feet and practically all mouth. And little pseudopods hanging out all around them, driving them through the water like the oars of a galleon.”

“On Europa?” Jonathan said, his eyes widening. “Anemones? Alive?”

“Like anemones, only a little different. But big ones. Millions of them. And these plant things with spinning wings that propel them from place to place in the water.”

“Real water? With strychnine or ammonia or something?”

“No, real water. Cleaner than an artesian well. You could dig down and drink it if it didn’t freeze as fast as it does. I dug out some of it and took a bite. Tastes a little like lime.”

“Europa,” Jonathan said and smiled, “the Popsicle planet.”

“No joke. These guys’ll go there someday and boy will they be surprised. And there’s this different kind of life there. A plasma thing.”

“Plant life?”

“No, not plants. Not animals. Something different.”

They talked in whispers, Pa’s eyes getting wider and wider, until Martha finished putting away the dishes and came in, smiling, with the latest issue of Harper’s, and sat in her chair to read. Jonathan took her hand as he turned in his book to the page on Ganymede. Clark sat at the window, looking out across the countryside and began daydreaming about the grain of pollen he saw four-and-a-half miles away, caught up in the backwash of a sparrow’s flight as it was about to land on the face of a calla lily. A few hundred yards through the field from that calla lily the reigning monarch of a honeybee hive threw out a pod of newly hatched queen bees. Against all odds, one young queen survived and – against all instinct – a drone from her mother’s hive took upon her what passes among bees as pity. The drone nudged her under a blade of thistle, mated with her, and died. Rich with the genes of a rogue drone, perhaps she would mother a hive of stronger bees. Anything was possible; it was spring in the Heartland.

“There’s a new Vonnegut out, Clark,” Martha said. “Have you heard?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you liked Vonnegut. He’s got a new novel. Would you like me to get you a copy?”

“I read it already, thanks,” Clark said. “This afternoon. At the bookstore.”

“Really?” Ma wondered. “It just came out.”

It had not yet arrived in Charles Stone’s bookstore in Smallville, but Clark read, with x-ray and telescopic vision, a copy that sat on a shelf in Scribner’s on Jefferson Avenue in Topeka. Clark was sitting on the schoolbus heading home at the time. He liked the book, but he found it a bit self-conscious.

“The whole book?” Martha asked. “This afternoon?”

“Yeah, Ma” Clark said. “I read pretty fast.”

“Such a bright child,” Martha said to Jonathan, who squeezed her hand in thanks, and they went back to their reading.



Krypto’s vision of colors that he had never seen did not bother him. It was easier now to distinguish one thing from another at a greater distance. It made him more comfortable negotiating these great distances that his new speed made possible. And his eyes lit up from the inside. In the inky black of space there was something like light and something like more-than-light that guided his eyes.

His new-found sense of touch, shielded by the thin, steely coating of white fur all over him, was manageable as well. He could still feel the occasional molecules of the near-perfect vacuum as they bounced randomly against him.

The taste of the dry roof of his mouth on the beast’s ultra-sensitized tongue was something for which it looked as though Krypto needed to watch out, but he could deal with it. When he got somewhere there was food, he had to keep his mouth full: not a difficult preoccupation for a dog.

The flying was not bad at all. In fact, even where there was no air, it was fun.

The problem was the smells.

The moment he hit the first traces of the planet’s coat of air Krypto felt it. The scent of the world hit the walls of the dog’s lungs like an avalanche.

There was life here.

And growth.

And decay.

And fear.

And fire.

And magic.

And dishonesty.

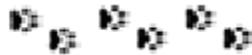
And violence.

And desperation.

And he smelled it. All of it. The moment he touched it.

The variety. The volume. He could not handle it. He arched his neck upward, shot into space again, bellowed all the air he could out of the depths of his lungs and wrung his head and chest back and forth until he could detect only the most minute residual trace of the scent of anything. But the residual scent of whatever was left troubled him. It was familiar and distant. An old smell, and it seemed days before it left the floor of his lungs.

It was only the dog's hunger that forced him, many meal cycles later, to approach a world with life aboard it again.



The boy was growing strong and his mother could not ignore it. And the crops this year: all the heavy lifting and the speed with which Clark finished his chores – all the weight he lifted from Jonathan's shoulders – could not account for these crops.

When Martha scolded Clark that day for spitting in a potted geranium he apologized and said he would not do it again. Then the next day she noticed that the geranium blossomed so it looked to have sprouted wings. Maybe the boy moved it so the sun hit it better.

Then there was Jonathan's angina. It was gone. She worried when the baby came that, heaven forbid, she might have to raise the child herself. Jonathan was getting chest pains here and there, and popping those little pills under his tongue and waking with sweats in the night. Once the child appeared, though, Jonathan seemed to have a new lease on life. Now, more than ten years later, her husband was tearing around the farm without a thought of his age or

any help other than his young son. He even looked younger. It was as though just being around Clark is curative.

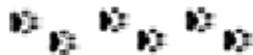
If there was a patch of tough land in Kansas – granted, a difficult thing to come by – then she thought it had to be the Kent farm. Jonathan and his father before him seemed to pull every radish and soybean from the earth by brute force. Martha’s father-in-law was gone by the time she married Jonathan. She knew longevity – or the lack of it – was in the genes, but Jonathan’s smile made whatever few years they would have together worth it. Still, the wheat crop was getting taller and denser every year. Alfalfa grew here like weeds these days.

Even the acre-and-a-half Martha set aside for herself to grow vegetables for the family and fruit for canning was producing bumper crops. She had blue-ribbon watermelons at the county fair the past two years in a row, and Clark had to set up a produce stand on Hankins Road at the end of the lane to try and cajole visiting city folk into taking home an overflow load of squash or carrots. Those carrots were two feet long, with lush leafy tops that grew shoulder-to-shoulder no matter how far apart Martha set them in their rows.

Jonathan was beginning to talk idly about setting aside a dozen acres or so for grapes. A vineyard. In Kansas.

Since he was a baby, Clark liked to walk through the fields and the gardens, breathing deeply, playing in the soil, slobbering with the dogs and the horses, growing too. And since he arrived, there was no more griping over the sorry fate of the Kents on this singularly uncooperative farm. It was as if, idly, he left tiny traces of his own vigorous self among the living things: a breath, a flaking cell of his skin, a bead of spittle – and for that, they were stronger.

Martha noticed these things. Then she dismissed them. It was difficult to dismiss them when the child began to fly, but she managed.



Krypto could not shake the scent. It was not unpleasant; it was just there, is all. With the new power that surged through Krypto’s body, the old smells were not so pleasant any more. The other dogs, chow at wakeup time, the snapping backwash of the electronic interactions in the Tootz’ machinery: it

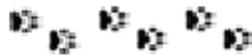
was all a blur, a buzz, a disjoint overpowering odor without any character. When you could smell everything at once all you wanted was the oblivion of space and the memories of what things smelled like once. But there was this lingering scent, this rogue molecule kicking around Krypto's olfactory pipes and he could not shake it loose, not for years. It became part of him.

Then from space he espied a hill of the bones of some extinct beasts. Diving toward them through a mountain of clouds, among the disorienting smells of a world crawling with life, he caught the scent again. It was a fresh scent, bouncy and alive, not at all what you might expect to detect in the upper atmosphere of a planet whose life is mostly on the ground and in a methane sea.

Krypto feasted on the bones, wrung out his head fast and hard enough to create a small low-pressure pattern along the corridor through which he rose back into space, and tried to keep the familiar scent from reaching his lungs. He was unable to do that, and before too long there were a pair of little cells of biomass kicking around Krypto's olfactory pipes, tripping off unsought-out dormant tendrils of memory synapses in his brain, tugging at his consciousness.

He crashed headlong through a shower of meteoroids, playing at seeing how deeply he could fly and how fast without shattering any of the rocks on his hide. He spied a comet whose tail was waning as it receded from its primary star, and whipped in circles around its aft end, yipping soundlessly in the void, to see whether he could get the tail to grow for a moment. He shut his eyes and launched himself into interstellar space and felt for the ghostly pockets of faint heat that let him know the husk of a former star had passed by. He felt for the tug of a black hole in space and swam through the emptiness toward it, sniffing for the traces of short-lived particles that it tossed out like crumbs from the mouth of a ravenous beast so intent on consuming all around it that it misses a morsel here or there. The sucking gravitation of the former star soothed him, massaged his skin and fur as he pulled away from it and let himself drift closer. It kneaded his bones, felt like a touch he once knew of a boy who loved him.

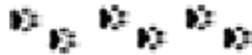
Then he realized.



On Earth, Clark Kent took up a mantle that, he had hopes, would come to represent something of a tradition one day. As dusk gathered that day, on the hill overlooking the little village there was a sight no one had ever seen before.

There beside Totten Pond Road stood a black-haired boy in a costume of primary colors. A red cape billowed behind him. Red boots, blue tights, and a blue shirt stretched over powerful muscles. An irregular pentagon containing a stylized "S" blazed over the boy's chest and cape. On that hill, silently and solemnly, he promised himself and whatever else might hear his thoughts that his life would be devoted to the preservation of life; that he would use his powers whenever possible to save and improve the conditions of life and of living things everywhere; that under no circumstances would he ever be responsible for the loss of a single conscious life; that failing in these affirmations, he would renounce his power forever.

There could be no nobler mission for a superman.



The boy was alive. Somewhere. Krypto could smell him.

Krypto felt for the thick, persistent scent in the guts of his lungs. It was the same child, there was no doubt. He knew the scent of Jor-El and Lara and all the shielded people at the hot light place, and the boy and everyone who came into or even near Jor-El's home. And the dog had grown even more able to distinguish smells since then. There were all the pirates of all their races and the beasts in the Tootz, and the constellations of races and personalities and distinctive scents of the beings with which the pirates came into contact over all that time, and of course there were the heightened sensibilities and the great many worlds with which Krypto had come in contact since the destruction of the ship. Krypto knew from smells. This scent was persistent, like the heartbeat of the Galaxy itself. Even Krypto's lungs could not expel it, not even in deep space. It was from somewhere extraordinary, something overpowering. And it was suddenly so familiar.

No matter how big the Universe was, no matter how dead Krypton was, no matter how divorced the dog was from his origins, no matter how definitively unlikely, this Krypto knew: the boy was alive. Somehow, he had been here. Somehow, he had grown strong.

Krypto needed no food or air and could live in space playing with his amazing abilities forever, as far as he knew. The need to survive never took hold of his motivations the way it does with other dogs who take to the wild. He ate only for fun, explored only for curiosity – curiosity, now there was a new idea growing in him only since the coming of his powers – and feared nothing. But now there was something he wanted.

He caught the scent again. Always it was on a world with life on it. Mostly he could walk on these worlds and no creature would think it odd. Krypto found that few creatures in the Universe other than humans – even highly intelligent creatures like yeast people and dogs – ever thought much of anything was odd. To most denizens of the worlds of his travels, Krypto was simply another sniffing, growling, occasionally nipping colleague. To some he was a dog. Dogs seemed to appear wherever humanoids did, after all. If Krypto's mind went to a scientific bent – which it did not – he might have pondered this, but even with his stepped-up sensibilities, he was not much for pondering.

There were a handful of planets where Krypto found traces of the boy's scent. They were all far-flung and disparate – except for the presence of life. Then one day he caught the boy's scent on a desolate rock that spun off in the outer darkness many light-hours away from its primary star.

Krypto could not imagine why all the planets on which he had found traces of the boy were homes to some form of life. He did not consider why, but he did notice that this world was something different. It was a big rock covered by chemical ice and so dark that Krypto kept smashing into strange icebergs floating in the air despite constantly keeping his eye lights on.

The scent of the boy was strong here. He had been here recently, and there was little atmosphere and no interference to wipe away his coming. Krypto circled the world, sniffing, and touched down on an outcropping of ice. The boy had been here. Right here.

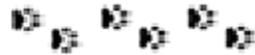
The dog hopped up on a platform. If he could measure such things, he might have realized that this pattern in the ice had to have been cut by someone. It was regular and flat, unlike the rest of the jagged world. Krypto did not have to realize this, though. His senses told him other things.

Living things left a marker behind, not just of their scent. There was an electromagnetic pulse that Krypto could not name but he could feel. This, he could feel far more strongly even than a super-human. All dogs can. When the

master goes away for awhile, a dog will sleep where the master sat or where the master lay, not just for the smell, but for the familiarity in the whisper of space around him. Here, on this crystal petrochemical shelf, frozen as hard as iron, Krypto felt to be the puppy frolicking with a man-baby on a giant dying world.

He spent a long time there, lying on the ice, long after the condensation of the trace atmosphere began to freeze a thin film around him. For awhile it got slightly darker and Krypto realized that the distant sun had set beyond this world's horizon. It was hardly a sun at all; more like a bright star among a cluster of other stars. When it came up, though, Krypto idly raised his eyes to watch its journey across the firmament, and in the first moments of lightrise he noticed an odd phenomenon. A thin trail of ions dusted their way up from the spot where the dog lay, and stretched through the sky as far as he could see.

Little particles, nearly imperceptible even by the dog's stepped-up senses, drew a path far into space, in the direction of that little star. There was no scent to follow through space, but there was a trail nonetheless.



“Are you sure this was a good idea, Jonathan?” Martha wanted to know.

“What idea was that, honey?” Jonathan rolled over so his mouth could face the night rather than the pillow.

“This costume thing. This hero thing”

“Hero’s what other people call him. He’s just our boy is all.”

“Disguised, though. Maybe we should get him a white horse and silver bullets too.”

“Now Martha.”

“And a mask.”

“Martha.”

“Well when he stopped those petty thieves last week – ”

“And weren’t you proud of him for that?”

“Of course I was. But it seemed undignified somehow.”

“Not much dignity in getting robbed neither.”

“No I don’t suppose.”

“Not by a load of crackpots in a ten-year-old Buick, ‘specially.’”

“But the flying and the ... the grandstanding.”

“You’d rather he scored touchdowns like normal boys?”

“Well, it’d be normal.”

“He’s not normal.”

She was quiet. She did not want to hear that.

“He’s just not from around here,” he said, rolling over toward her.

“I know that. But we don’t know where.”

“Where?”

“Where he’s from.”

“I thought you stopped worrying about that when he first started to talk.”

“I did. I really did, Jonathan. I’m just afraid, that’s all.”

“No don’t tell me you’re afraid of the boy.”

“No of course not. How could I? I’m just afraid ...”

“Of?”

“Of the enemies he’ll make. Of that big red-and-yellow target on his chest. Of how long he’ll be with us.”

“Shh. Martha, calm down. I know. Shh. Come here.”

“I’m sorry. I need him. I don’t want to give him away. I need him like I need you. And he’s alone.”

“What do you mean he’s alone? He’s got a family.”

“Oh what’s there for him from old folks like us? He’s all alone, and now we’re making him some kind of ... of symbol. I don’t like it.”

“We’re all alone, Martha. We’re farm folks. We’ve been alone all our lives. That’s the way people live. It’s what we’re here to do.”

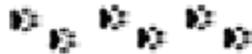
“Oh don’t be getting all universal and religious on me, Jonathan Kent. You haven’t been to church since the last time you washed the dishes.”

“You know he can hear us, right?”

“Why would he listen?”

“How could he help it?”

In his room down the hall Clark lay awake, listening and crying a little. He tried to remember the little spacecraft and how it might have felt to be inside it. He tried to remember how long he was in it and where it might have come from. All his memory could summon up were smells. After awhile he slipped out a window and went flying until dawn.



He had never seen a planet so lousy with life. He never really saw much of Krypton, but the dog was sure it could not have been like this. It was a small- to medium-sized planet, too close to its sun for Krypto’s taste, made mostly of melted water patched with land. Even the clouds had things living in them. Tiny animals lived in the dewdrops. Here were big animals and small animals and plants on the ground and in the sea and floating free in the sky. There were tiny bacteria and viruses made of just one molecule. Huge things swam in the water and herding things rumbled on the dirt and they had enormous hearts and brains and families and identities and they all came at him in great swarms. Even the life had life. Little animals lived with big animals. Insects grazed from the hides of mammals and the petals of flowers. And

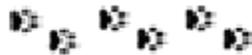
everything big enough to have more than one cell, no matter how small, had smaller things living in the cells, like tiny machine cities processing nutrients and pumping out goods and services. Anywhere there was air to breathe or water to suck up or a foothold to wish for such things, there was life. It was chaos here, and for the smell of the boy that was in everything, it was dog heaven.

It was difficult to distinguish the smells. To distinguish the sounds was impossible. And it did not matter whether Krypto could pick out the smell of one thing over another here because the boy smell was in all of it. It seemed the whole planet was the boy's home, and everything had the boy in it. It did. Everywhere he went – and by now that was virtually everywhere over the Earth and its environs – Clark left pieces of himself. A cell. A breath. An idea. The strength of the life of this world was growing for those pieces of Clark. It would grow more still. Krypto could feel it.

There was a vitality here that the dog had found nowhere else in all his travels. This was a planet in rebirth, and it was not even aware of it yet. It was a baby not yet moved to yelp. It was euphoria.

But he could not find the boy. The scent of the boy in everything was overpowering. To find the boy himself among all this would be like finding a strand of hay in a haystack.

So Krypto went to the place where life was thickest. He went to a place on the edge of the land and the water where man-made stars lit up a warren of humans. A huge colony of millions of men scurried through their lives here, being born, building things, dying and being born again. The little white dog rose into the night sky of this warren's harbor and he howled.

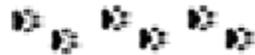


Few people remember the Metropolis Air Raid of that year. Portions of the city lost their power. Hundreds of windows, especially in new buildings not yet sealed to the elements, blew outward into the streets. Homes rattled and books fell off shelves. Children woke crying in the night. Alarms went off spontaneously. The police department called up all their on-call officers. The Governor got a request for a National Guard alert, but it passed before the

Governor peeled himself from his bed. And a huge wailing from the sky blanketed the city and its suburbs for nearly a minute.

The Federal government launched an investigation into possible causes. The rumor was that a foreign satellite was testing out a new offensive weapon, and many in the National Security Agency believed it and still do. When the government issued its final report on the subject, it contained an authoritative account of how a short circuit in the power grid upstate set off a chain reaction of emergency shutdowns, and it all proved that a whole bunch of secret crisis-management systems worked the way they were supposed to work.

The disturbance was nothing of the sort, but by the time the report came out nobody really cared very much any more. People were just too busy.



What happened was that the boy, floating idly above Kansas on a hot sleepless night heard the howl and turned eastward.

He saw the beast hanging in the sky high above the city, its mouth pursed as though to whistle, with a mournful bellow coming from deep in its chest. It was so small, this little white thing, and it made such a loud noise.

“Shh,” the boy said, approaching, and the beast suddenly stopped howling and stared. And it sniffed.

“Shh,” the boy said again, in something like the boy’s voice and with a smell like the boy’s smell. “What’s wrong?”

The beast looked at him for a moment. He was bigger, but so was Krypto. And stronger. And hovering in the sky.

“You can fly?” the boy asked. He was too incredulous to wonder at the tugging in the distant reaches of his memory.

Krypto circled around him, inspecting him. Was it really the boy? His scent was everywhere here, so it could be anyone. Flying.

It took longer for the boy to warm to Krypto, longer to reach beyond the wonder into the traces of recognition. But Krypto stopped circling and, hovering in the sky, crouched with his forelegs stretched forward, as if on the ground and inviting a playmate.

“You’re a dog,” the boy said, “right?” Then he wondered what answer he might have expected.

“You’re my dog, right?”

And Krypto’s boy came to him and gingerly petted him along the grain of his steely fur. Then the boy petted him harder, roughly so he could feel it.

The boy’s hair and the red cape hanging off his neck landed in the dog’s mouth and Krypto chewed on it until it was as wet as a gnawed bone. And the boy nipped at Krypto’s nose and Krypto scraped at the boy’s bottom with his paw and they both hit and scraped and squeezed at each other some more because they could not hurt each other.

“They love each other,” the boy heard someone say in his memory.

And the boy rumbled something unintelligible from the depths of his changing voice. And the dog snorted with contentment. And they loved each other.

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