

The Wild-Goose Chase

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Rated PG

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Summary: Looking for Superman's spaceship and finding a Godzilla doll instead shouldn't make Lois happy. So why is she wearing a smile on her face when she returns to the Daily Planet? Read and find out in this alternate ending to Neverending Battle!

Hi FoLCs!

This fic was born of an urge to show Lois' adventures at the end of Neverending Battle. And the rest that followed? Well, let's just say, my muse does have a mean streak to her :D

Kudos to Kmar, Mona, and Mellie for helping me put this one together and to Erin for getting it ready for the Archive :)

I hope you had fun reading, and if you'd like to leave me a comment or two, please feel free to post on the Fanfic-board (http://www.lcficmbs.com/ubb/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=6;t=001635) or just send me an e-mail. It is always appreciated,

Michael

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This story is an alternate ending for Neverending Battle. The setup is therefore based on the script by Dan Levine.

Blocks in [] are literal thoughts by the character.

Rating: PG

Clark was pretty satisfied with himself. Not only was Superman back in the skies, but he had also managed to avert a simple — but most certainly fatal — accident when he had rescued that little girl earlier in the day. He had even gotten an above-the-fold headline out of it, and the fact that it was one of those feel-good stories that he enjoyed doing the most certainly hadn't hurt either. The only blemish on it all was that it was all thanks to Lois Lane, or more precisely, the fact that he had sent her on a wild-goose chase through Metropolis' smelly underbelly.

"Good work, Kent." His boss' praising voice brought Clark back to the here and now, namely his desk in the Daily Planet's newsroom, where he stood surrounded by the Chief, Jimmy, and Ms. Grant — he still refused to think of her as 'Cat'.

"Thank you, sir. Just in the right place at the right time, I guess," he responded, accepting the praise but unwilling to bask in it. After all, how could he, when he had just done something his mother would box his ears for if she ever found out? Sure, Lois had been a first-rate... itch during the entire episode, but in the end she had shown him that she still cared. [At least for Superman,] Clark's inner voice added with a sour tone. Okay, so maybe he wasn't all that worked up over his colleague trotting through the dirt.

"That's what being a good reporter is all about," Mr. White continued before giving him an appreciative pat and a nod to keep up the good work.

"Thank you, sir," Clark responded again. He really needed to come up with a better comeback if he intended to keeping up the good work; otherwise, this would start sounding repetitive pretty soon. And a repetitive reporter was the last thing his boss needed, or wanted.

The ephemerality of the editor's goodwill was promptly displayed when the older man focused his attention on Jimmy. "Where the hell is my fish?" he barked.

"I'm working on it," the office gopher replied evasively even as their boss walked away, already on the lookout for someone else slacking off. Jimmy, too, immediately turned his attention back to subjects more interesting than his latest chore, and apparently the article on Superman's return to the skies was it. "Let there be no mistake. Metropolis is my home now. I'm here to stay," Jimmy quoted Clark's words. "That should make life pretty interesting."

Clark tried his best to provide his colleagues with a noncommittal nod, one that said, 'I'm a reporter; I like interesting stories,' instead of 'I'm Superman; I know it's going to be interesting.'

"Yeah, but where's the story behind the story?" the Planet's gossip columnist chimed in as she leaned on the partitioning on the side of his desk. "Where's the... juicy stuff?"

Clark thought he could see her eyes light up, and if the impression he had gotten from her was accurate, her definition of 'juicy stuff' was not something printable in a newspaper. At least, no newspaper sold outside of an adult book store. Then his attention got sidetracked by the elevator's chime and his wayward colleague's return to their place of work.

"Where's the dirt?" the Planet's dirt digger continued to present her thoughts on what constituted a good story.

Clark warred for a second with his conscience before he succumbed to the temptation and pointed out to his two co-workers the return of Lois Lane. "I think that's coming in right now."

Jimmy and Ms. Grant both turned their heads to follow the direction of his outstretched finger, their eyes bugging as they took in the disheveled appearance of the Planet's star reporter. Her formerly cream and beige ensemble sported numerous darker spots, and the foul odor crawling into his nose gave him a good indication of their origin. Her nylons had more runs than Clark could count — and he really did try to — and just when his wandering eyes found her feet, he saw that both her shoes were missing their heels, explaining why she appeared to be shorter than usual.

Jimmy's question about what had happened brought his eyes back up to her face before they got distracted again by Lois' left hand, presently involved in scratching a red spot where her blouse didn't cover her neckline.

"Nothing," she responded smugly. "Nothing at all." Then his colleague turned to face them fully, and Clark froze at the sparkle in her eyes. "I just didn't have time to go home and change," she continued while she scratched the back of her head with her right hand. "After all, what's a bit of mud and a couple dozen mosquito bites when I have a story to write?" She afforded the stunned trio a blazing smile and started to move towards her own desk. "Oh, and Jimmy — " Lois turned back around and dug through the pocket of her blazer.

"Yeah...?"

She pulled a black film container out and held it in the younger man's face. "Develop those pictures for me, would you?"

Several hours earlier

A piercing shriek echoed through the catacombs of the Metropolis sewer system before it was superseded by the verbal equivalent of the foul stench that permeated the air. Swearing sailors had nothing on Lois Lane's vocabulary, especially while she was laying face-down in the dirt.

"Those pumps cost me 80 bucks..." Lois muttered as she was slowly picking herself up, the torn-off heel in her right hand. "What did I do to deserve this?" She gave the leather-covered piece of wood a contemptuous glare before she sent it flying into the muddy flow to her right. Between the wet, filth, and foul odor, the shoes would have been doomed to the trash even if she hadn't broken the heel.

"Why can't you hide your ship somewhere *nice*?" The once-clean star reporter gave her gloomy surroundings a contemptuous glare. "Like an abandoned warehouse? Or the Lex-Store on the East Side?" She bent down and grabbed a crumpled sheet of paper from the dirt-covered ground where it had landed during her ignominious fall. "But *no*, you had to hide it in the sewer system." Her eyes searched the arching top of the cavernous labyrinth. "What self-respecting superhero hides his spaceship in the sewer system? Huh...?"

With a final shake of her head, Lois adjusted to the new norm and squinted as she stroked out the hand-drawn map. At least, it hadn't landed in the gunk that slowly gurgled past her. A few seconds later, she realized that she had no idea how much further the secret lair of the superhero was and consigned herself to trotting on, one limp at a time because there was *no* way she was going to walk through the sewers without shoes.

This situation lasted for only a couple dozen steps, then Lois decided to do something about the excessive limping. Propping her left hand against the wall, she pulled off her right shoe, glared at the heel, and sharply banged it against the wall. The two-inch heel snapped off, and Lois eyed the end-result skeptically. She would still walk funny, but at least she wouldn't be toggling like a drunken sailor with a peg leg.

Three blisters later, the intrepid reporter leaned her back against the wall and hung her head. The hand clutching the map swung listless by her side while she used the other to push her mud-streaked hair from her forehead. At least, she hoped it was only *mud* that she had transferred to her hair during another spectacular fall when she had tried to jump over a crossing a while back. Which had brought her here...

Wherever 'here' was because she was lost. Completely and utterly lost. That much she knew for certain, and the only upside was that she could always crawl back into the daylight through one of the grate-covered entrances she came by every so often. All she had to do was admit defeat. Admit that Lois Lane didn't get the story. A snort escaped her nose. As if *that* was going to happen! Superman's spaceship was down here *somewhere*, and she was going to find it and show that hack that she did *not* need to steal a story to get the front page.

Her spirits rejuvenated, Lois pulled herself together and resumed her search for the Holy Grail of headlines. The only concession to her disheveled condition was her left hand, which she now ran along the wall for support. At least this way, she stood a chance of not getting more dirt on her outfit. [Not that it mattered much,] she mused silently as she considered her ruined combination. "The smart costume for the working woman of today." Lois rolled her eyes as she remembered the slogan advertising the spring line of

Lex-Wear for women. She really should do an exposé on the misogynistic fraud committed by that ad, because apparently, today's working women still only served coffee to their bosses instead of succeeding on their own.

Several dozen curses later, Lois reached yet another passage crossing the one where she was presently stumbling forward on her journey through the more scenic parts of the city. Up until now, every time she had reached a crossing, she had been able to basically step across the disgusting brew that flowed beside the raised walkway. This time, though, it looked like she had stumbled onto the mother of all sewer lines — the tube was big enough to drive a small truck through!

"Oh, that's just great..." Lois muttered under her breath before she zeroed in on a stone lying on the floor. A sharp kick later, and the good-sized pebble made its way across the mud and hit the wall on the other side with a satisfying echo. "Too bad I can't just —"

Lois stopped when she heard a faint voice drifting up from down the larger tunnel. "...was a noise."

"Marks, I'm tellin' ya, ya're startin' to hear things." The second voice sounded closer, was distinctly male, and accompanied by footsteps.

"Crap!" Lois hissed between her clenched teeth before she edged back down the path where she had come from.

"Well, if *I'm* the one hearing things, how come *you're* the one leading the way to figure out what it was?" The second voice was also coming closer; the deep growl reminded Lois of the boxers she had hung out with in Menken's Gym when she was ten.

"'Cause I'm not goin' to explain to the Colonel why I didn't take guardin' the artifacts seriously."

[What colonel? What artifacts?] Even in her precarious situation, the particular references didn't escape her trained senses. Not that it mattered, because she didn't expect much pleasantness in her future if she was found by two guys who spent their days lurking in the sewers.

A faint halo of light appeared from the big cavern, telling Lois that the thugs were much better equipped than she was. The heavy footsteps could now be heard clearly on the wet ground, squishing and squashing as they brought her unseen foes closer.

Any second now they would reach the corner, and the usually brave reporter could feel her heart thumping in her throat. She pressed her back against the clammy stones that served as a wall and inched back further.

Her hand fell to the pocket of her blazer, and she searched for the small cylinder containing the pepper spray she always carried for situations such as this. It wasn't there! Then she remembered the swarm of mosquitoes or whatever those gnats were she had stumbled upon. Now, *that* hadn't been her finest hour, and she was grateful her co-workers hadn't witnessed the pitiful dance as she had fought with the bloodthirsty creatures. And to add insult to injury, the pepper spray hadn't even worked on them! Of course, none of that mattered now.

Lois pressed herself even closer against the rough concrete, no longer caring about the dirt and the... things that clung to it. Maybe her clothes were dirty enough by now to act as natural camouflage paint.

The cone of light grew more distinct, telling Lois that her pursuers had almost reached the corner. One more step and...

She was barely able to stifle a scream when she stumbled backwards into a smaller side-tunnel. Despite her

surprise, Lois still managed to grab the wall, holding herself up; if she were to fall now, her safe haven would be ruined.

A second later, her balance was restored, and she held herself perfectly still, listening to the voices that echoed through the semi-darkness around her. “See? There’s nobody...”

Lois’ eyes went wide when she felt a weight on her head — a moving weight! Before, she had stood frozen in an attempt to be invisible; now, it was out of sheer, blank terror.

“...corner...”

The weight continued to move even as additional scraps of the conversation managed to drift through Lois’ panicked haze. She was trapped, something was crawling all over her head, and she needed a distraction.

Clenching her teeth almost to the point of shattering them, she reached up to her head and felt something cylindrical, furry. Her eyes went even wider and her breath became stuck in her throat. Still, she continued to move her hand carefully, suppressing the natural desire to jump around and screech in complete horror.

By now, Lois had completely disassociated herself from her arm, imaging that the limb was a mere appendage that did its mistress’ bidding as it grabbed the squiggling body and pulled it away from her hair. Her once clean, shiny, bouncy hair. Hair, she’d probably need to cut off and burn when this endeavor was over.

A few more inches and the disgusting critter was in front of her, staring at Lois with black, beady eyes set in a white face. Suppressing the odd combination to gag and faint, Lois flung the opossum towards the main walkway before collapsing back against the wall, her lungs furiously pumping air.

“What the...?” One of the guys, Marks, was speaking again.

There was a low thud and a squeak, followed by a splash. “I hate rats.”

“I told ya it was nothin’.”

“Yeah? Well, at least, now we can tell Trask that there’s nothing but rats down here.”

Trask? Lois’ mind kick-started again, and she tried to listen closer without actually moving.

“I hate rats...”

“I hear ya!”

Lois let a deep breath escape her lips when she heard Marks and his buddy walk back towards their guard post.

After another minute or two, Lois’ heart had calmed down enough so she could ponder the implications of what she had heard. Trask was down here. And he had brought his U.F.O.s with him. The very same unidentified junk that she and Kent had found in the warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard before the rogue Air Force officer had cleaned out his shop and vanished without a trace. And now she knew where he had vanished to.

The intrepid reporter stepped out into the middle of the walkway, her arms crossed in front of her, the map clutched in her hand. Somebody had given her a map that was supposed to lead her to Superman’s spaceship, and now she had found Trask’s hideout. She smacked her lips. The implications were perfectly clear. She hadn’t been setup. She had followed the trail perfectly. And now she was going to catch Bureau 39, Colonel Trask, and Superman’s spaceship all in one day’s work. Life was good. Especially for an ace reporter like Lois Lane.

Confident that she had just secured herself another Kerth-winning exclusive, Lois took careful note of the sewer lines as she made her way to the nearest surface exit. People, and by people she mainly meant her editor, might call her reckless, but she never took *unnecessary* risks, and now that she knew where Trask was hiding out, there was no reason to stumble in there without any backup and risk the story. Besides, skydiving without a parachute was *not* among her favorite pastimes, even *if* it ended with Superman carrying her in his strong arms, pressed against his hard chest.

Two left turns, one right, and another left turn later, she had reached the short exit tunnel and started up the flight of stairs before the grate covering the entrance stopped her. Lois eyed the two-by-five feet gridiron, pondering the rusty hinges on its long side. She knew from experience that she could lift it if she had to, and it looked like she really had to this time. On the plus-side, though, since her clothes were already ruined, she wouldn’t have to worry about rust stains. Biting her lower lip, the reporter took a deep breath, muttered a heartfelt ‘Here goes nothing...’ and started for the gridiron that lay between her and the nearest phone booth.

At first, the cover didn’t budge even an inch, but when Lois climbed another step and started to rattle the grid, she was rewarded by a crunching sound from the hinges. She added another step for leverage and the grate began to swing open. Using the momentum, she continued to push, adjusting her grip as she climbed her way back into the daylight and her first whiff of fresh air since she had entered Metropolis’ underworld.

The stench of various bodily excretions was horrific as it wafted over Lois as soon as she had exchanged the sewers for a back-alley in what looked like Suicide Slum. Shocked, she bit down the urge to choke, held her left arm in front of her face, and stumbled out onto the street as fast as she could. If she had known what she was in for, she might have chosen to face Trask and his bullies all by herself after all.

As soon as she had left the public convenience for Metropolis’ less fortunate behind, she dropped her arm and leaned against a wall, taking deep, gulping breaths. Never had exhaust fumes smelled sweeter.

With her equilibrium restored, the slightly disheveled investigator took a look through watery eyes in either direction of the street, trying to spot the nearest phone booth. Not seeing one of the familiar grey and red huts past the throngs of people clogging up the sidewalk, she tried to stand on her toes, cursing the broken-off heels and the loss in height that came with it.

Finally, Lois thought she saw something about a block down the street and squinted to confirm her suspicion. Satisfied that she had, indeed, spotted a phone booth, she took off in a wobbly gait, barely paying attention to the people scrambling out of her way without her having to employ so much as a well-planted elbow.

When she reached the pay phone, Lois was already mentally rehearsing her impending conversation with Henderson. The police inspector tended to take charge of her investigations as soon as she invited him to join into the fun, and she had to make sure he understood that Metropolis’ Finest were merely lending her a hand. Thus preoccupied, Lois didn’t notice the half-way passed-out drunk who used the small booth as shelter until she reached for the phone. Glaring down, the reporter pointed towards

the sidewalk outside the booth. “Would you mind...?”

“This’ my booth...” the man slurred back, not moving more than his arm to gesticulate her away. “Go, get cha own...”

Lois gritted her teeth, suppressing the urge to vent her pent-up frustrations on the lone soul in front of her. “I just need to make a quick phone call to the police and then you can — ”

She didn’t get to finish the sentence because the bum started to roll and crawl out of the booth, an empty bottle of cheap booze clanging as it dropped to the floor. “No need to call the — “ A loud belch muffled the rest and the wet cough that followed made Lois very wary of where she would put her feet next.

Once the rag-clothed man had finished leaving the booth, he pulled himself up against the doorframe and eyed Lois through bleary eyes before wrinkling his nose. “You smell, lady...” Before she could utter a single retort, he staggered away, thankfully towards the glass-covered storefront of a shabby diner instead of the street.

Disregarding the incident now that it was behind her, Lois focused again on the job at hand, namely getting in touch with Henderson. She carefully stepped over the puddle of spit and vomit and reached for the phone, trying to avoid touching it as much as possible. She quickly punched in 9-1-1 and waited for the operator to answer the phone.

“Metropolis Police Department, please state your name, location, and the emergency you are reporting,” a bored, female voice answered.

“Hello?” Lois started. “I need you to connect me to Inspector Henderson of the Twelfth Precinct.”

“I’m not a switchboard operator. But if you tell me your name, location, and the emergency, I’ll send a squad car,” the woman answered stoically.

Taking a deep breath, Lois carefully chose her answer. After all, she didn’t have her purse with her and she needed to use the free phone line to get in touch with Henderson. “Fine, my name is Lois Lane, I’m a reporter and stranded in Suicide Slum. The emergency is that I need you to patch me through to Inspector *Bill* Henderson right now because all my emergency quarters have rolled down a sewage drain.”

“You sure have nerve, lady.” The voice now sounded just a tad agitated. “Prank calls are a felony and I have no — ”

“Look,” Lois interrupted the operator with forced calm. “You can either put me through to Inspector Henderson or you can send a squad car and I tell the officer when he arrives.”

“Or I could just hang up since this is obviously not an emergency,” came the suspiciously quick-witted retort.

“You do that, and I’ll just dial that number again and again until I find someone willing to listen,” Lois shot back, not willing to put up with the stuck-up bureaucrat manning the call-center.

There was a sigh on the other end of the line. “The Twelfth Precinct, you say?”

Lois let go of a relieved breath. “Yes. Inspect — ”

“Okay,” the faceless voice on the other end of the line interrupted her rather rudely, and Lois decided that she must be talking to a fat, middle-aged woman who only had her cats to keep her company. “Here’s what I’m going to do. I’ll put you through to the boys over at the Twelfth and let them deal with you.”

“You are?” Lois exclaimed with relieved surprise, but

the line had already gone on hold without as much as a friendly goodbye. Not that she had expected one.

“Metro PD, Twelfth Precinct, Officer Fackler speaking,” the male voice interrupted Lois’ thoughts a couple of seconds later.

“Fackler?” Lois replied, thinking she remembered the officer, fresh out of the police academy who often manned one of the reception desks when she hunted Henderson down for one factoid or other. “It’s Lois Lane, and I need to speak to Henderson right away.”

There was a short pause, and Lois could see the startled look in front of her mind’s eye. Fackler never was the fastest one to grasp the seriousness of a situation, but he usually came through and would wave her by so she could find Henderson herself. “The Inspector is in a meeting right now, Ms. Lane.”

Lois rolled her eyes but forced herself to remain calm. “Look, this really can’t wait, and I’m sure Henderson will agree if I get the chance to tell him,” she pleaded.

This time the pause was considerably longer, then she heard the officer’s voice again, “Okay, Ms. Lane. I’ll go and fetch the Inspector. But if you get me in trouble, next month’s donuts are on your tab.”

Recognizing a bargain when she saw one, Lois enthusiastically agreed and leaned against the glass wall while she waited for Henderson. At least this time, she didn’t have to listen to elevator music; instead, she could pick up the odd snippet of conversation.

Two minutes later, Lois was just listening to an elderly woman complaining about the ‘prostitutes opening a brothel right next door’ when the familiar voice of her favorite member of the Metropolis police force overshadowed the background noise. “This had better be important, Lois, because the Captain was not too happy about me cutting his briefing short.”

“Thank god, Henderson,” Lois exclaimed with a breath of relief. “You have *no* idea what I had to put up with to get you on the line.”

“To the point, Lois!” Henderson interrupted her, reminding the reporter that he wasn’t the most patient of men.

“Right. Do you remember that explosion in the sky over Metropolis a couple of weeks ago?”

“I think so. Wasn’t that the one where you sent a S.W.A.T. team to an abandoned warehouse?”

Happy that Henderson didn’t need a refresher-course, Lois jumped right in. “Exactly. And I have just figured out where they are now.”

“You’re not in a plane, are you?” a suddenly very concerned voice interjected.

“No, and what’s that supposed to mean?” Lois responded testily before continuing without waiting for an answer. “In fact, I actually went out of my way to call you instead of apprehending the goons myself.”

“Lois, is everything all right?” Henderson sounded extremely worried all of a sudden. “Are you hurt? Should I be sending in an ambulance?”

“No-oh,” Lois drawled. “I’m not hurt, and if that’s the way you treat me calling for assistance, I’ll know better than to call you the next time I have a hot lead and need some support.”

There was some mumbling on the other end of the line, and when Henderson’s voice returned, he sounded all business. “Okay, so what exactly is it that you want from me?”

Lois stood next to Henderson as they both watched the black-clad members of the anti-terrorist taskforce secure the perimeter. It had taken surprisingly little effort on Lois' part to convince the inspector of the seriousness of the situation once he had arrived on the scene, and thanks to a still standing warrant for the former Air Force colonel and his cohorts, events had unfolded quickly from there on out.

"Sir," a six-foot-four bear of a man addressed Henderson. "The area is secure and we've arrested seven heavily armed men. All of them appear to have a military background."

The police inspector nodded as he responded. "Good work, Sergeant. Any trace of Colonel Trask?"

The sergeant looked over his shoulder, surveying the dimly lit catacombs. "No, sir. Looks like he left operations in the charge of that guy over there." Lois' eyes followed the outstretched arm of the officer. "A Lieutenant Billings by his dog-tags. Seems to me like the Colonel recruited this whole bunch from dishonorably discharged Army and Air Force guys."

A grunted 'Hmm...' was all the response he got from Henderson, so he turned away to continue processing the suspects even as the inspector turned his attention back to Lois. "Well, looks like the big fish got away."

Lois shrugged. "Yeah... But I'm sure he will turn up again. Especially now that we have his toys." She made a step towards the makeshift warehouse they had uncovered during the raid. "Speaking of, can I borrow a camera?"

Henderson rushed after her, his hand on her shoulder. "Now hold it just a minute, Lois." When she stopped to glare at him, he continued. "This is still the scene of a police investigation, and we need to catalogue everything we find there."

Lois turned more fully towards him, her temper flaring as she pushed her right index-finger in the policeman's face. "No, Henderson, you listen. First, I've been the one to find them, and with considerable personal detriment, as you can see."

There was a twitch in Henderson's face, and Lois thought he was wrinkling his nose. She let it slide — once — because she had to admit, her clothes had taken on a distinct aroma. Although, how Henderson should be able to notice it in these surroundings was beyond her.

"Second, what are you worried about?" She turned and pointed towards the crates and tarps and meter-long pieces of twisted metal that were stored in the large cavern. "Certainly not me bagging one of the U.F.O.s and smuggling it out of here?"

By now, Henderson had raised both his hands, just slightly, but still noticeably, giving Lois a twinge of satisfaction in her stomach.

"And most importantly, you have promised *me* the exclusive." She stretched out her open palm, wiggling her fingers. "So give me a camera, let me take some pictures I can take back to Perry, and I'll be out of your way." [At least, until I check up on the wrecks in the police lab so Jimmy can get a couple of nice daylight shots,] she amended silently.

Henderson sighed audibly, shook his head, and turned towards a group of cops dressed in suits that milled about a couple of feet away from the action. "Hey, Zymack, I need to borrow your camera!"

The cop nodded and held up what looked like a standard-issue camera, the likes Lois was used to seeing

from other crime-scene investigations. At least that way she should be able to get some good shots.

"You stay here," Henderson told her with a no-nonsense tone of voice, before he walked over to Zymack to grab the camera, muttering something Lois wasn't quite able to understand, but it sounded suspiciously like this not being worth it.

Lois rolled her eyes, suppressed a sigh, and let her eyes wander once more across the large space while she scratched a mosquito bite on her neck. There really was a lot of stuff down here, and she wondered how she was going to identify Superman's spaceship. Most likely, it would be the biggest piece down here. Unless, of course, it had disintegrated during his landing on Earth. A frown suddenly marred her face. Which sounded more than likely the longer she thought about it. Superman hadn't flat out said so, but it was quite possible that he was stranded, and only his invulnerability had protected him during his crash.

Her eyes locked back on to Henderson, who was now quietly talking to one of his storm-troopers, the promised camera in his left hand, the right hand indicating something inside the warehouse. Lois was just about to go and snatch it from him when he nodded, patted the man's shoulder, and walked back to her.

"There you go, Lois," he told her as he offered her the Nikon. She grabbed the camera with a mumbled thanks and darted off towards her bounty when she heard Henderson right beside her. "But I'm coming with you, just to make sure everything is proper." Lois barely acknowledged him as she picked out the first object to ban on celluloid "Don't want Trask's boys to get off scot-free on a technicality, now do we?"

"Yah... yah... yah..." Lois responded distractedly as she pulled a tarp off a... weather balloon and took a few commemorative shots. The reporter continued to wander around, pulling away covers and peeking inside crates that stood neatly arranged to form makeshift passageways. She had managed a couple more worthwhile shots, and one of the wrecks she had stumbled upon even looked like it could have played the flying lead in the Roswell drama, but none of the ships screamed 'Superman' at her. It really started to look like whoever had drawn the map had tried to over-dramatize. Or maybe, one of the mercenaries had betrayed Trask and figured that sending Lois a map to Superman's spaceship instead of Trask's hideout was less likely to getting him killed if it fell into the wrong hands...

"Hey, Lois?"

Henderson's voice startled her back into the here and now, and she turned towards the source of the noise, her eyes growing wide. The inspector was in the process of uncovering a small... spaceship that was in remarkable shape. Lois moved towards him, eyeing the bluish hull with interest. It appeared to be about six or seven feet long, without a sharp corner to it, and a bulbous center. Something along the side caught her eye and she bent down to take a closer look — there really was a series strange letters on the hull. It reminded her of the script of that one race from Star Trek. The ugly guys with the wild hair; Vulcans, if she remembered correctly.

"So, what do you think?" Lois looked up and saw that Henderson had finished pulling the tarp off the ship and arranging it so the nose-cone remained covered before propping his foot up on top of the folded material. "I know, it's probably a fake but it's the best-looking one in here, and if you want to take a shot for the front page..."

The usually stoic lawman had his arms folded over his chest, and she knew he was right — this was the shot that would sell tomorrow's Planet. Lois flashed him an answering grin and a nod as she took a few steps back so she could get the entire ship and Henderson into the frame. Taking care to make the shot count, she quickly decided to take two more, just in case. Henderson wasn't usually this forthcoming, and whether the smell down here had made him drowsy or he was gunning for a promotion, she didn't know nor care as long as she got a good headline out of it.

"Got them," she told Henderson when she lowered the camera again and started looking around for more material even as she was composing the outline of the article in her head. And she had to admit, this made for an even better story than the one she would have gotten out of the warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard. After all, this way she didn't have to share the byline with Smallville. When she turned back towards the entrance of the cavern, Lois saw that Henderson's troops had started to pack up the first pieces, including the blue one from the victory shot.

Back in the Planet's newsroom

Clark continued to watch Lois as she exchanged a few more words with Jimmy, most of them threats of what she'd do to him if he messed up the shots, before his attention got sidetracked by a car accident happening two streets over.

When he got back to his desk, he noticed a Post-it with a scribbled note that Inspector Henderson had called for him. Curious about the message — he assumed it had to do with the bombing of the Carlin Building earlier this week — Clark reached for the phone and started dialing just as Lois limped over to his desk, a newspaper in her hand.

"I see you got today's front page?" she began without preamble and no trace of kindness in her voice.

He hung up the phone and turned his attention to Lois. "Don't tell me you've come over to congratulate me?" he asked her without any hopes of a positive answer. Apparently, sending her on a wild-goose chase through the sewer system hadn't turned out to be much of a character-building exercise for her.

"Congratulate you?" Lois' lips curved up slightly in a condescending half-grin. "Please, today's front page is already yesterday's news." She leaned closer, as if she was sharing a secret. "It's tomorrow's front page that counts."

Clark felt irritation creep into his voice as he retorted, "I see. And I guess you already dug it out?"

"What can I say?" She gave him a shrug and a smile that cracked one of the mud-flakes on her cheek. "A reporter has to go where the story takes her. Especially, if it's a big one."

"Like?" Clark asked, mildly intrigued even as he pondered the irony of how such a beautiful smile could front this viscous an inside.

"Oh, I don't know..." Her eyes sparkled like she was telling a joke, and Clark patiently waited for the punch-line. "For instance, do you remember that warehouse full of U.F.O.s that Trask managed to make disappear before I could write-up the story?"

When his only reaction was a noncommittal 'Uh-huh...?' Lois continued with her tale. "Well, they've turned up again, and you can read all about it on tomorrow's front page."

This time, Clark's eyes grew wide, and he wasn't able to suppress a coughing fit even as the blood drained from his face. "Tomorrow's front page?"

Lois eyed him for a moment as if he had just turned

green instead of white, then she answered over the laughter that bubbled up in her throat, "What, you think just because you've gotten lucky *once*, you'd get tomorrow's front page, too?"

He was barely able to utter a response, but it appeared to be enough for Lois as she shook her head and swatted his shoulder with the folded morning edition. "Only in your dreams, Kent, only in your dreams." She laughed again, dropped the newspaper on his desk, and turned to limp back to her own, leaving a stunned Clark Kent behind.

THE END