

# Soul Desire

By **Deadly Chakram** <dwelf82@yahoo.com>

Rated: PG 13

Submitted: January 2012

Summary: A great evil is loose in Metropolis, seeking to steal Superman's soul in order to bring about the end of the world. The fate of the world — and Superman — rests in the hands of four ancient heroes. Sequel to "Clarkus Maximus."

Disclaimer: I neither own nor make anything. All recognizable Lois and Clark characters, lines of dialogue, and plot points belong to DC comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd productions, and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. All recognizable Xena and Hercules characters, lines of dialogue, and plot points belong to Renaissance Pictures, Studios USA, Universal Pictures, and anyone else with a stake in the Xena and Hercules franchises. I'm just playing with my toys again.

Author's Note: Please read "Clarkus Maximus" before reading this story. It isn't an absolutely necessity, but it will certainly help in explaining how Lois and Clark know Xena and Gabrielle, as well as give you some background on them. I have done my best to make both fandoms as accessible as possible to the non-fans.

I have disregarded the Twilight of the Gods from Xena's 5th and 6th seasons. I never cared for the idea of Xena killing off most of Olympus. Also, as a Xena/Ares shipper, I DO believe that Ares truly loved Xena. This story takes place after Xena's death in Japan in the series finale. This story also takes place in Metropolis in the year 2011. One final change to the Xena storyline is that I ask that you envision the original chakram for this story, not the "new" yin-yang style chakram. It has no bearing on this story — I just despise the yin-yang one.

I am NOT using Kevin Sorbo as a real person. I am using the fictional disguise of "Kevin Sorbo" that Hercules uses in the modern-day episodes "Yes Virginia, There Is A Hercules" and "For Those Of You Just Joining Us."

And now — On with the show!

\*\*\*

"Out of my way!"  
 "I'm gonna run you off the road!"  
 "Oh yeah? I'd like to see you try!"  
 "Get back here you coward!"  
 "Come and get me!"  
 "Oooh, better watch out there! You almost hit that eighteen wheeler!"

"Come on! Faster, car! Faster!"  
 Wheels screeched on the pavement as the cars jockeyed for positions, flying down the California coastline at breakneck speeds. Smoke belched from exhaust pipes, thick and black, before the sea breeze gently swept them away. The driver of the black muscle car swerved into oncoming traffic, trying to cut around the red sports car. Its tires left dark skid marks on the asphalt, as the driver cut the wheel sharply left, then right again. The blue sports car came alongside the red one, sandwiching it between itself and the muscle car. The drivers of both the black and the blue cars turned their wheels into the red sports car. Metal screeched and sparks flew as the driver of the red car tried desperately to escape the trap that he'd been caught in. He braked

hard, intending to force the others to overshoot him, but it was too late. The damage to the car was too severe. Smoke poured from the damaged engine and the car exploded. Bits of flaming metal rained down on the street as the other cars sped away from the scene.

"Well, *that* had to hurt."

"Thanks for the help, but you're next!"

"Oh yeah? Give me your best shot!"

The driver of the blue car laughed, clearly satisfied with the turn of events, and taunting the other to try the same thing on him. Gunning the engine, he rammed his car into the rear bumper of the muscle car, which had managed to gain some distance on him. Cutting the wheel hard, the driver of the blue car forced his rival back into the lane of oncoming traffic. The black car's driver frantically tore the steering wheel left and right, trying to shake himself loose. Precious seconds were lost as he tried to free himself. But his efforts were to no avail. A double-decker bus smashed violently into the front of the black muscle car, destroying the vehicle instantaneously. The driver of the sole remaining car gunned the engine even harder, swerving around the slower vehicles on the road and tearing across the bright yellow finish line that was painted across the roadway.

"*Yes!*"

Clark Kent threw his hands in the air victoriously, the Xbox360 controller slipping from his grasp and falling into his lap. Beside him, twelve year old Michael and eleven year old Hunter groaned in frustration. It was the fifth race in a row that their father had won that afternoon.

"That's not fair!" protested Michael, dropping his controller onto the couch. "You and Hunter ganged up on me!"

"All's fair in love and video games," Clark replied, affectionately ruffling his oldest son's ebony locks.

"Clark, play nice," Lois lovingly admonished her husband. "Or I'll have to take the game away from you."

"They started it," he teased with a wink at his sons. "I never would have had to beat them if they hadn't challenged me in the first place."

"I don't care who started it. I'll end it," Lois said, laughter coloring her words.

Clark chuckled at her teasing tone as she swept into the room, eight year old Rebecca hard on her heels. There were smudges of flour on his daughter's face, clear evidence of the cookies that he had smelled cooking in the oven.

"Daddy, I made cookies," Rebecca stated proudly. "All by myself!"

"Hey!" Lois teased in mock indignation.

"Okay. Mommy helped. A little."

"Gee, thanks," Lois said dryly, causing Rebecca to smile and laugh.

"Oh yeah?" Clark asked, picking her up onto his lap in one fluid motion. "What kind?"

"Almond cookies," she said, grinning.

Clark smiled as he once more saw his wife's own smile on his daughter's face. "Well, I guess that means that I am *definitely* having dessert tonight after dinner."

"Speaking of, I was thinking that maybe you could zip out to get some Chinese food for us tonight," Lois said. "You know. From that place that we all like." She made a flying gesture with her hand, indicating that she wanted him to fly to China.

"Uh, sure," Clark said, letting Rebecca off of his lap and stretching as he stood. He crossed over to the game console and shut it off.

"Thanks," Lois said, flashing him a winning smile. "I've been promising the boys for a week that we would do this."

"All right!" Michael exclaimed. "Can I come with you, dad?"

Clark shook his head. "No, I'll need *both* of my hands free to fly all of that home."

“It’s not fair!” Michael harrumphed, folding his arms over his chest in a perfect imitation of Clark’s Superman pose. “I can’t wait until I’m able to fly!”

Clark laughed. “You might be waiting a while. I couldn’t do that until I was eighteen. And there’s no guarantee that you’ll inherit all of the powers that I have.”

Michael made a terrible face and stuck out his tongue.

Clark laughed again. He was glad that he could finally speak freely about his alter-ego and abilities with his children. All three, even little Rebecca, understood the importance of keeping the family secret. He’d had to tell Michael and Hunter as they approached their preteen years, since that was when his own abilities had first begun to manifest. It hadn’t been a moment too soon, as it had turned out. Two months later, both boys had begun to show signs of their developing powers. At first, Lois and Clark had kept their youngest child in the dark about Clark’s abilities. But Michael was growing stronger by the week. And then Hunter had accidentally set fire to Rebecca’s favorite stuffed tiger with his emerging heat vision. Rebecca had been inconsolable for a week over the ruined toy, and there had been no getting around having “the talk” with her about the family secret.

The phone ring shrilly, shattering Clark’s thoughts like a fragile piece of glass. He reached for the phone automatically. He cradled the headset between his shoulder and his head, using his free hands to scoop up the game controllers and put them away.

“Hello? Oh, hey, Jimmy. What’s up? Uh huh. Yeah, of course. Really? You’re kidding! When? Centennial Park, west side. Uh huh. Yeah, I think Lois will be thrilled. Got it. Thanks, Jimmy.”

He hung up, aware of Lois’ eyes on his back.

“What was that all about? Hot lead on the Germaine murder?” She sounded hopeful. “We’ve been stuck without a lead for over a week now.”

“Not exactly. How’d you feel about doing a celebrity interview? We haven’t done one since Bobby Flay cooked a Thanksgiving dinner for the soup kitchen in Hobbs Bay... what... six years ago?”

Lois nodded but shrugged noncommittally. “I guess that depends on the celebrity. Who do we have to cover? And isn’t that Andy’s area? Or is Perry so annoyed with us on the stall with the Germaine murder that he’s relegated us back to puff pieces?”

“Kevin Sorbo,” Clark replied. “And he asked for us specifically when he agreed to do an interview for The Planet. Apparently, that’s the only way he’ll do this.”

“Kevin Sorbo? That guy who played Hercules on TV years ago?” Her tone said that she was less than impressed. “It couldn’t be Johnny Depp or Brad Pitt?”

Clark nodded, choosing to ignore the second question. “One and the same. He’s shooting a movie in Centennial Park; a sword-and-sandals fantasy film called The Dragon Master. We have to be there in an hour.”

Lois sighed heavily. It seemed like every time she and Clark had a day off, something else popped up, calls for Superman aside. “Okay, I’ll go get cleaned up,” she said, resignedly.

“I’ll call my folks to watch the kids,” Clark said, trying to be helpful.

“You do that,” she said, stumping unhappily up the stairs to their bedroom.

Martha and Jonathan had moved to Metropolis permanently a few years prior. They were getting older and the farm had become too much work for them, even with the hired hands that they had employed. And they had both wanted to be close to their grandchildren. Clark loved having his parents so close by, but it still hurt to know that the farm had been sold. He dearly loved the place and had many fond memories of it. He also regretted that he hadn’t been able to help out in running the farm, and felt partially responsible for his parents having to sell the place. But his duties as a reporter, superhero, husband, and father hadn’t left

him much time to get out to Kansas on a regular basis.

Lois’ sister, Lucy, had also moved back into Metropolis around the same time as the Kents. As a result, she often pestered them to use her as the kids’ babysitter, as did Lois’ parents, who had since remarried one another. Lois was still thankful for the machine that had sapped out their bad memories of their first, failed marriage. But with the two boys exhibiting their powers, often unintentionally, Lois and Clark had become solely dependent on the Kents as their babysitters. At least they knew how to handle a child with special abilities. After all, they had raised Clark, and had done a fine job of it, if Lois was any judge. And, of course, no one in the Lane family knew of the family secret. Lois and Clark intended to keep it that way.

Clark picked up the phone and dialed his parents. In no time at all, he’d arranged for them to come to the house to watch the kids. His eyes strayed to the three where they sat watching the TV. They argued over what they would be watching later that evening, until they finally settled on The Lord of the Rings. And just like that, peace reigned once more in the living room. Clark smiled as he watched them.

Perfect half human, half Kryptonian children.

Perfect blends of Lois and himself.

Michael, the oldest, who was the spitting image of Clark and who’d inherited his mother’s competitiveness. Hunter, who had Clark’s eyes and crooked smile, along with Lois’ nose and penchant for getting into trouble. Little Rebecca, the baby, who was her mother’s clone in every way, especially in her inquisitiveness, though she had Clark’s quiet strength.

Lois had insisted that each child be given a Kryptonian name, along with their legal name. She had wanted to keep their heritage alive for them. And so, Michael also bore the name Jon-El, in honor of Jonathan Kent. Hunter’s Kryptonian name was Jor-El, in honor of Clark’s biological father, the man who had done everything possible to save Clark’s life, even when it had meant the heartache of sending his infant son to Earth to escape Krypton’s demise. Even Rebecca had a Kryptonian name — Marla-El, a combination of Martha and Lara. Each child knew of their secret name. And each child knew that they were in the deepest of troubles if either one of their parents used that name to call them.

As always, even after all of these years, the thought of his kids staggered Clark, and threatened to bring grateful, happy tears to his eyes.

His kids.

The kids he had been told that he would never have.

The kids that he and Lois had once despaired of ever having.

The kids who were the center of Clark’s universe.

The kids who were living, breathing miracles.

Clark sighed softly to himself, completely content. As always, the thought struck him that he was truly the luckiest man alive. He loved his job — both of his jobs, to be exact. He was married to the love of his life, a woman who made him happy in every way. And together they had the three greatest kids in the world. Yes, he was a lucky, happy man.

The chiming of the doorbell jostled him out of his reverie. He opened the door and ushered his parents inside. All three of his children rushed to greet their grandparents, nearly knocking Clark down as they stampeded past, excitedly talking over one another. Clark chuckled and took the opportunity to hurry up the steps and change into more professional attire. Black pants, a white shirt, his favorite maroon jacket, and a maroon tie dotted with tiny white hibiscus flowers. It wasn’t his favorite tie, but in recent years Lois had insisted that he add some less garish ties to his wardrobe. He checked out his reflection in the mirror, then finger-combed a few stray locks of hair into place. Lois emerged from the bathroom in a light weight gray skirt, white top, and matching gray jacket. Clark eyed her appreciatively as she did the

same to him.

“Ready?” he asked, as he straightened his tie once more.

On her nod, they both went back down the stairs and into the living room.

“Martha, Jonathan! Hi! Thanks for coming on short notice,” Lois said apologetically. “Seems to be a trend lately though.”

“Nonsense, we love spending time with our grandkids,” Martha said, smiling.

“I know. I just hate not being able to give you more advanced notice. Boys, turn the TV off now please,” Lois said. “I want those book reports done tonight before bedtime. Rebecca, sweetie, I want you to work on your homework too. Dad and I will be home as soon as we can.”

“Aww, mom! It’s only Friday!” Michael complained.

“Yeah,” Hunter put in. “No one does homework on Friday!”

“No buts about it,” Lois said firmly. “If you get it done tonight, then you don’t have to worry about it all weekend. And maybe we can do something fun on Sunday.”

The two boys sighed, all too familiar with their mother’s tone. Resistance was futile.

“O-kay,” they said in unison, breaking the word into two separate syllables. “Can we at least watch *The Lord of the Rings* later?”

“Only if your homework is finished.”

The two huffed in annoyance, mumbling about how this turn of events was not fair.

Clark pulled out his wallet and slipped a few bills out from the leather folds. He gave them to his father, pressing them lightly into his palm.

“Just in case the natives get restless and we don’t make it home in time for dinner, order a couple of pizzas. Say, did I eat you guys out of house and home when I was their age?”

Martha chuckled and nodded. “We could hardly keep up with that metabolism of yours, until your body started to convert sunlight into fuel.”

Clark shook his head, amused. “Well, it looks like that appetite got passed on to them along with at least a few of my powers.”

“Aww, you promised us Chinese food,” Hunter said, pouting.

Clark looked at his father and shrugged. “Pizza, Chinese, whatever you guys want. Text me if you need anything. See you guys in a little while. Be good for your grandparents, okay?”

He and Lois gave their kids a quick hug and kiss. A moment later, they were out the door and in Lois’ aging Jeep. Clark had offered, on several occasions, to buy her a new car. But each time, Lois had staunchly refused. She loved that Jeep and was determined to drive it into the ground before getting rid of it. Clark didn’t mind too much. He had plenty of fond memories in that car — all times when he’d been able to sit and talk with Lois, more or less uninterrupted. And little Rebecca had been created in that car, late one summer night when a terrible storm had forced them to pull off the road on their way to an out of town event. But, sooner or later, Clark was sure that they would need to buy a van to tote their family around town.

Lois slid into the driver’s seat as usual, started the engine, then pushed the car into gear. Clark pulled out his smart phone, ran a search on Kevin Sorbo, and began to read off facts about the actor to Lois so that they could begin to shape their interview questions. Not more than fifteen minutes later, Lois pulled into a spot on the street alongside Centennial Park. She grabbed her purse and Clark grabbed the notebook and pen that they always kept in the car for spur of the moment stories. He was always the designated note taker when they were together, since he had no trouble jotting down everything that was said in an interview, thanks to the discreet use of his super speed. And if he couldn’t use his speed, his flawless memory stored the quotes so that he could jot them down later for use in their stories.

They walked briskly down the cracked asphalt path, heading for the western end of the park. The late September air was still warm, despite the cool rain that had fallen the previous day. Bursts of red and yellow stood out among the still-green trees, a sure sign of summer’s passing. As they walked, a bright orange leaf broke free from a maple tree and landed on Clark’s head. He reached up and flicked it off, while a squirrel chattered unhappily at him. Up ahead, they could both see the wooden barricades keeping back the curious onlookers, as two men dressed in black and silver dueled it out with prop swords. Beyond that, the facade of an aged castle stood imposingly in the distance.

“Is Jimmy coming?” Lois asked, as they walked side by side, her head swiveling from left to right as she looked for their friend.

Clark shook his head. “No. He said that he got some photos earlier. He’s covering the grand reopening of the Metropolitan Children’s Hospital right now.”

“Guess we’re too senior for stories like that now,” Lois said, laughingly. “It’s been a while.”

“Nah,” Clark said with a grin. “But Perry’s got that new group of interns. The hospital reopening is the perfect little story for them to get their feet wet on.”

“You know, I always hated those kinds of stories,” Lois said.

“What changed?” Clark asked, already knowing the answer, but playing along anyway.

“I started doing them with you.”

As they approached the barricade, a flustered production assistant was addressing the onlookers, reminding them that they could take pictures but that the use of recording devices was strictly prohibited. Clark approached the man, favoring him with a friendly smile.

“Can I help you?” the production assistant asked when Clark motioned him over.

“I hope so. I’m Clark Kent and this is my wife Lois. We’re from *The Daily Planet*. We have an appointment to interview Mr. Sorbo.” Clark flashed his credentials.

The man glanced at what Clark offered, then spoke rapidly into his headset. After a moment, he nodded absently as the reply came through.

“Follow me,” he said, motioning another production assistant over to handle the crowd in his place. He looked relieved to leave the crowd behind, even if only for a few moments. “Mr. Sorbo is expecting you. He’s waiting for you in the tavern.”

“The tavern?” Lois repeated.

The production assistant nodded, then turned on his heel and led them through the set, carefully winding his way around scenes that were currently being shot or rehearsed. To their left, a couple of knights were doing battle with a mechanical dragon head. A few puppet masters made the head bob and attack, just missing the actors as they worked the jaws. A short jet of flame erupted from the dragon’s maw as the actors jumped to either side. A couple of stunt coordinators stood to either side, with fire extinguishers ready in their hands, just in case. To their right and further down the path, townspeople were celebrating in the village square as a ragtag band played a jaunty tune on makeshift instruments. The director yelled “Cut!” and the extras went back to their starting marks to run through the scene again.

Soon enough, Lois and Clark reached the tavern that had been constructed. Their guide knocked a few times, then opened the door after being beckoned in. He announced their arrival and swiftly left to return to his post. Clark could hear him speaking into his headset again, reassuring the other production assistant that he would be back in a moment. Then he turned his attention to the tavern. The building was pretty isolated from the rest of the set, as though it were a lone inn situated in the middle of the woods for travelers on their way to the grand castle city. Built of wood, it stood two levels and boasted a hanging sign that swung

in the light breeze. The Wayfarer's Crossing, it said in brass letters.

"Come on in," encouraged a voice from within.

Lois and Clark entered into the tavern. A burst of cool air greeted them, momentarily surprising them. There was a low hum of an air conditioning unit, barely audible to their ears against the grunts and yells that echoed over the park from a fight scene being rehearsed nearby. Large windows let in plenty of natural light. And seated in the middle of the room at a small round table of roughly cut wood, sat Kevin Sorbo, dressed casually in jeans, sneakers and cream colored t-shirt. His dirty blonde hair hung to his shoulders, reminding Lois of pictures she had seen of him when he'd been playing the part of Hercules. He rose to greet Lois and Clark, extending a hand to them.

"Hi, thanks for coming. It's so nice to meet you both."

"It's our pleasure," Lois assured him.

"Sorry we couldn't meet in my trailer," Kevin continued. "The air conditioning unit in it broke down about an hour ago, but the one in here is just fine." His words came out in a rush as he firmly shook Lois and Clark's hands. Clark was surprised at the strength in the actor's handshake. Kevin gestured to the wooden chairs. "Please, take a seat. I've been a big fan of your work for a long time now. That's why I asked for you two to be the ones to do this interview. Can I offer you something to drink? This is the only ancient tavern in town with a mini fridge." He grinned.

"No, but thanks," Clark replied, pulling out a chair for Lois before seating himself. "Mini fridge?" He raised his eyebrows in amusement.

Kevin laughed. "The crew likes to party here after wrapping up the more difficult scenes. And a lot of the guys eat their lunches in here. It's a pretty relaxed set for a hugely expensive summer blockbuster."

"It's a pretty impressive set from what we've seen," Lois said.

Kevin grinned again. "Yeah, it is. They really went all of for this." He looked around the tavern fondly, almost nostalgically. "So, should we get down to business?"

"Oh, let's do."

Lois and Clark looked up sharply. The voice had come seemingly from nowhere. Clark noticed that Kevin didn't look perturbed in the slightest. Angry, perhaps. And undeniably annoyed. But most definitely not surprised.

A blue spark appeared by the bar, then expanded into the shape of a man. There was a flash, and a man materialized before their eyes. He was an imposing fellow, with short cropped ebony hair and a neatly trimmed mustache and beard. Muscles rippled in his massive arms and his dark eyes fairly smoldered. He was dressed in black leather pants and a matching vest, beneath which his bare chest was visible. Each of the garments was studded with small nodes of silver, and he wore a pair of matching gauntlets and a silver earring shaped like a sword dangling from his left ear. A medallion hung about his neck on a sturdy leather cord. A sword hung in a scabbard on his left hip. The man eyed them all levelly, no expression visible on his chiseled face. He leaned casually against the bar.

Kevin sighed heavily. "What do you want, Ares?"

"Now, is that any way to greet your dear, big brother?" Ares asked, mockingly.

"Ares, I really don't have time to play games. Why don't you go find someone else to bother? Hmmm?" Kevin sounded bored, with a tinge of annoyance seeping through and coloring the edges of his words.

Lois and Clark exchanged a weighted look. Was this truly the ancient Greek god of war? After all that they had seen and experienced in life, it wouldn't surprise them in the least if this really was Ares. But if it truly was so, why was he there? And just

what did he mean, calling Kevin his brother?

"I'm not here to play games," the war god assured the actor. "I'm here with a warning."

"Let me guess," Kevin replied, sarcasm rich in his deep voice. "Give up the merchandizing rights on this film to you? Stop acting altogether? You're starting a war in some remote little location in the world and I had better not try to stop you? That about sum it up?"

"No, Mister Know-It-All. As much as I miss our little battles, I'm not here to fight you, or threaten you. Like it or not, I'm on your side this time."

Kevin laughed, a short and disbelieving sound. "Pardon me if I don't believe you." He turned back to Lois and Clark. "Come on, let's find a pest-free place to do this interview, shall we?"

Kevin stood and took a step toward the door.

"Damn it, Hercules! Would you just listen to me for a minute?" Ares pushed himself away from the bar and took a step towards Kevin.

Kevin rounded on Ares, his features strained with tightly controlled anger. "How dare you use that name in the presence of others!"

Ares grinned, amused, and rested his hands on the pommel of his sword. "Oh please. Like you haven't just admitted to cavorting with gods in the past. And like it or not, you're not the only one here with a secret." He shot a pointed look at Clark.

Clark subtly but audibly cleared his throat. "Maybe we should go. We can do this at another, more convenient time."

"Uh-uh," Ares said, wagging a finger in Clark's direction. "You're the reason why I'm here."

Clark pointed a finger at his own chest. "Me? Why?"

Ares looked around unhurriedly. "I'll tell you just as soon as the rest of our little party arrives."

Lois scrunched up her brow. "Rest of the party?"

As if in answer to her question, another spark appeared in the air, this time in red. Another man materialized before them. He was dressed in black leather with a high neck, a red flowing cape, and held a heavy helm cradled in his left arm. A short, silver crown adorned his sandy, slicked back hair. He eyed them all and did not smile.

"Oh goody, Hades is here too," Kevin mumbled under his breath.

"Hercules," the newcomer said gravely, extending a hand to his nephew. "Sorry to barge in like this. But the world needs your help. And so does Superman."

"Well, I guess we've made it clear that my little secret isn't going to be kept," Kevin muttered, though his voice had lost its animosity. He sounded resigned to the turn of events.

Kevin grasped the god about the forearm in a friendly shake. Lois and Clark immediately remembered the last time that they had seen such an odd handshake, thirteen years prior. Lois had been newly pregnant with Michael at the time.

The evil time traveler, Tempus, had kidnapped them while they had been out for a jog and taken them to ancient Greece. Passing himself off as a god, Tempus had manipulated a group of warriors into capturing Clark and selling him as a gladiator. Clark had nearly died in the arena after Tempus convinced Julius Caesar of his godhood and demanded that Clark be killed. But luckily, for both Lois and Clark, they had befriended a fierce warrior woman named Xena and her best friend, Gabrielle. Xena had posed as a gladiator herself. Under the guise of Blade, an Amazon gladiator, she had entered into the fights in Rome and saved Clark's life. Lois and Clark had finally been returned to their own time after Autolycus, the self proclaimed King of Thieves, stole the Chronos Stone, a mystical rock with the ability to send people through space and time.

"Superman?" Clark asked, echoing Hades.

The god of the dead turned a knowing eye on him. "Yes. I'll

let Ares explain in a few minutes. But first I need to do something.”

Hades stood back, closing his eyes. His hands rose into the air, straight out in front of him, fingers spread wide. Pure energy and light flowed outwards from his fingertips. The very air crackled with electricity, until the short hairs on the back of Lois and Clark’s necks stood on end. Goosebumps rose on Lois’ arms as well. The light grew in intensity until Lois, Clark, and Kevin had to look away. Even Ares shaded his eyes with one strong hand. There was a sound like the crack of thunder, then, abruptly, the light was gone and the electricity fled from the air. Hades’ eyes snapped open and he smiled at his handiwork.

Lois, Clark, and Kevin looked back into the space where Hades had directed his power, though Lois and Clark were half expecting to see a still empty space. Instead, three people stood there, looking rather confused. Lois and Clark recognized the two women immediately, though the last time they had seen the blonde woman, her hair had been much longer. The man they did not know — a short, curly blonde dressed in leather pants and a purple vest over his otherwise bare chest, with an odd, squiggly looking medallion hanging about his neck.

“Xena? Gabrielle? Iolaus?” Each name was a thousand different questions rolled into one as Kevin spoke them. His voice broke a little on each name. Tears welled in his icy blue eyes and glimmered there, but did not fall.

“Hercules?” Iolaus asked, just as disbelieving, eyes wide. “Is that really you, buddy?”

“Of course it is!” Kevin, or rather, Hercules replied, forgetting, for the moment, the presence of Lois and Clark. Pure excitement shone on his face. “I can’t believe it! You’re back! I’ve missed you, my friend. It’s been...the gods only know how many centuries since I last saw you.”

“You mean, since I died,” Iolaus said, a wry smile on his face. “By the gods, it’s good to see you again, Herc!” He closed the distance between himself and his best friend, drawing him into a back slapping hug. When they had pulled apart, Iolaus regarded his friend for a moment, his eyebrows arched. “But I have to ask. What in Tartarus are you wearing?”

This caused Hercules to laugh, though the sound was watery with unshed tears of joy. “Times have changed, Iolaus. And so has the fashion.” He turned to Xena and Gabrielle, drawing each of them into a fierce embrace.

“You look good,” Xena said with a mischievous smile as she appraised him. “A few more gray hairs since the last time I saw you, but otherwise the same.”

Hercules laughed loudly as Xena smirked. “I do not have gray hairs,” he protested.

Clark noticed how Hercules regarded Xena, and instantly knew that there was more to their history together than Xena had told them about. In fact, the two had briefly become lovers once, back when Hercules had helped Xena turn from her evil ways to fight for the Greater Good. But their romance had been short lived, as Xena had felt it best to go on her separate way as she began to atone for her past misdeeds. A glance at Ares told Clark that the war god had feelings for the warrior woman as well. The god was practically fuming at the outpouring of affection between Xena and Hercules, though he looked with affection at Xena. Clark blinked as realization dawned. It seemed that the god of war was not only capable of jealousy, but of love as well.

Xena and Gabrielle turned to Lois and Clark. They smiled as they recognized their friends.

“Lois, Clark,” Gabrielle said, hugging them both with easy familiarity. “Nice to see you again.”

“You too,” Lois said, hugging the blonde bard back.

“You look well,” Xena said to Clark.

“So do you,” he replied.

“For a dead woman, yeah,” Xena replied with a wink. “I

guess so.”

“Dead?” Clark asked.

“Long story.”

Ares cleared his throat, almost shyly. “Xena. By the gods, I’ve missed you.” He awkwardly shifted his weight from foot to foot, looking for all the world like he wanted to embrace Xena as well. He held himself back, however.

Xena regarded the war god coolly. “You never wrote.” She swiveled her eyes to Hades and crossed her arms. “All right. Enough of the reunion stuff. What gives, Hades? How did you pull me from the Japanese land of the dead? And more importantly, why?”

Hades shrugged. “I made a trade. Your soul, which, as a Greek, belongs to me, for the soul of a renowned warrior of theirs.”

“And what about those forty thousand souls I was guarding?”

“A replacement was found,” Hades assured her. “A much more deserving replacement, believe me. Listen, it isn’t important right now. What matters is why you are here. All of you.” He gestured to the chairs all around. “Please, sit.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Lois protested as she sat, finally pulling out of her shock enough to think straight. “Can we just back it up for a second here? Clearly you all are having a happy little reunion, and I really hate to interrupt it, but I need a moment to wrap my head around all of this. You’re gods?” She gestured to Hades and Ares; they nodded solemnly. “And you’re really Hercules? Son of Zeus? Strongest man alive?”

“Yes,” Hercules admitted. “I am. Although Superman probably has me beat in the strength department.”

Clark hesitantly ventured a question. “And...what? You just never died?”

Hercules shook his head. “The immortal blood that flows in my veins has kept me alive.”

“And well preserved,” Iolaus said, a wry, teasing smile tugging at his lips. “Gray hairs aside.”

“So you can’t die?” Clark continued.

“Oh, I’m sure that I can, under the right circumstances. If I took a bullet to the heart or something. But apparently not from old age.” The demigod shrugged.

“And Kevin Sorbo is...?” Clark asked.

“Just a disguise that I chose for myself. Every so often I have to shed my identity and pick up a new one, start a new life. It’s tedious, but necessary. It would be too suspicious if Kevin Sorbo got to see his one hundred and thirtieth birthday.”

“How old are you?” Clark asked.

Hercules shrugged. “I’ve lost count. After the first couple hundred years, it didn’t seem to matter anymore.”

“And you three,” Lois pointed towards Iolaus, Xena, and Gabrielle, “are...dead?”

“They were,” Hades confirmed. “I’ve given them back life until they accomplish the task set before them. Once they have achieved their goal, they must return to me.”

Xena arched one eyebrow. “And me?”

Hades smiled a half smile. “Your son awaits you in the Elysian Fields.”

Xena’s eyes widened in surprise, but that was the only outward sign of her shock. Based on what Lois knew about the warrior princess from the brief time that she had gotten to know the woman, she guessed that Xena had never expected to atone enough for the evil deeds that she had committed early on in her checkered past. She certainly looked surprised that Hades had deemed her worthy enough to pass into the ancient Greek equivalent of paradise.

“We’re getting off track here,” Ares growled, growing ever more bored with the pleasantries.

“I agree,” Clark replied, amiably. “You said that whatever is going on involves Superman somehow, right?”

“Right,” Ares nodded.

“So, I guess that begs the question — what do you need Lois and me for? Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, go find Superman for you?”

“Oh? I’m sorry. You mean, you *aren’t* Superman?” Ares asked, sarcasm heavy in his smooth voice.

Lois shook her head. “Of course he’s not,” she said, as casually as she could, while rushing to Clark’s aid. Inside, though, she felt nervous lying to a god. Especially one that was the patron of violence and war.

Ares huffed impatiently. “Are we *really* going to do this?”

“Do what?” Lois asked innocently.

“The thing where you keep denying the truth and I keep asserting that Clark Kent moonlights in tights.”

Clark eyed the war god levelly, his expression giving up nothing. He was all too aware that he was using his Superman mask, but he felt unsure of what other options he had. Ares rubbed his chin in thought for a moment, then grimly smiled as a thought occurred to him.

“Last chance,” Ares said. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Clark did not move. He did not speak.

“Fine, have it your way. We do this the hard way,” Ares said.

“Or, as I like to see it, the more fun way... for me.”

In the blink of an eye, he’d formed a ball of fire in his right palm. Waves of heat shimmered in the air above it. Rearing his arm back, Ares pitched the ball at Clark. The fireball hit him squarely in the chest, knocking him back off his chair and slamming him into the sturdy wall of the tavern. The fire held him there, suspended two inches above the floor, for a long moment. Lois and the others could feel the extreme heat coming from it, even from halfway across the room.

“*Clark!*” Lois screamed, genuinely afraid that the god’s powers might somehow be able to hurt her husband, despite his invulnerability. Making a split second decision, she rushed at Ares, beating on his chest with her fists. “*Stop it!*”

As suddenly as the fireball had appeared, it vanished. Clark fell heavily to the floor, blinking in surprise. Lois left Ares and hurried to her husband’s side, checking him for injuries with her eyes and hands. Clark stirred after a second or two, coughed, then looked down and grimaced. He patted down a few remaining tongues of flame that were happily devouring his shirt and jacket. A gaping hole in the front of his clothing revealed the blue suit and S shield beneath.

“Was that really necessary?” Hercules asked.

“Told you so,” Ares happily pointed out.

“Gods above,” Iolaus said, incredulously. “To take a hit like that and live... Is he a god?”

“Why does everyone think he’s a god?” Lois asked to no one in particular. “No, he’s not,” she said to Iolaus, though she did not turn away from Clark.

“Aw, man. My favorite jacket,” Clark said with a groan as he stood. He gave Ares a hard look once he was back on his feet.

“Why?”

“Because we don’t have time for these games,” Ares replied, the hard edge to his voice matching Clark’s.

Clark dusted himself off, then righted his chair and sat.

“Okay, fine, you proved your point.” He sighed and dragged his hand through his hair, unhappy with the turn of events. “I admit it. I *am* Superman.”

“Unbelievable,” Hercules muttered, with a shake of his head.

A pink spark materialized before the group, stealing Hercules’ focus from Clark. When it receded, a curly blonde woman in pink negligee and a robe made of mostly diaphanous material stood before them. Things were definitely getting weirder by the moment, Clark mused to himself, even as he felt his face flush. He averted his eyes, staring at the wooden tabletop

as though it had suddenly become the most interesting thing in all the world.

“Whoa! That was *way* harsh, Ares! You *so* need to chill out.

Hiya, bro!” She flashed a winning smile at Hercules.

Lois shot a questioning look at Hercules.

“My sister, Aphrodite,” he said, looking somehow pleased to see the goddess. Clark guessed that the two were on good terms.

“I think I’m getting a migraine,” Lois muttered under her breath, dropping her head into her hands.

“Ugh, honey, that tie is *such* a fashion don’t,” the goddess of love said, looking at the tattered remains that hung about Clark’s neck. With a flick of her finger towards Clark, she restored his clothing to its previous, whole state. “There. That’s better. When this is all over, we have *got* to talk about your sense of style,” she continued.

“Not that I’m unhappy to see you, but what are you doing here, Aphrodite?” Hercules asked, drawing her attention away from her appraisal of Clark’s wardrobe.

The goddess smiled. “How could I pass up a chance to see Curly again?” she said, nodding towards Iolaus. “Besides, Xena and Gabrielle are my friends too. And, like it or not, I’m here to back up what Hades and Ares have to tell you. I knew you’d never trust them on their own.”

Hercules nodded. What Aphrodite had said was the truth.

“Ok, now that we’re all properly introduced, let’s get down to business,” Ares said impatiently. He looked Hercules square in the eye. “The world is in trouble. And your life is in danger,” he said, pointing at Clark.

“And why should we believe anything you have to say?” Hercules asked.

“Because you have no choice.”

“Sure I do.” Hercules crossed his arms defiantly.

“There’s no other way to say this. Dahak is trying to force his way back into the world,” Ares said.

The words were softly spoken, but they exploded in the room like a bombshell.

Hercules, Iolaus, Xena, and Gabrielle all exchanged a weighted look, even as the blood drained from their faces. Lois and Clark could see flickers of fear and concern in their eyes. For a long moment, none of them dared to utter a word.

“Yeah, I thought that would get your attention,” the war god said smugly.

“That can’t be. I destroyed Dahak,” Hercules said finally, confusion dueling with fear in his voice.

“No, you *defeated* Dahak. You never destroyed him,” Ares corrected him.

“Excuse me. I’m sure I’m going to regret asking. But what’s a Dahak?” Lois said.

“Not what. Who,” Hercules said with a heavy sigh.

“He’s an entity of pure evil. And his only hobby is trying to break free of the bonds that hold him outside of this world so that he can destroy all life.” Xena leaned on her elbows on the table.

“So he’s, what? Another god?” Clark asked. “I’ve studied tons of world religions and mythologies. I’ve never heard of Dahak before.”

“He’s not exactly a god, but for all intents and purposes, you can consider him as one. It’s a little hard to explain,” Hercules said, shrugging as he tried to find the right words.

“Evil incarnate? Is Dahak...the devil?” Lois asked.

Hades shook his head. “No. But that isn’t a bad way to look at him either. He’s a being that thrives on suffering, evil, and death.”

“Dahak can’t break into the world on his own,” Xena said, the expression on her face evidence of her whirring thoughts. She looked uneasy for the first time that Lois had ever seen.

“No, he can’t,” Hades confirmed.

“So who’s helping him?” Gabrielle asked. It was the first

thing that she had said in a while, Clark noticed.

“Glad you asked,” Ares replied. “An old friend of yours, Xena. Someone who once promised you that the world would fall at your feet.”

Xena’s mouth set into a hard, thin line. “Alti.”

“Alti,” the war god confirmed.

“Ok, I’ll bite. Who’s Alti?” Clark said.

Xena stood and began to pace. Her voice turned rough with remembered pain. “She’s a very powerful shamaness. Maybe the most powerful one to ever live. A long time ago, after Caesar betrayed me, I allied myself with the warlord Borias. Together we swept across the known world like a plague, from Greece to China and back again. At one point, we found ourselves in Amazon territory. That’s where I met Alti. She’d been one of the Amazons, but they had cast her out from their ranks because they feared the great and evil powers she could wield. I befriended her, drawn in by the hope that she could help me to have such devastating powers as well. I lusted for that power. I was too blind to see that Alti was using me, manipulating me, but Borias saw it and tried to warn me. I wish now that I had listened to him. But Alti had too strong a hold on me. She promised to make me The Destroyer of Nations. And I fell for it.”

“When you say powers,” Lois said, “what exactly do you mean?”

Xena stopped pacing and took a moment to choose her words carefully. She frowned as she thought about the shamaness.

“Her powers lie mostly in the spiritual realm,” she said at last. “She can command spirits and she can send her own spirit into other living things. She also has the ability to place curses on people.”

Lois snorted a little. It wasn’t the first time that she and Clark had faced curses. On their wedding night, they had had to travel back in time with the writer H.G. Wells to remove a curse on their souls. The curse had promised a painful, ugly death for Lois if they consummated their love.

“I know it probably sounds a little out there to you,” Xena said earnestly. “But believe me when I say that it is true. I have firsthand experience with her curses. When I met her, I was already pregnant with Borias’ child. Alti cursed my son while he was still in my womb, saying that he would never know the love of either of his parents. Borias died the night that Solan was born. And I gave him up to the centaurs to raise so that he could never become a target for my enemies, nor would he become like me. Solan died without ever knowing that I was his mother.”

“That’s incredibly sad,” Lois murmured sympathetically. She couldn’t imagine a life apart from her children, nor could she imagine a life in which her children didn’t know exactly who she was.

Xena nodded absently, her mind still in the past.

“Anything else?” Clark prodded.

Xena sighed as she released the memory of losing her son. “Alti also has the ability to see into the future, and to pass those visions along. It’s rare that I’ve seen her do that though, like her curses. The main thing to watch out for is her ability see into a person’s past. She uses that power to wage a mental war with her victims. She dredges up the most painful memories that she can get a hold of and makes her victim relive the pain in every stark detail.”

“So if you broke your arm once...” Clark began, trying to understand.

“You’ll feel the excruciating pain of the breaking bone as you once felt it, but your arm will not actually break again,” Xena explained for him. “She doesn’t have to power to make the wounds actually come to pass. At least, she never could in the past. Who knows what her allegiance with Dahak has gotten her.”

“Why would Alti become Dahak’s ally?” Gabrielle asked.

“She’s never been one to share power. It just doesn’t make any

sense.”

“You already know that her soul is destined to live on, constantly being reborn to wreck havoc on the world,” Hades said. “When Hercules defeated Dahak the last time, when he entered the world for a brief time in Iolaus’ body, Dahak was severely beaten. It has taken him these past thousands of years to recover enough of his old strength to try again. He’s enticed Alti with incomprehensible powers if she can help bring him into the world. Already, a small tear in the universe has formed, the gateway through which Dahak will return, if given the chance. The gods have only just become aware of this.”

“But doesn’t Alti realize that Dahak will destroy everything if he gets loose?” Iolaus asked. “There won’t *be* a world left to use her powers in.”

“Not everything, Curly,” Aphrodite said, breaking her silence. “He’ll kill the gods and everything good in the world. Evil will spread like a bad rash and take over the world. It’ll be chaos.”

“Alti thinks she’ll rule alongside Dahak,” Gabrielle said.

“Or she thinks that she’ll wield enough power to overthrow Dahak,” Xena said quietly.

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with me,” Clark said, running a hand through his hair.

“Dahak can’t just enter the world the way that you or I can walk through a doorway,” Hercules explained. “He needs help to enter the world. Sacrifices, if you will. The last time, he required the sacrifice of a warrior heart. Iolaus foiled the attempt on the life of Nebula, the queen of Sumeria, and died in her place. With his death, Dahak had what he needed to force his way into the world.”

“I don’t think I qualify as having a warrior heart,” Clark said, frowning.

“He doesn’t want your heart,” Ares said, his hands once again resting on the pommel of his sword. “He wants your soul.”

“His soul?” Lois echoed.

Ares nodded. “Dahak knows that Superman’s soul is extraordinarily powerful. The most powerful one to ever exist. It’ll give Dahak more than enough power to reenter the world. And, it has the added bonus of ridding the world of his greatest obstacle.”

“And,” Aphrodite said, “he thinks that Clark’s death will sever the bond that you two share, giving him further power. Believe me, the connection between your souls is the strongest that I’ve ever seen. And I’m the goddess of love.”

“So...you three are gods. Why don’t you just do something to stop Alti and Dahak?” Lois asked.

“Can’t,” Aphrodite shrugged apologetically.

“Can’t or won’t?” Lois shot back, surprising herself. “Or maybe some of you *want* Clark to die.” She eyed Ares with suspicion. “Surely you must hold some sort of grudge against him. He’s stopped a number of wars since he took up the Superman persona. That must get under your skin.” She wondered briefly at her boldness towards the powerful gods before her.

“Three hundred and eighty seven of them,” Ares confirmed. “But who’s counting? Look, don’t you think if I had the power to kill your husband, that I would have already done so?”

“Why haven’t you?” Clark asked. “Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

Ares sighed, clearly unhappy with the reason why. “Because, like my dear brother here, Zeus has placed you and your family under his protection. None of us can do anything to harm or kill any of you. And as much as I despise you, I am bound to obey my father’s edicts.”

“The gods can’t intervene with Dahak,” Aphrodite said, turning back to Lois. “As it is, most of them have already fled Olympus, seeking safety between universes. We’re the only three left who stayed behind to help.”

“Cowards,” Iolaus snorted with distaste.

“They’re the gods,” Hercules sighed. “What did you expect?”

Iolaus shrugged. “Might be nice if Zeus took matters into his own hands for once, instead of relying on someone else to do his dirty work.”

“Do you believe them?” Lois asked Hercules, gesturing at the gods.

Hercules reluctantly nodded, letting out a long, drawn out breath as he did so. “As much as I hate to admit it, I believe them. You can always trust the gods to act in their own best interests. And Dahak will kill them if he gets loose.”

“So what do we do to stop Alti and Dahak?” Clark asked.

“I have to kill her,” Xena said, determination settling over her features. “How powerful is Alti right now?” she asked, voicing the question to all three of the gods before her.

Aphrodite shrugged, embarrassed. “That’s part of the problem. We don’t know.”

“Figures,” Iolaus said, rolling his eyes.

Xena set her jaw. “I guess I’ll find out when I fight her then. But this time I need to make sure that she stays dead. I just don’t know how yet.”

“She’s not the only problem though,” Hercules sighed.

Iolaus nodded thoughtfully. “Dahak.”

Hercules nodded in return. “There’s got to be a way of permanently sealing this world to him.”

“Or a way to kill him,” Xena said grimly.

“You think so?” Gabrielle asked.

Xena frowned. “I hope so.”

“Wait, hold on a second,” Lois said. “You’re talking about killing, for all intents and purposes, a god. I thought that gods were supposed to be immortal.”

“They are,” Hercules said, spreading his hands out as he explained. “But under the right circumstances, and with the right tools, even gods can be killed. For example, there used to be a race of half human, half deer called the Golden Hinds. A single drop of their blood had the power to kill an Olympian god.”

“So you think that every...godly entity has a fatal flaw?” Clark asked.

Hercules shrugged. “It’s possible. At least, I hope that’s the case with Dahak.”

“Well, it was mentioned that you fought this Dahak once before,” Lois prodded. “How’d you defeat him?”

Hercules thought back, stroking his chin. The images came vividly back to him, even after thousands of intervening years. The mad scramble through deadly traps with Zarathustra to acquire the Stone of Creation. The way that the sapphire gem had focused the sunlight to imprison Dahak with unbreakable chains, so long as the light lasted. The exorcism that he’d performed to purge Dahak from Iolaus’ body. The otherworldly realm that Hercules had been forced to enter in order to do battle with Dahak. The battle that he’d fought and won, ultimately freeing Iolaus so that he could crossover to the other side. He still couldn’t watch the end of the Men in Black movie — the giant bug at the end reminded him too much of the form that Dahak had taken in order to fight him. Hercules still thanked the gods that Iolaus had found a way to come back from the dead that time.

“The Stone of Creation might help,” he said at last. “I used it the last time I fought him. At the very least, it might help break the bond between Alti and Dahak.”

“Okay then. Where do we find this stone?” Clark said resolutely, standing ready to fly off to whatever corner of the world the stone might be hidden.

Hercules shook his head. “That might be a problem. I can tell you where it was a few thousand years ago, but not now. It could be anywhere.” He turned reluctantly towards Ares. “If we’re all to be on the same team, I’m going to need some help. See what

you can find out about the stone’s whereabouts. Please.” The last word reluctantly emerged from Hercules’ throat, as though it were physically painful for him to say.

“All right,” Ares agreed after a long moment, the same painfully forced cordialness straining his own voice.

Clark shook his head. “There’s still something that I don’t understand here. It’s clear that you two,” he gestured to Xena and Gabrielle, “are the same people we met long ago. But I’m not sure how that’s possible. I thought that we’d crossed to a different universe.”

“You thought wrong,” Ares said.

“But if it was the same universe, why didn’t I have my powers?” Clark argued. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Discord,” Ares said with a shrug.

“Excuse me?” Clark asked.

Ares sighed, annoyed with the delay in fighting Dahak. “Discord’s one of the minor goddesses,” he explained. “She’s annoying, but she can have her uses too. Apparently, she thought it would be hysterical to see you as a flesh and blood mortal while you were in Greece. Her spell lost its power once you returned to your own time. Now, me, I can appreciate the humor in that. But Zeus was pretty mad when he found out. Now if you excuse me, I have work to do.” With a flash, he vanished from sight.

“I need to return to the underworld,” Hades said, standing. “I can only be gone so long without consequences.”

“Go,” Hercules said, nodding. “I appreciate that you came with Ares today. And for bringing back my friends. We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“If you need anything, call my name. If it is within my power to grant it, I will do so,” the god said before he too, vanished from sight.

“Aphrodite,” Xena said, turning to the pink clad goddess, “think you can find Alti and keep an eye on her?”

“Spy work?” the goddess asked gleefully, clapping her hands together. She thought a moment before snapping her fingers. Her outfit transformed into a sleek black pant suit, complete with dark sunglasses. Her hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. She struck a Charlie’s Angels type of pose. “What do you think?”

“Subtle,” Hercules said. “But that does remind me. We’re going to need disguises for you three.” He looked at Xena, Gabrielle, and Iolaus as he spoke.

“No problem, bro. Leave it to goddess.”

Aphrodite tapped her chin with a manicured finger as she thought. After a few seconds, she pointed at each of the Greeks in turn, transforming their ancient looking clothing into modern wear. Dark blue, almost black jeans and a black three quarter sleeve shirt for Xena. Stone washed blue jeans and a green t-shirt for Gabrielle. A pair of faded jeans and a light blue t-shirt for Iolaus.

“There, that ought to do it,” she said. “Not particularly stylish, but at least they’ll blend in nicely.”

“Thanks,” Hercules said sincerely. He checked his watch.

“Uh oh. We better find someplace else to continue this discussion. The crew needs this set in about twenty minutes so they can prep it for tomorrow.”

“Someplace with food, I hope,” Iolaus said. “This is the worst tavern I’ve ever been in! Where’s the food? The drinks? The cute serving girls?”

Hercules smiled. Some things never changed — chief among them, Iolaus’ love of food and women.

“This isn’t a real tavern, Iolaus,” he said, clasping his friend’s shoulder briefly with one strong hand.

“Then what good is it?” the shorter man complained.

“We need to find someplace where you won’t draw attention,” Lois said, looking at Hercules.

“I’d say my hotel room, but it’s going to be snug in there with



all of us.”

“What, no suite?” Clark asked, a little surprised.

“Nah, it’s just me there and all I really need is a bed and a shower.”

“Too many people still on shift at the Planet to commandeer a conference room,” Lois said, thinking aloud.

“I guess we don’t really have a choice,” Clark said. “Come back to our place. We’ll figure something out from there. Kev... uh, Hercules, do you have car close by?”

“Yes. But I’d hate to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing. We’re all on the same side, right? I can’t think of a better place for us to lay low while we figure out our next move. We’re parked down on Swinton Place. Silver jeep, old as the hills. Can’t miss us. You can follow us back.”

“Okay,” Hercules agreed after a moment. “Iolaus, Xena, Gabrielle. You can ride with me.”

Chairs scraped across the wooden floor of the tavern. Lois and Clark exited first and casually made their way back through the set. It was growing ever closer to sunset, and most of the outdoor scenes had wrapped for the day. A few crispy looking dragon-fire victims were making their way to the craft services tables for drinks, slapping each other’s backs and laughing loudly. Clark waved at the same production assistant who had led them to the tavern earlier, just before he and Lois slipped around past the barricades that marked off the set from the rest of the park. The crowds had dispersed, now that there was nothing to see being filmed.

As soon as Clark and Lois were back in their car, Clark pulled out his cell phone and dialed the number for his home. His mother picked up on the second ring. He quickly made arrangements for Michael, Hunter, and Rebecca to stay at their grandparents’ house until things blew over. There was no telling how long Xena and the others would be holed up in their house, but he guessed that they would be there at least overnight. He gave his mother the briefest of explanations, leaving out the threat to his very life and soul. It was better if she worried about his safety after the fact. He hated to keep things from her, but he wasn’t sure that he really understood everything himself. When he was finished, he ended the call and sat in silence with Lois, waiting for Hercules to pull up.

Meanwhile, Hercules led his friends through Centennial Park at a brisk pace. He waved to a few of the production assistants, those who saw him at any rate. He stopped only once, instructing a petite blonde girl named Lynn to see what she could do about clearing his schedule for the next few days, citing personal reasons as the cause of why he needed a few days away from the set. She promised to speak with the director as soon as possible and to call or text if there was any problems.

“Nice,” Iolaus said, appraising the girl as she sauntered down the path. “Since when do you have women catering to you? I thought that was against your image.”

Hercules smiled at his friend’s banter. By the gods, how he’d missed the traded teasing with his light-hearted friend!

“Why? Jealous?” he joked right back.

“Hey, I’m huge in the Elysian Fields,” Iolaus shot back, an amused twinkle in his eye. He stopped and looked his friend in the eye. “All kidding aside, it really is good to see you again, Herc. I’ve missed you. I’d take fighting a hydra with you over the blissful numbness of the Elysian Fields any day of the week.”

“I’ve missed you too, Iolaus. It hasn’t been the same without having you by my side, traveling the world, fighting side by side. It’s pretty dull fighting fake monsters in rubberized suits. Or worse, CGI monsters.”

“What?”

“Uh, never mind. It’s complicated.”

They resumed walking. Hercules led them out of the park to

where he’d parked his car, a well kept red convertible only one model year old. A street vendor stood parked in a shiny silver trailer on the corner.

“Hey, let’s get a bite to tide us over. What do you say?” Iolaus asked.

Hercules hesitated but Iolaus started towards it.

“Iolaus, no,” Hercules said. “Lois and Clark are waiting for us.”

“Come on,” Iolaus beckoned. “But, I’m a little short on dinars. Can you spot me a few?”

Hercules shrugged and started after his friend. A few feet from the vehicle, Iolaus stopped and turned around.

“What?” Hercules asked.

“That guy...he kinda looks like Falafel. Don’t you think?”

Hercules looked over and stifled a grimace. The man was impassively watching the foot traffic on the sidewalk. But Iolaus was right. He had the same long, dirty face and small, beady eyes of their old friend Falafel, the worst cook in ancient Greece.

“He does,” Hercules conceded. “Maybe he’s a descendant of his.”

“Well, in that case, I think I’ll pass on the food,” Iolaus said, starting back the way they had come. “I didn’t come back from the dead to torture my stomach.”

Hercules smiled and shook his head as he trailed Iolaus.

“Now I know why they call these things ‘roach coaches,’” he said to himself.

They reached the convertible once more. Xena raised one eyebrow as Hercules unlocked the vehicle.

“I thought you said we were riding.”

Hercules laughed a small embarrassed laugh. “Sorry, I keep forgetting that you guys aren’t accustomed to seeing the world as it is now. This is a car. Think of it like...a horseless carriage.”

“Impossible!” Gabrielle said, unbelieving.

“Come on. Hop in and I’ll prove it.”

“So, who gets to ride up front?” Iolaus asked.

“I call ‘crossbow,’” Xena grinned slyly.

“I walked myself right into that, didn’t I?” Iolaus complained, half-heartedly.

Iolaus and Gabrielle climbed into the backseat while Xena took the front passenger seat. Each of them looked dubious as to riding in the strange contraption. Hercules slid the key into the ignition and pulled away from the curb.

“So what else has changed since we’ve been gone?” Xena asked after a few moments, while Hercules navigated a few one way streets to circle back to where Lois and Clark waited.

“Well, a few years back, there were a couple of TV shows based on our lives and adventures.”

“TV?” Gabrielle asked.

“It’s like a play. Only it isn’t done live in front of an audience. Maybe I can show you later.”

“Did they at least get our stories right?” Gabrielle asked. “I mean, did they take liberties with my scrolls?”

“Uh...” Hercules stuttered.

“It’s okay, you can give it to me straight,” Gabrielle assured him. “I can take it.”

“Quite a few liberties were taken. I don’t know if it was done just in an attempt to draw more viewers in or if maybe they had only some of your scrolls, or if they just got lucky on the things that they got right. But there were quite a few stories written that never actually happened. And I do assume they had some of your scrolls, at the very least. I mean, the earlier stories completely nailed your adventures right on the head.”

“What sort of adventures did they, whoever they is, make up for us?” Xena asked, her eyes never leaving the car’s windshield, taking in all of the unfamiliar sights and sounds of Metropolis.

“Well, for one, they had you slaughter most of the Olympian gods,” Hercules said, shrugging a little as he drove. It was

obvious from his tone that the sheer ridiculousness of the “Twilight Of The Gods” story amused him greatly. “Oh, and they had me kill Zeus.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding! Please, at least tell me that I killed Ares first,” Xena replied, her eyes wide with shock and disbelief as she pulled them from the road ahead and looked instead at the demigod.

“No, you kept him alive,” Hercules said.

A fit of laughter seized Iolaus. Hercules couldn’t help but to join in.

“Could have been worse,” Hercules said after a moment.

“They turned me into a pig for two episodes.” He pointed to Lois’ car. “Look. There they are.”

They followed as Lois pulled her Jeep from the curb and guided the vehicle to Hyperion Avenue, each of them absorbed in their own thoughts.

In no time at all, both cars pulled up to the Kents’ townhouse on Hyperion Avenue. Hercules threw his convertible into park, showed his passengers how to open their doors, and locked his vehicle.

“Not bad,” Xena said, eyeing the car. “Maybe not as much fun as going full gallop on a good horse, but not bad.”

Hercules chuckled. “Too bad we don’t have time to open her up on the highway. You might change your mind then.”

Lois and Clark were already at the door, unlocking it and holding the door open for their guests. They stepped over the threshold, Iolaus’ eyes going wide. Clark figured that the house must look like a palace to the man. He’d seen how simple the houses and inns in ancient Greece had been. Xena and Gabrielle took it all in stride. The place looked almost the same as the last time that they had been there, when they had travelled into the future to return Lois and Clark to their own time using the Chronos Stone. Xena noted a few changes; photos of Lois and Clark’s children hung on the walls now and a few scattered toys littered the living room floor.

“Make yourself at home,” Lois said, gesturing to the living room couches.

Iolaus made his way to one of the couches and picked up a stuffed horse. “Hey, Xena, this kind of looks like Argo.”

Xena smiled. “It sure does.”

“I’ll run out and get us some dinner,” Clark offered, glancing at the clock.

Iolaus’ face brightened. “Excellent! I always think better on a full stomach. Just no possum stew. Doesn’t sit right with me.” His hand briefly covered his stomach in emphasis.

“That... won’t be a problem,” Clark assured him, stifling an amused smile.

He paused and thought for a moment. What could he possibly pick up that the three ancient Greeks, unfamiliar with the modern world, might like? A small smile ghosted over his lips as a thought occurred to him. Hero sandwiches for a band of heroes, he decided.

“I think I’ve got just the thing,” he said.

He spun into his super disguise, deciding that it would just be faster to fly across town to his favorite sandwich shop. Hercules’ and Iolaus’ jaws both dropped. Xena and Gabrielle looked suitably impressed, but not shocked. They both clearly remembered seeing him do the same thing when he’d flown off to return Tempus to the Metropolis Institute For The Criminally Insane at the end of their last adventure together.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, then crossed the room to the window. He stopped at the windowsill, frowning. “Hey, Iolaus, mind tossing me that horse?” he asked after a second. “Rebecca’s going to flip out when she realizes that she left it here.”

Iolaus tossed the stuffed animal at Clark in an easy, underhand pitch. Clark caught the toy and tucked it under one arm. Pushing aside the curtains, he took off like a shot, making it

impossible for any onlookers to have seen him. A sonic boom rang out, the only evidence of his passing.

“Holy Hera,” Iolaus gaped, falling back into the couch cushions.

Even Hercules’ jaw dropped, though he’d seen plenty of news footage that showed Superman zipping off into the sky. There was simply no comparison for seeing it happen in real time though.

“I’m just going to change really quickly,” Lois said, slipping out of her heels. She turned on a couple of lamps in the room, now that the sun was nearly set.

Xena, Gabrielle, and Iolaus all took an immediate fascination with the flameless light source. Iolaus poked at the bulb with a cautious finger.

“Wow,” he said, marveling that he hadn’t burnt his finger. “The future is pretty cool. One of these things would have come in really handy all those times we had to go into deep, dark caves to slay monsters, eh Herc?”

Hercules nodded. “Yes, it would have.”

“So, what was the last monster that you fought? The world must still have some, right? Come on. Tell me everything.”

Hercules shook his head slowly. “I haven’t fought a monster in a couple of thousand years now, Iolaus. There are no more left. Unless you count Hollywood producers. Scariest monsters I’ve ever faced.”

“Worse than the Hydra? The Minotaur? The She-Demon?”

“Worse than all of the monsters you and I faced put together,” Hercules said with a wry smile.

“Xena, what are we going to do about Alti? We don’t even have our weapons,” Gabrielle said.

“I don’t know yet. Let’s see what Ares finds out about the Stone of Creation.” Xena stood and began to move, examining various objects in the room.

“You trust him?” the bard asked.

Xena sighed. “Yes. There was real fear in his eyes when he told us about Dahak. So long as Alti and Dahak are a threat, we can trust Ares to be on our side.”

“Do you think that he still carries a torch for you?”

Xena nodded slowly. “Probably. And that gives us another advantage. He won’t dare to be tempted to switch sides on us.”

“Okay, that’s better,” Lois said, striding back into the room, dressed in loose yoga pants and a t-shirt.

“Your children are beautiful,” Xena said, looking at the most recent family photo to adorn the walls. “I take it that this is the one you were carrying the last time we met.” She pointed to the image of Michael as he stood next to Clark. “He looks just like Clark.”

“You knew?” Lois asked. “How? Why didn’t you tell me that you knew?”

Xena smiled conspiratorially. “Remember how you spent the entire voyage to Rome throwing up over the ship’s railing?”

“How could I forget?”

“I showed you the pressure points in your wrists to alleviate sea sickness.”

“I remember,” Lois nodded. “I thought I was doing it wrong. And I was convinced that the voyage was going to kill me.”

Xena chuckled. “At first, I thought that you were doing it incorrectly too. So I watched you do it a number of times, from a distance. You were doing it properly. That’s when I realized. I’ve only ever seen that technique fail when a woman is experiencing pregnancy sickness. Since you didn’t mention being pregnant, I held my tongue. I wasn’t sure if you knew yet yourself, and I didn’t want to add more stress to you while you were worrying about saving Clark.”

Lois nodded thoughtfully.

A second later, a familiar whoosh was heard as Clark alighted in the living room. The stuffed horse was gone. Instead, he held a

couple of brown bags in his arms, each one packed to the brim with food. Each one had the name “Tony’s” written in a fancy script in red ink on the side. Clark placed the bags down on the dining room table.

“Mom and dad say hi. So do the kids. Michael and Hunter wanted you to know that they finished their homework. You know, I think Michael’s speed might be coming in. He kind of... dashed... into the room when I got there. And he said that he wrote a five page paper by hand in twenty minutes. Rebecca was thrilled to have her toy brought over,” he said to Lois. “You can unpack this stuff. I’ll get some drinks from the kitchen.”

He sauntered off to the kitchen. A few minutes later, he reappeared dressed in jeans and a Bills shirt, holding a tray of glasses and an assortment of drinks. Lois was already unloading the take out onto various dishes. A variety of hot and cold sandwiches, potato and macaroni salads, a tin of regular garden salad, and a few different containers of dressings covered the middle of the table. A box of cookies and another box of mini brownies joined the rest. Clark gave everyone a glass and began to pour the drinks.

“Any mead?” Iolaus asked.

“Uh, not exactly,” Clark said.

“Ale?”

Clark shook his head. “Sorry.”

“Nah, that’s fine. What’s that stuff?” He pointed to the pitcher of dark liquid on the table.

“Iced tea,” Clark said.

Iolaus shrugged. “Never heard of it, but I’m game.”

Clark poured him a glassful. Hercules went for the Cherry Pepsi, as did Clark. Gabrielle and Xena both stuck to ice water. Lois went for her old standby of cream soda. Clark identified each of the sandwiches for the ancient heroes, choosing an Italian sub for himself. Iolaus went for the chicken parmesan hero. His eyes lit up at the first bite.

“Gods above! This is incredible!” he exclaimed, his mouth half full. He swallowed hard. “You know, there’s food on the other side, but nothing as satisfying as the food on *this* side.” He took another large bite, grinning as he chewed.

Xena and Gabrielle talked lightly with Lois and Clark as they ate, asking them how they were doing since they last had seen them. Gabrielle quickly told Hercules and Iolaus the story surrounding their last encounter with the two reporters. By the time that they had finished eating, Iolaus had polished off a sandwich and a half, plus generous helpings of the potato and macaroni salads. Clark was impressed that the short, well built, and in-shape man could pack away so much food.

They studiously avoided the topics of Alti and Dahak for most of the night, though the heroes did offer Lois and Clark a few details on the two when the conversation circled around to them a couple of times. After dinner, they moved back into the living room, uncertain of what to do. None of them felt like sitting still. They were all men and women of action. Sitting and waiting, perhaps for Alti to make the first move, had their nerves on edge. Xena was especially agitated. Without her weapons, she felt like a part of her own body was missing. She was more than capable of fighting without a blade, but she missed the comforting feel of steel in her hands, and said as much whenever anyone mentioned it.

“Do you think Alti is in Metropolis?” Gabrielle asked finally, shattering the uncomfortable silence that had blanketed the room, and voicing the question that was on all of their minds.

“She must be. Ares wouldn’t have come to us yet if she wasn’t close by,” Hercules said.

“Ares had better find out about that stone soon,” Xena said, settling down on the floor next to the demigod.

“There’s got to be a way of knowing for sure,” Iolaus said, drumming his fingers on the arm of the couch.

“I’d go out and make a quick sweep of the city,” Clark said with a shrug, “but I don’t have any idea of what I’m looking for.”

“Chaos would be a good starting point,” Xena said dryly. “Unless she’s learned the art of subtlety after all these years. I doubt that though.”

“Well, let’s see what LNN has to say,” Clark suggested. He picked up the remote control and flipped the television set on.

All eyes were riveted on the appliance. Xena, Gabrielle, and Iolaus exchanged an uneasy look.

“What sort of spell is on that thing?” Gabrielle asked warily.

“Spell?” Lois asked.

“The...people. How...?”

Clark chuckled quietly. “It’s not a spell or anything insidious,” he assured her. “There’s no actual people in there. Just images of people. Like a bunch of paintings looked at really fast so that they seem to move.”

Gabrielle nodded, but the action looked forced. Her brow was crinkled in puzzlement.

Clark kept skimming through the channels until he landed on LNN. The news was just starting to repeat on a loop. For a long while, they sat in silence, watching for any sign of trouble that would indicate that Alti was in the neighborhood. They saw the coverage of a couple of Clark’s rescues that day; a car fire in front of the Daily Planet and a man who’d wanted to commit suicide by jumping from the Metropolis Bridge. Nothing seemed to point to the shamaness. Eventually, the anchors began to cover the international news. Clark turned the sound down. He didn’t need it very high to hear it after all.

“Can I get anyone some coffee? Tea? Dessert?” he offered.

“Sure,” Hercules replied. “Coffee would be great. Need a hand?”

“No thanks. We’ve got it,” Lois said, waving Hercules back down as he started to rise.

Lois stood along with Clark. Together, they made their way to the kitchen. Clark switched the coffee maker on and leaned heavily against the island in the center of the room. He looked completely lost and bothered.

“You okay?” Lois asked, moving to his side and wrapping her arms about his waist, trying to comfort him.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m just a little worried, that’s all. I mean, no one has said anything, but there must be a reason why the gods sent *four* heroes to fight this Alti person. And I hate not being able to just go out there and take care of the problem.”

“I know,” Lois said, giving his body a comforting squeeze. “I don’t like it either. But I trust Xena and Gabrielle. They’ve already proven to me that they can handle just about anything. I would have lost you if not for them. And I’m starting to trust Hercules and Iolaus too. If Hercules defeated this evil god in the past, he can do it again.”

Clark wrapped his arms around her. “I trust them too. And thanks,” he murmured into her hair as he planted a kiss on her head. He sighed. “Just how does a person protect their soul anyway?” he mused.

Lois looked up at him. “They get religion?” she joked weakly.

Clark chuckled lightly but distractedly. “Very funny. Look, Lois...maybe...maybe it’s not such a good idea for you to be in Metropolis until this all blows over. Who’s to say that this Alti won’t go after you too? I don’t want to risk it. Take the kids and go somewhere.”

Lois shook her head defiantly. “After all these years, do you really think I’d let you face this alone? I’m staying.”

“Lois, this isn’t like the other dangers that we’ve faced,” he protested. “This isn’t some psycho with a gun, or cyborg, or a woman who shrinks people, or evil Kryptonian with an attitude problem.”

“So? What’s your point?” She crossed her arms over her

chest.

“The point is, I don’t know how to protect you this time,” Clark said pleadingly.

“Nice try, but I’m not letting you do this by yourself. End of discussion.” Her voice held a note of finality to it.

Clark knew the tone well. Unless he tied her up and flew her off to some secure location, there would be no keeping Lois away. And even if he did, she’d find a way to get back. Motherhood had definitely not softened her Mad Dog Lane side. And right now, Mad Dog Lane was firmly in control.

“All right,” he said, throwing his hands up in surrender. “You win.”

Lois kissed him gently on the lips and patted his cheek affectionately. “I always do.”

She flashed him a smile, then pulled out of his embrace to pour the coffee. Clark grabbed the rest of the items that they needed, then took the tray from the counter. They reentered the living room to find Xena and Hercules deep in discussion. Gabrielle and Iolaus were sitting in companionable silence, watching the images on LNN.

Clark set his tray on the coffee table and took his seat on the second couch, across from Gabrielle and Iolaus.

“Coffee’s up,” he said, still somewhat distractedly. Lois might have won the discussion in the kitchen, but that didn’t mean that Clark was happy about it. Far from it.

“Thanks,” Hercules said. He glanced at the other Greeks.

“Uh, why don’t I fix your drinks for you?” he offered.

For Iolaus and himself, Hercules left the coffee black. For Gabrielle, he added a touch of milk. For Xena, he added three teaspoons of sugar. Each of them took a tentative sip. Gabrielle frowned slightly, trying to decide if she liked it or not. She followed Hercules’ example and added half a spoonful of sugar. She took another sip, then smiled. Clark watched it all as he fixed Lois’ coffee and then his own. He threw a quick glance at the television, but LNN had switched over to entertainment news. A critique of Courtney Cox’s outfit while at a recent red carpet event was not going to help them at all. Not knowing what to say, he bit into a chocolate chip cookie and chewed thoughtfully.

“So, I guess the next thing we need to figure out is sleeping arrangements,” Lois said, holding her mug in both hands.

“I can take them back to my hotel,” Hercules offered.

Lois shook her head. “There’s got to be some sort of safety in numbers. What if this Alti finds out where to find Clark? No, I think I’d feel better if you all stayed here.”

“I don’t know,” Hercules said. “We’ve imposed enough here today.”

“You aren’t imposing. And I won’t hear of you leaving.”

“We’ll be fine on the floor,” Xena said. “All four of us are used to roughing it. Well, maybe Hercules has forgotten what it’s like.” She grinned playfully at the demigod, elbowing him lightly in the ribs.

“Hey, I go camping when I can!” he shot back, feigning hurt, his hand over his heart.

“Well, let me at least see if I can find some air mattresses or something,” Clark said. He took out his phone, intending to run a search through the local stores.

“That’s not necessary. Xena and Gabrielle can take the couches. Iolaus and I will take the floor. We’ve slept in places a lot less comfortable.”

Iolaus nodded his confirmation.

“I really can’t...,” Clark started to protest.

“It’s fine, trust us,” Iolaus said. “No rocks, no one going to attack us in the middle of the night, no chance of waking up to a sudden downpour...this is like paradise!”

A look at Iolaus’ face told Clark that this was another argument he wasn’t going to win. The old saying of “batting a thousand” came unbidden to his mind and he choked back a

resigned laugh.

“Okay,” he relented. “At least let me see what I can do about sheets and pillows.”

He drained the last of his coffee and then went up the stairs. Ten minutes later, he came back down, a large bundle of sheets and a couple of pillows in his arms. He set them off to one side for the time being. They passed the rest of the night in companionable conversation. Twice, Clark had to slip out when he heard cries for help, once to stop a mugging and once to help a driver whose brakes failed as he was driving on a winding cliff road outside of the city limits.

At last, everyone was ready to turn in for the night. Lois and Clark made up the couches and tried to make the floor as comfortable as possible. Clark noticed that Xena had gone missing as they worked. On a hunch, he went out the back into the small yard that they owned. He found her leaning against the house, quietly looking up at the sky. She turned as soon as she heard the door opening as he came outside.

“Am I interrupting?” he asked.

“No, not at all.”

“Everything okay?”

Xena sighed. “Everything’s fine. It’s just...I was remembering something that a friend once told me.”

“Oh. Care to share? Or too private?”

“I don’t mind sharing. You see, Hades’ helmet of invisibility had been stolen by a very evil man, who used it to slip out of the Underworld and back to the world of the living. My friend, Marcus, had been given back his life for a day or two to help me as we tracked down the helmet. When we camped that night, he couldn’t stop staring at the sky. He said that you never realize all of the things that you take for granted until you don’t have them anymore. Like the sky and the evening air. I understood a little of what he was saying back then, but never quite the extent of it. That is, until today when Hades pulled me back to life. Seeing Gabrielle...and Hercules and Iolaus...it just sort of hammered home how much I’ve missed them, you know? And experiencing life again, I see how strange your world is compared to the one I knew, but there’s so much that has stayed the same. The sky, the moon, the satisfaction of a hot meal. I know that I did the right thing, choosing to stay dead in Japan when Gabrielle had the chance to bring me back. I had to guard those souls from further evil. But I still can’t help second guessing how easily I chose to reject another chance at life.” She shrugged, embarrassed at having bared her soul so easily. “I’ll be fine. Thanks for listening.”

Clark sighed. When he spoke, his voice was soft, barely above a whisper. “Xena, you know that I would do anything in my power to help you and the others...stay alive after all of this is over. I owe you more than I can say. When we first met, you had no reason to trust me or Lois. You had no obligation to help us. But you did. In doing so, you kept Lois and my son out of harm’s way. And you saved my life, not once, but twice. First in the arena, and then again from the poison that was slowly killing me. If there was any way that I could make Hades give you, Gabrielle, and Iolaus a second chance at life, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Xena touched his arm lightly and a genuine smile crossed her lips. “I know that you would. But, I guess going to the Elysian Fields won’t be such a bad thing. Gabrielle and Iolaus will be there to keep me company. And it’ll be nice to be reunited with my son. Come on, let’s go back in before the rest wonder what happened to us.”

“After you,” Clark said, opening the door for her.

A little while later, Clark emerged from the shower and slipped into bed alongside Lois. Lois snuggled up to his warm body, running her hand over his bare chest. Clark brought his arm around her body, pulling her closer. Lois rested her head against his chest and his chin rested on the top of her head. Neither of

them spoke; there was nothing to say that they hadn't already said that day. But they both had their thoughts on their current foe. And with the kids not home, the house was eerily quiet, despite the four heroes that were camped out in their living room. It was a long while before either of them slept.

Morning came too fast for Clark's liking. He groaned and threw a hand over his eyes, blocking out the steady assault of sunlight. At least, he mused, he'd been able to sleep through the night once he had finally fallen asleep. No cries for help had interrupted him — an extremely rare occurrence. For that, he was glad. He had the feeling that he would need every shred of his strength today. He glanced at the clock on the night stand. It was just eight in the morning. He slipped out of the bed, leaving Lois to sleep. Hastily, he pulled on a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt. It was on the cooler side, and although he didn't feel the cold like a regular person, he had long ago become accustomed to dressing the part whenever he knew that others would see him. He smiled ruefully. The people sleeping in his living room had seen him spin into his super disguise and fly off, but yet, he still felt compelled to keep up the charade with his current clothing choices.

He floated down the steps, not wanting to wake anyone, then slipped out of the house. He jogged to the local deli to pick up some breakfast supplies and returned home. By the time Lois and their guests had woken up, Clark had prepared a spread of eggs, bacon, toast, bagels, sausage, and a selection of fruits, as well as coffee, tea and orange juice. Everyone ate with gusto, especially Iolaus, Clark noticed.

They were just finishing up when Ares appeared before them. Hercules put down his mug of coffee.

"What did you find out?" he asked.

"Hello to you too," the god replied.

"Ares, please," Xena said, exasperated.

Ares' head whipped to the raven haired warrior woman.

"Well, since you asked nicely, I'll tell you." He pulled out a chair from the table and sat, adjusting the sword that hung at his side. "Okay, here's the deal. I paid a little visit to Mnemosyne. I understand that you spoke with her the last time you dealt with Dahak." He nodded towards Hercules.

"She actually spoke with you? She's not too keen on the gods, since Zeus attacked and defeated the Titans. She barely even wanted to speak with *me* the last time, and I'm only half a god."

"Yeah well, when it comes to defeating Dahak, we're *all* on the same team," Ares said with a shrug. "Anyway, after you used the stone the last time, Zeus collected it and split it into three pieces. He hid each piece in a different place, even recruiting the gods of other countries to watch over the shards."

"Why would he do that?" Iolaus asked.

"He, like all of us, thought that Dahak had been destroyed. The stone was still very powerful, and he feared that someone, either a god or a mortal, might be able to use it against the rest of the gods."

"Can they?" Xena asked.

Ares shrugged again. "No one knows. But dear old dad wasn't going to risk it."

"Well, at least he didn't destroy it completely," Hercules sighed.

"Why not?" Clark asked. "I mean, if he feared it so much, why not destroy it?"

Ares drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Only Zeus knows, and he's unreachable right now. Maybe he feared that one day some other evil entity would arise."

"What's the catch?" Lois asked, running her finger mindlessly around the rim of her mug. "I mean, there's got to be a catch, right? I'm guessing he didn't just stick them in a hole in the ground for anyone to stumble across."

Ares smirked. "You know, if you and your husband weren't such goody-goodies, I might actually appreciate that sharp mind of yours. But you're right. Zeus placed a series of protective spells on the shards. Those with mortal, human blood can't touch the shards without being incinerated. Those with immortal blood can't touch them either without becoming trapped for eternity."

"So basically, we're screwed," Iolaus said, throwing up his hands. "Perfect."

"Maybe not," Clark said slowly and with a sly grin. "I'm willing to bet that while neither a human nor a god can get the shards, that an alien can."

"Alien?" Iolaus repeated, arching his brows. "Like a strange visitor from another planet, alien? I've heard those fantasy stories before."

Clark nodded. "They aren't fantasies, Iolaus."

"Okay, fantastic. Even if you're right, where do we find one?" He took a large bit of the remainder of his bagel.

Clark grinned grimly. "You're looking at him. I'll go after the pieces of the stone."

"You?" Iolaus asked, swallowing hard. "You don't look like an alien. But," he breathed out quickly and shrugged, "then again, I did watch you fly last night."

"I'll come with you," Hercules said. "I'm familiar with the handiwork of the gods. So, where do we find the shards, Ares?"

"There is a piece hidden in a labyrinth in Egypt. The entrance is somewhere in the cliffs of the Valley of the Kings and it snakes below several of the tombs. It won't be easy to find. Mortals have been digging in that valley for a long time and haven't stumbled on the entrance yet." Ares took a piece of bacon and chewed it thoughtfully. "Ooh, crispy. Just how I like it."

"Ares, focus," Gabrielle said.

Ares chewed for a moment longer than was necessary, then swallowed. "The second piece is in Norway, hidden in a labyrinth someplace beneath the Rainbow Bridge. But don't think that your friend Balder is going to help you, Hercules. The gods have fled Asgard, much as the rest of Olympus has."

"Why are all the gods such cowards?" Gabrielle muttered. "Where's the other piece?"

"Here's where it gets a little weird," Ares admitted. "It's up in the Arctic by the North Pole."

Hercules blinked. "Okay, that *is* weird. There's no gods up there."

Ares shrugged and spread his hands wide. "Since when has Zeus ever made sense before?"

Hercules inclined his head in agreement. "I hate to say it, but you've got a point."

"I want to come with you guys," Iolaus said decisively.

Clark shifted uncomfortably. "I can't fly the both of you around at once," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "For a short distance, sure. But for long distances like we're talking about, I'm afraid that it's better that I only take one."

"You wouldn't get past the wards on the doorways," Ares said. "Mortal blood, remember?"

"Aww man," Iolaus grumbled. "I finally get back to the land of the living and I don't even get to go where the action is."

"And me?" Hercules asked.

Ares looked thoughtful for a moment. "The balance of mortal and immortal blood might just be enough to allow you access inside. But you won't be able to remove the shards from their cradles. Only when the stone is reunited can it be handled. Keep the shards apart until you have all three."

Iolaus harrumphed.

"I'm sure there will still be plenty of fighting to come when we take down Alti," Xena assured Iolaus, clamping a hand on his shoulder. "In the meantime, you can help Gabrielle and me while we guard Lois. If Alti knows about her relationship to Clark's... alter ego, she may try to make a move to draw Clark out into

battle. We need to be ready for that.”

“Hmmm...yes, well, you might want these then,” Ares said, pausing to chew another strip of bacon. A blue spark appeared in the air above his hands, similar to the one that preceded his own appearances. An instant later, Xena’s sword and chakram appeared in his hands.

“My weapons,” Xena said, accepting them from the war god. “But how?”

“After Gabrielle laid them to rest with your ashes in your family’s tomb, I took them,” Ares admitted, though there was no apology in his voice. “I couldn’t stand to see them rot with time. It seemed a shame to let them go to waste. I’ve kept them secure in my quarters on Olympus. And fine, I’ll admit it, it was nice to have a memento of you around.”

“Thank you,” she said, reverently stroking the smooth metal of her chakram with her fingertips. A gleeful light seemed to shine in her eyes as she hefted the weapons, taking comfort in their familiar weight and feel. Indeed, she felt as if her arms were complete once more.

Ares made a second set of sparks appear, bringing two sais into existence. He handed them to Gabrielle.

“You kept these too?” the bard asked, surprised.

“Like I said, call me sentimental,” he said dryly. “Besides, what *would* my collection be like if I kept a souvenir of the Warrior Princess but nothing from the Battling Bard?”

Lois raised her brows. “I thought you had a staff.”

“I, uh, made a change in weapons a year or so after I last saw you,” Gabrielle said. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Clark glanced at the clock. It was nearing ten in the morning now. He cleared his throat. “Hercules, you and I had better get going.” He spun into his super suit without waiting for a response.

The demigod nodded as Clark stopped spinning. “Where to first?”

Clark mulled it over. “We’ll hit the North Pole first, then move onto Norway and Egypt. I don’t want any prying eyes when we’re at the Valley of the Kings, so I’d prefer to do that under the cover of darkness.”

“You are *not* going dressed like that!”

A pink shimmer announced the presence of Aphrodite. She pointed a finger at Hercules, transforming his clothing into thick winter wear, including a puffy, bright orange Gore-Tex snow jacket and pants, as well as heavy boots.

“That’s better,” she said with a pleased smile. Then she turned to Clark. “Your turn, Stud Muffin.”

He waved his hands before him, as if he could ward off her power that way. “I don’t need it. I don’t feel temperature extremes,” he explained. If anything, the thick winter wear would only slow him down.

“Well *duh!* You think I don’t know that? I meant that ensemble you’re wearing has *got* to go.”

“No thanks,” Clark said, as politely as he could.

“Ugh, don’t tell me you’re really going to fly around in that blue and red outfit of yours,” the goddess pouted. “It’s not exactly subtle. Or easy on the eye. Talk about clashing! I could fix you up something in a nice blue and black, or maybe a nice black and red. Or maybe dark green. And what’s up with the cape? That’s *so* last century!” As she spoke, she snapped her fingers, changing the appearance of Clark’s outfit with each snap.

“Aphrodite, please,” Clark begged. “I like my suit the way my mother designed it.”

She rolled her eyes, pouting again. “Everyone’s a critic!”

Another snap of her fingers restored his suit to the way it normally was. Clark breathed a discreet sigh of relief.

“Aphrodite,” Xena said, drawing the love goddess’ attention from Clark. “Any news on Alti?”

“Nada,” she replied. “She must be laying pretty low, where

ever she is. I’ll keep an eye out still, but so far, I’ve come up with exactly squat.”

“Keep watching,” Xena instructed.

Lois was mildly surprised at how casually the warrior princess issued commands to the gods before her. And at how easily they accepted her as their commander. She supposed that it shouldn’t be too surprising. After all, on their first adventure, Gabrielle had told her plenty of stories of Xena flat out defying and battling various gods. And, Lois suspected, there must have been even more occurrences like that after she and Clark had been returned to their own time.

“Will do,” the goddess said, with a mock salute before putting her hands on her hips. In a flash, she was gone again.

“What about you, Ares?” Xena asked.

“There’s not much that I can do,” he said. “But I *can* postpone a battle I had scheduled today out in the Middle East. As a favor to Superman, of course. No need to distract him when the threat of Dahak is hanging over us all. Not that I’m happy about it mind you. It’s taken me months of prodding on both sides to get to this point.”

“A favor from the god of war,” Clark mused. “Why do I get the feeling I’m going to regret that?”

“Because you probably will,” Hercules said knowingly.

“Hey,” Ares snapped. “If you pull this off and kill Dahak, I’ll consider us even.”

“How generous,” Hercules mocked him.

“Ooh, a dagger in my heart!” Ares scoffed.

He dramatically put a hand over his heart and stumbled back two steps before vanishing into thin air. Clark stepped over to Lois and took her into his arms. Her arms instantly encircled his neck and pulled him tightly to her.

“Be careful, Clark,” she whispered as her head came to rest on his chest.

“I will,” he promised her, his voice a solemn vow. “Be careful yourself. I know that Xena, Gabrielle, and Iolaus will do everything to keep you safe. But be careful anyway, okay?”

“I promise,” she vowed in return. “Come home to me in one piece.”

“Don’t I always?”

Clark leaned in, covering her lips with his own. She eagerly responded, attacking his lips with fearful energy. After a long moment, they broke apart.

“I love you, Lois,” he said softly.

“And I love you, Clark,” she responded.

Clark eased himself out of his wife’s embrace and turned to face Hercules. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Hercules confirmed, nodding.

“We’ll make this as fast a trip as we can,” Clark promised.

With that, he stepped over to Hercules and ushered him to the living room window. Awkwardly scooping the big man into his arms, Clark took off like a shot into the clear blue sky. Hercules closed his eyes as the earth fell away from them, fighting a sense of vertigo. When they were high enough to avoid being seen, Clark stopped climbing and leveled out. He peered down at his passenger. Hercules had opened his eyes again but was looking a little green around the gills.

“You okay?” Clark asked, genuinely concerned.

Hercules swallowed down the lump of bile that had begun to creep up his throat. It simply would not do to vomit all over Superman. After a moment, he nodded.

“Well that was certainly the most...intense...take off I’ve ever experienced.”

Clark flashed an embarrassed smile. “Yeah. Sorry about that. I need to speed in and out like that to avoid prying eyes. We can go a little bit slower now if you’d like.”

“I think I’ll be okay. So, do I at least get an in-flight movie? Frequent flier miles?” the half god joked. “A tiny package of

peanuts?”

“No, but I can promise you the fastest travel time and smoothest landing that you’ve ever experienced.”

Clark adjusted his trajectory ever so slightly, striking due north. He sped onwards, slicing a path through cold, wispy clouds here and thick, wet rain clouds there. Hercules peered down after a while, a little uncertainly. It was one thing to watch the world racing by beneath him while on a plane, and quite another to do so in the arms of a super powered alien. He trusted Superman completely, but being so exposed made him uneasy nonetheless. He felt Clark pick up speed as they passed over Canada. Towards the northern border of the country, they encountered a massive electrical storm, forcing Clark to alter his route miles out of the way. It took less than a minute, but each moment pressed like weights on the minds of the two heroes.

At last, the storm was left behind. Land fell away to open ocean beneath them, then back to land once more. Ice and snow began to cover the earth and Clark started to drop in altitude at a gentle angle. He began to slow down, preparing for landing.

“Where do we even begin to look?” Hercules asked, yelling over the wind and eyeing the endless sea of ice below him. The speed of the flight caused tears to flow from his eyes and crystallize on his cheeks in the subzero air, forcing him to blink rapidly.

“I don’t know. But keep your eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary,” Clark replied. “I’ll x-ray as we pass overhead also.”

Clark slowed way down, until they were moving no faster than a man at a brisk run. Clark x-rayed every inch of land within his scope of vision, working in a sweeping east to west and back again loop, steadily moving further and further north with each pass. He was infinitely glad that they weren’t doing this in the dark.

“Aha,” he said triumphantly. “I think I might have found something.”

He floated gently back to the ground, angling his path towards a large glacier. Softly, his feet touched the ground and he gently put his passenger down. Hercules adjusted his coat, happy to be on solid ground again.

“Well, that was certainly an experience,” Hercules said, feeling better now that he was on the ground. “Never thought I’d wind up flying with you.”

Clark smiled wryly. “Never thought I’d meet anyone else with superhuman strength.”

Hercules chuckled. “Guess that makes us even then. So what did you see? It all looks pretty much the same around here to me.”

“There’s a large cavern a mile or two beneath the ice,” Clark replied.

Clark began to walk towards the wall of ice before him. White snow and crystalline ice mottled with darker patches of deep blue took his breath away with its sheer splendor. Clark hated to have to destroy part of the artistic beauty that nature had created over the millennia. He sighed softly to himself. Hercules came up beside Clark as he stood marveling at the towering mass of ice. The demigod pulled the hood of his jacket tightly around his head. He made a fist and readied himself to force an entrance. Clark gently put a hand on Hercules’ arm, stilling his movement.

“Wait,” he said.

He thoroughly examined the entire wall of frozen water, zooming in here and there to check fracture lines and other weak spots.

“Allow me,” he said once he had gotten a good feel for the structure.

“Be my guest,” Hercules said, grandly sweeping his hand before him before shoving his hands deep into his pockets to warm them.

Clark trained his heat vision on the glacier, reining in the intensity to a precise laser. He carefully swept his eyes in a curving arc, melting the ice steadily. He deftly avoided the weak places that might just cause the formation to crumble in upon itself, and thereby bury the piece of the Stone of Creation beneath tons of ice and snow. It wouldn’t be impossible for Clark to retrieve the shard if the glacier did collapse, but it would take precious time. It was better to go the route of careful precision.

Bit by bit, an arching tunnel took shape in the side of the glacier. Clark easily adopted a routine. He’d melt away a few feet of ice, then stop and refreeze the melting sides with quick blast of his super breath. Then he’d go back to making their tunnel. Every so often, he would x-ray the ground, judging the distance between the end of his tunnel and the narrow channel that connected with the underground chamber. Two hours of steady work went by, with Clark stopping his task only a handful of times to throw a couple of swift darts of heat onto Hercules, who’d begun to shiver badly in the arctic air, despite the Gore-Tex. At least, inside the icy walls of the tunnel, they were protected from the winds that were kicking up swirls of snow and depositing them into small drifts here and there.

“Why are you stopping?” Hercules asked as Clark stood back, examining his handy work with his hands on his hips.

“We’re here,” Clark announced. “All I need to do is dig down twenty feet or so. There’s an opening that leads to a long channel. It’ll take us directly into the chamber.”

Clark x-rayed the ground. Deeming it safe and sturdy, he floated above the floor and flipped upside down. He began to spin, faster and faster, until he was no more than a blur of blue and red, with the intermingled splash of yellow. He began to lower himself into the frozen mass of earth, becoming a veritable drill. In less than a minute, he had carved out a circular hole in the ground. He repeated the process twice more, widening the hole with each pass, until it was large enough to allow them to slip underground easily.

“After you,” Clark said to Hercules, sweeping his hands towards the access hole.

Hercules eyed the hole before him. “Nice work. Let’s hope there are some torches in there. Otherwise this is going to be difficult. I don’t suppose night vision is part of your powers.”

Clark chuckled and shook his head. “What do I look like? A Navy S.E.A.L.?”

“What? It’s not standard issue super hero powers?” Hercules said with a wink.

“I’m afraid not,” Clark said, his eyes sparkling in amusement.

“Here goes nothing,” Hercules said, sitting on the edge of the hole.

He swung his legs over the side and eased himself down as far as he could, then dropped the rest of the distance. Clark heard a soft thud as the demigod hit the floor, feet first and rolling slightly to avoid injuring himself.

“You all right?” Clark called down after him.

“Fine, fine. That just gets harder every century,” Hercules said. “Give me a second though. I think I found some torches.”

Clark moved back a step or two, so as not to obstruct any of the dim light that Hercules had to work with. He heard the hero’s shuffling steps on the hard, flat stone of the passageway. A few sharp clacks came next as flint stones were struck, followed by the whispered roar of a fire springing to life. Light flared inside the previously dark hole. Hercules lit a second torch. Clark floated an inch off the ground and lowered himself down into the passageway with Hercules.

“You are *such* a showoff,” the son of Zeus teased him good-naturedly.

Clark grinned and shrugged. “Hey, when you’ve got it…”

Hercules broke into a deep belly laugh and handed Clark one of the torches. He slapped Clark on the back in a friendly manner.

“You know, Clark, you surprise me. I never thought that Superman would have such a sense of humor.”

Clark laughed. “Yeah, I guess I don’t really get to show that side of myself when I’m in the suit. I can’t. It would not only blow my cover, but might undermine some of the authority that I carry. People listen to Superman because he’s more on the formal side. If they saw him acting like a regular guy, they might start to disregard what he has to say.”

Hercules nodded. “You talk about Superman like he’s a separate person.”

It was Clark’s turn to nod. “In a way, he is. He’s just an avatar of what I can do. Like Kevin Sorbo is yours. You’re really just Hercules. And I’m really just Clark.”

Side by side, they began their descent into the passageway. It was just wide enough for the two to walk alongside each other. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all smoothly hewn gray stone, without a joint or break to be seen. Strange designs were scratched deep into the stone at random intervals. Clark stopped to examine one. He respectfully traced his finger along the intricate, curving lines.

“What do these symbols mean?” he asked.

Hercules examined it, bringing his torch close to broaden the pool of light on the wall.

“I’m not familiar with it,” he said at last. “But they aren’t unlike runes of power I saw once, long ago. They probably help to bind the spells set on this place, since there aren’t any gods here to watch over it.”

“Anything we should be worried about?”

“Let’s hope not.”

They started down the passage once more, the ground now sloping steadily further and further into the bowels of the earth, still running due west. They walked in silence for a long while, each one taunt as a bowstring, waiting for some nasty surprise or another to come rushing at them from the darkness before them. More runes flashed into existence on either side of them, only to be swallowed up by the oppressive darkness once more as they moved on. Clark no longer paid them any mind, though he was aware of them as they marched past. All of his focus was on reaching out with his senses, straining to hear or smell anything out of the ordinary, since he couldn’t see anything beyond the small pool of light thrown by his torch, or that of Hercules.

After what seemed like an eternity of walking in the darkness, the passageway opened up into the large, circular cavern that Clark had glimpsed when he’d been x-raying from the air. It was larger than he’d thought. He stopped in his tracks on the very threshold of the cavern. Hercules did the same.

“How do you want to do this?” Clark asked, throwing a glance over at the demigod.

Hercules grimaced. “Could be just about anything in there,” he said unhappily. “I’ll take the right. You go left. Stay along the wall. Yell out if you find anything.”

Clark nodded and set his jaw determinedly. He stepped into the cavern, holding his breath in anticipation of some trap being sprung. When he’d taken ten steps into the chamber, and nothing at all happened, he slowly released his breath, somewhat shakily. He mentally berated himself for his unease. Unless there was Kryptonite in the chamber, there should be nothing for him to fear. Except that, for all of his godly blood, Hercules still bore the blood of a mortal. And that made the man vulnerable to harm. Clark was genuinely worried about the son of Zeus. But for now, there was nothing that Clark could do. Splitting up held their best chance of finding the stone and getting out of the cavern. So Clark forged on ahead. He kept close to the smooth, curving wall, his left arm stretched out to let his fingertips brush the frigid stone. Another thirty steps in and he noted a shelf in the wall. He walked closer and peered at the shelf. A trench was cut into the middle, leaving several inches of thick stone to the left and right.

Clark cautiously poked a finger into the trench. His finger became wet and he lifted it to his nose.

“Oil,” he said, momentarily confused. Then it dawned on him. “Hercules,” he called out, his voice echoing in the vaulted chamber. “Do you see a sort of shelf on your side? It’s filled with oil.”

With that, Clark lowered his torch and touched the flame to the reserve of oil. Instantly, the liquid was aflame, the fire racing along the wall almost exactly to the middle of the far side of the cavern. A second later, the right half of the cavern followed suit. Light blossomed in the bleak chamber, illuminating the entirety of the vast space. Clark took a moment to take in all of the details. Veins of gold and silver raced along the walls, glittering in the flickering light. Above, the ceiling was lost to the ever present darkness, but Clark’s sharp eyes caught the sparkling of crystals that barely caught the last reaches of the light. Some grew in vast clumps together, others stood alone, cut off from the others by stretches of unbroken blackness.

Vast pillars of smooth, polished stone stood in rows, leaving a wide aisle down the center of the chamber. Clark was instantly glad that he and Hercules had stuck close to the walls when they’d entered the space. To walk into one of those pillars could have proved disastrous, as they were supporting the heavy roof of the cavern.

At the far end of the chamber, an onyx altar stood on a raised dais. In a golden stand in the center, a piece of the Stone of Creation sat. It glimmered sapphire blue in the dancing firelight. Four daggers stood in holders in the middle of each the four sides of the altar, point down.

Clark took a step forward, moving away from the wall and to the center of the chamber. A white stone inlay in the floor marked a sort of grand and regal pathway down the exact center of the aisle. More of the strange, spiraling runes marred the white stone in places. Clark hesitantly stepped foot onto the path, once more tensely awaiting some trap to be sprung. Once more, nothing happened. He stopped and waited for Hercules to reach his side.

“It’s too quiet,” he whispered to the ancient hero. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. I thought your brother said that these places were protected.”

Hercules nodded. “Half brother. And trust me, that’s a half too much. But you’re right. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak,” he whispered back. “I keep hoping that whatever gods placed this shard here figured that the location of this chamber was protection enough. No normal person could ever hope to find this place.”

Clark nodded silently.

Together, they moved forward once more, apprehension slowing their steps more than they would have liked. It felt almost as if some outside force was pushing against their progress. Still, they steadily drew nearer to the altar. No threats materialized to thwart their advancement. By the time they reached the steps of the dais, both men were on their last frayed nerve.

“Stay here,” Clark cautioned, then ascended the four steps.

He stopped before the inky black altar. All across the polished surface, ancient lettering was scrawled in precise gold veining. Clark studied the lettering intently.

“What’s wrong?” Hercules asked worriedly when he saw Clark’s brow furrow.

“There are words inscribed all over the altar, but they don’t make much sense to me. And I can only read about half of them.”

“What does it say?”

“Something about the daggers. Path of the sun is the way.

Pieces of the stone once more made whole. Harness the power of light. Only then can the darkness be banished...or vanquished. Sorry, I’m not familiar with the dialect. Let’s see...dawn of time is pure. Ending of the world spreads darkness like...I think it says



a plague. That's about it."

Hercules rubbed the back of his neck in thought. "Helpful," he muttered. "Why can't the gods ever be direct?"

Clark studied the daggers again. All of them looked identical. Hollow golden handles and hilts shot with thin silver swirls ran down to a clear, delicate, razor-sharp crystalline blade. The pommels were missing from each of the weapons. Only a couple of empty prongs stood there. Clark guessed that the reunited Stone of Creation was meant to be placed in the prongs. Tiny blue sapphires were placed at the tips of the cross guard, which curved backwards ever so gently towards the pommel. A line of three additional sapphire stones lined the handle on both sides. Clark x-rayed each dagger in turn, coming up with absolutely no way of telling them apart. A closer inspection of the blades revealed them to be not crystal but pure diamond.

"No discernable differences," he relayed to Hercules. He read the inscription on the altar over again, once to himself, and once out loud. "I think it's a riddle," he said at least. "Path of the sun. The sun moves from east to west. These daggers seem to be aligned to each point of the compass. Let's see... we came in moving west. So this is the eastern dagger, making that one west. So we can rule out these two... the north and south ones." He pointed as he spoke. "Harness the power of light," he repeated.

"That's got to refer to the stone itself," Hercules said.

Clark nodded. "I think you're right. The way this hilt is set up, light could probably travel through the stone, into the blade."

"What was that part about the dawn again?"

"Dawn of time is pure. Ending of the world spreads darkness," Clark recited.

"Dawn," Hercules repeated. "Dawn is east."

"You think this inscription means for us to take the eastern dagger?"

"It has to be," Hercules said, sounding sure of himself.

"Okay. Here goes," Clark said, reaching out with a tremulous hand. His fingers closed gently but firmly around the handle. Reverently, he lifted the dagger from its cradle.

Once the dagger cleared the top of the altar, Clark and Hercules looked around the cavern nervously. Nothing stirred in the few shadows cast by the flickering trenches of fire. No sound could be heard except for their ragged breathing, and to Clark's ears, their pounding hearts. He passed the dagger to Hercules for safe keeping, hoping that the demigod's mixed blood would protect him from any spells woven around the artifact. Clark would have held onto it himself but he simply had no place to put it. Hercules took the dagger without hesitation. When Hercules failed to be consumed in a giant fireball or zapped with lightning, Clark became confident enough to reach out for the piece of the stone.

Gently, and with great respect, he reached for the stone. It appeared that the stone had been cut into thirds, the bottom half cut straight across and the upper half cut into two halves. The piece before him was one of the two upper halves. His fingertips brushed gently against the smooth, cold piece of sapphire. The light from his torch danced around in the myriad of precisely cut facets. It dazzled his eyes for the briefest of moments. Taking a deep breath, he lifted the shard from its cradle, closing his strong fingers around it. It fit comfortably within the confines of his large palm. Clark tried to estimate how large the stone would be once it was complete. He put it at somewhere around the width of his palm. It would be large for the dagger that they had taken but it would still fit within the prongs of the pommel.

He was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he heard it; the unmistakable sound of stone grinding against stone. Pinpointing the origin, he looked up. The ceiling was swiftly coming down at them, the crystals growing from it now flaring to life in the light of the fires. Clark had the fleeting impression of blood red teeth coming down upon them. The falling ceiling picked up speed

with every passing second and the chamber began to shake. Loose pieces of stone began to rain down from the falling ceiling.

"Time to go!" Hercules announced.

Clark dropped his torch. With a burst of super speed, he caught Hercules up in his arms and flew across the chamber. The ceiling had already closed half of the distance between them. Clark pushed himself faster, praying that Hercules would hold the torch that he carried steady. He would need every ounce of light to ensure that he didn't smash right into a pillar or a wall.

They cleared the threshold to the cavern. Clark did not slow. The passageway that they had used to access the cavern was rumbling as the stone cracked and began to collapse. Clark gripped Hercules even tighter. He pushed his speed as fast as he dared to in the narrow space, ducking and dodging falling sections of walls. Once, a large slab of stone crashed right onto his back, momentarily surprising him and knocking him off his chosen path. The stone shattered upon impact and tiny pebbles slipped off his body like gray raindrops.

At last, the hole that Clark had drilled into the access tunnel appeared. Hercules dropped the torch at the first sign of the dim light streaming into the vast darkness before them. Clark shot up out of the hole, twisting in midair. He sped down the corridor that he'd created in the side of the glacier. Ice cracked and broke all around him as the earth shuddered. Clark narrowly avoided a chunk of ice that nearly struck Hercules in his head. Light continued to grow all around them as the tunnel came to an end.

Clark cleared the glacier just in time and halted a good hundred feet away from the mass of ice and snow. He set Hercules down in the crusty layer of windswept snow. Together, they looked back at the glacier. The entire structure rumbled and groaned as it collapsed in upon itself. In seconds, the chamber that they had left just escaped from was buried under countless tons of ice, stone, and snow.

"Well, no one else will ever get in there again," Hercules said.

"And they blame global warming for the destruction of nature," Clark said cheekily.

Inside though, it bothered him that he was the cause of the glacier's demise. Though he hadn't directly done anything to make the cavern collapse, he blamed himself. The once majestic, awe inspiring mass of ice now lay crumbled and broken, marring the landscape with an ugly scar.

Clark opened his clenched fist and inspected the piece of stone within it. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that he hadn't accidentally crushed it when his muscles had tightened during the harrowing flight. Out in the sunlight, the stone glowed with a deep beauty that had been hidden in the cavern. It seemed to glow and magnify the light that struck it. It was a little hard for Clark to tear his eyes away from the stone. He reached for his cape and unzipped a small, hidden pocket on the left side. He'd learned long ago the virtues of having a pocket or two built into his suit. He rarely used them, but he'd gotten some use out of them too. He slipped the piece of stone inside and zippered the pocket once more. He looked at the dagger that Hercules still held.

"Ares didn't mention *that*," he said. "I wonder why."

Hercules shook his head. "I don't know. Could be that the knowledge of the dagger got lost over the ages. When I used the stone against Dahak the first time, Zarathustra didn't even know of the dagger. And he'd been around for ages. Not even Mnemosyne seemed to know of it. And she remembers everything."

Hastily, Hercules unzipped his thick, bright orange coat and slipped the dagger between the jeans and belt that he wore beneath the matching Gore-Tex snow pants. With the item secured, he zipped the coat again, and shivered against the sudden influx of arctic air.

“Well, as lovely as this place is, I’m freezing. Shall we?” he asked.

Clark scooped up the son of Zeus once more. “All aboard! Next stop, Norway,” he announced with a wry smile.

Clark gently floated upwards, lifting them both into the air. He ascended into the sky much slower this time, much to Hercules’ relief. Twice now, he’d experienced Clark’s super speed first hand. He wasn’t in a hurry to endure it again. He allowed his body to relax a little as Clark climbed in altitude. He even found it to be a little thrilling and enjoyable this time around.

Clark stopped briefly once he’d gone as high as he desired. He let the healing rays of the sun soak into his skin after expending so much energy in the utter darkness. Feeling recharged, he oriented himself in the general direction of Norway. At first, he went at a reasonably slow pace, allowing Hercules to get more comfortable.

“You okay?” he asked, shooting a glance to his passenger.

Hercules nodded. “Just fine,” he answered truthfully. “I think I’m getting used to this. I can see why you like flying.”

“It’s always been one of my favorite things,” Clark admitted.

“As wonderful as my strength and speed and the rest of my powers can be, I could live without them. But I don’t think I could ever be whole again if I couldn’t fly.”

“What about your children? Can they fly too?” Hercules asked, genuinely curious.

“They’re still a bit young,” Clark said. “Their powers are only just developing now. And only half of their DNA is Kryptonian. So there’s still a lot that we just don’t know yet. But my secret hope is that all three of them do inherit the ability to fly. There’s nothing quite like it. The peace of mind it can bring. The feeling of freedom.”

“Not to mention all the money you can save on gas,” Hercules joked.

Clark laughed. “All part of the perks,” he agreed with an amused smile. “But in all seriousness, I hope they can experience what I do when I fly.” Clark picked up some speed, tearing through a bank of clouds like a bullet.

Both men grew silent, each now occupied with their own thoughts. Using his telescope vision, Clark kept tabs on various landmarks as they slid past, miles beneath them. He increased his speed again, using thermals and air currents, and avoiding a storm or two as he raced along. A glance at the sun when they’d emerged from the polar cavern had told him that more time had passed than he would have liked. He hoped to make up some of that lost time as he flew. He had the nagging sense that the easiest of the challenges now lay behind them, and he worried about what they might find in the other resting places of the stone shards.

\*\*\*

Lois paced her living room, aware of the ancient heroes eyeing her every movement. It was ridiculous, she reasoned to herself. Clark had only been gone two hours. Two long, nerve-racking hours. She wondered if he and Hercules had retrieved any of the pieces of the Stone of Creation yet. She also wondered what sort of challenges might face them in each of the locations. She had seen enough action movies for her vivid imagination to run absolutely wild. She kept picturing the scene from Indiana Jones when the giant boulder was released and nearly crushed poor Indy. She kept picturing the scene in *The Mummy* when the salt acid melted off the faces of the workers who dared to open the stone where the Book of the Dead was hidden. Not that either of those situations could possibly harm her invulnerable husband. But she worried nonetheless. And Hercules still had mortal blood in his veins. A booby trap could prove fatal for the demigod.

Eventually, she decided pacing wasn’t doing any good. It wouldn’t stop her mind from envisioning every sordid possibility

of things that the two men might encounter. And it certainly wouldn’t help Clark and Hercules accomplish their mission any faster. All it would do would be to wear a hole in the carpeting. At last, she stilled her movements and sat heavily on the couch.

“Sorry,” she apologized to her friends. “I know my pacing isn’t helping things.”

“We understand,” Iolaus assured her. “But Clark’s in good hands. Herc’s the best person in the world to get him safely through labyrinths designed by the gods.”

“I’m sure that he is. But I’m actually worried about them both,” Lois calmly admitted.

“Herc will be fine,” Iolaus insisted. “He and I have faced a ton of monsters and warlords and gods and...well, you name it.”

Lois chuckled lightly, despite herself. “Clark and I have faced our fair share of dangers too. He’ll keep Hercules safe. I just hate not being able to do anything.”

“I know what you mean,” Iolaus said with a conspiratorial grin. “It’s killing me to know that I have a limited amount of time left back in the world of the living and I can’t even go on a good old-fashioned quest with my best friend.”

“You and me both,” Xena said, not looking up from where she sat inspecting the blade of her sword.

Iolaus’ stomach rumbled loudly. He covered it with an embarrassed hand, then smiled self-consciously.

“Oops,” he said. “Sorry.”

Lois laughed, a genuine, heartfelt laugh. In the short time that she’d known Iolaus, she’d come to like the short blonde man. She wished that he had been around the last time she’d entrusted herself to the care of Xena and Gabrielle. Iolaus’ light heart and quickness to laugh had a way of easing some of her tension. She thought that Iolaus was a lot like Clark in that respect.

“I guess that’s my cue to get lunch ready,” she said.

“Nah, you don’t have to,” Iolaus said, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Iolaus could eat his own weight in food each day, if you let him,” Xena teased with a smirk, as she set her weapon aside.

Iolaus laughed. “Hey, I happen to have a very high metabolism,” he said, feigning hurt.

“It’s no problem,” Lois said, standing. “There’s still some sandwiches left from last night. Just give me a few minutes.”

With that, Lois disappeared from the room. In the quiet refuge of the kitchen, she set to work getting lunch together. This she could do. She had a task before her. She could force herself to only focus on the task at hand, blocking out all of the unpleasant thoughts bouncing around in her skull. The trick never failed her, and it did not disappoint this time either. A sense of calm overcame her as she worked. She piled a tray high with sandwiches, drinks, and condiments, then reentered the living room. Everyone mostly only picked at their food, though Iolaus managed to finish his entire hero.

They talked quietly, the topics jumping from one thing to another with no particular rhyme or reason. The ancient heroes plied Lois with questions about the year 2011. They seemed unable to fathom just how dramatically the world had changed, though they had gotten a small taste of it the previous day. Gabrielle kept asking about the “computer” that Lois had made a fleeting reference to. She seemed in awe of a machine that could cut down the time that it took to write, and which made it so easy to go back and correct mistakes or completely change the things a person wrote. Xena was more interested in how weapons had evolved over the years. She’d only gotten the briefest of looks at the gun that Tempus had wielded in a last ditch attempt to murder Clark on their last adventure together. Lois tried her best to explain a little of modern warfare, and Xena looked suitably impressed. Still, Lois could see from Xena’s expression that the warrior woman was definitely partial to a good strong blade to fight battles with.

“Lois,” Gabrielle said, after a slight lull had formed in the conversation, “would you mind...showing me this computer gizmo?”

Lois smiled. “Sure, let me go get it.”

Lois stood and thought for a moment. So much had happened in less than twenty four hours. Where had she left her laptop? Mentally, she retraced her steps and remembered that she’d left it on the tabletop of the breakfast nook in the kitchen, where she and Clark had last been working their way through a stack of research. She swiftly retrieved the computer from beneath a stack of files and returned to the living room. She sat on the couch between Xena and Gabrielle, flipped open the lid, and pressed the power button. The machine was less than a month old and started up instantly. Gabrielle’s eyes grew wide in fascination as the icons appeared on the screen.

“Okay, see this?” Lois held aloft a sleek black flash drive marked “2010/2011 DP Articles.” “This little device is like a portable library. I can store hundreds of stories on this thing.”

“Wow,” Gabrielle breathed. “I always thought that scrolls were pretty convenient. To be able to store hundreds of scrolls worth of writing on something smaller than my finger...” She shook her head in disbelief.

Lois nodded. She slipped the drive into one of the USB ports and pulled up the files stored on the device. Gabrielle’s eyes widened again when she saw the massive list of files build. Lois clicked onto the first one on the list, a grisly report on a string of murders that had taken place the week after New Year’s Eve 2010. The file popped up instantly.

“By the gods,” Gabrielle said in awe. “I wish this had existed in my time. And I really wish that I could read your language,” she said regretfully.

“Would you like to see it in action?” Lois asked. “The computer, I mean. How it works when I write.”

“Please,” Gabrielle said with obvious delight.

Lois pulled up a blank Word document. She thought for a moment and then began to type. It wasn’t anything special — just a brief description of the events that had happened in the last day. She dictated what she was writing, so that the bard could match the words on the screen to what they meant. Gabrielle watched with growing fascination as the words appeared rapid-fire on the screen, or disappeared just as quickly again when Lois choose to delete something. She purposefully misspelled some words to show off how the spellchecker worked. A few other times, she showed off the synonyms feature.

“That’s incredible,” Gabrielle decided. “This could have saved me hundreds of hours of tedious scrollwork! Having to labor over my wording before putting my quill to the parchment. Worrying if I would have enough space to finish my tale before the scroll ended. The gods themselves must have designed this thing.”

Lois laughed. “Not gods. A company called Dell and man named Bill Gates. But they do seem to *think* that they are gods.”

She deleted the document in its entirety. She was about to show Gabrielle the wonders of the internet when the phone began to ring. Lois stood and crossed the room to the phone. She grabbed up the receiver and held it to her ear.

“Hello? Oh, Perry, hi. No, Clark’s not home right now. Uh, not exactly, Chief. Yes, I’m sorry that we didn’t email you; a couple of personal things came up last night.” She listened and sighed. “No, of course not, Perry. Kevin had to postpone the interview with us for the time being. No, I don’t know when we’ll be able to get it. He said he’d call us when things cleared up. No, he didn’t say why. Well, because it wasn’t my place to ask. Of course I trust him, Chief. After all, he’s Her...hardly ever been known to lie to the press before. Didn’t Clark give you the fluff piece on the twentieth annual Metropolis Rocky Horror Picture Show tribute? Can’t you just run that instead? Okay, okay.

The Germaine murder? Still at a standstill. Yes, Perry, I know. Okay, thanks. Yes, I promise. Bye.”

She hung up the phone wearily. Age had not slowed down Perry one iota, nor had remarrying Alice softened him. He was still the toughest editor in the business. Maybe even worse now than he’d ever been in the past. But, truth be told, Lois wouldn’t have it any other way. She dreaded the day when Perry would retire, though she was sure that he was grooming Jimmy for the position. For that, she was glad. Neither Clark nor she wanted the position of editor. They had both hated the toll it had taken on their marriage years prior, when Lois had briefly been promoted to the position after Perry himself had been promoted. The situation hadn’t lasted more than a week or so until Perry stepped down and reclaimed his title of Chief, but it had been long enough. Neither of them ever wanted to be in a situation like that ever again.

“Great shades of Elvis,” she muttered to herself, then grimaced when she realized that twenty some-odd years of working for Perry had made her pick up some his colloquialisms. She turned back to her friends. “Sorry, that was my boss. Clark and I were supposed to have interviewed Hercules about his new film before this whole soul-stealing thing came up.”

Iolaus looked confused. “What was that?” He pointed at the phone. “It looked like you were talking to yourself.”

Lois let slip a small laugh despite herself. “It’s a... communication device,” she decided on. “I pick up this end and I can talk to someone else on another end.”

“Where’s the other end?”

“Anywhere in the world.”

“Huh,” was all the man could say.

The phone rang again, before she could make a move back to the couch. Lois huffed a little, slightly annoyed. She picked up the receiver.

“Hello?” Her voice softened a notch after a moment. “Hey, Jimmy, what’s up? Really? That’s fantastic. No, I can’t swing by the Planet today. Can you email it over? Thanks, you’re a life saver. Uh-huh,” she said excitedly. She quickly checked her email account through her smart phone and saw the documents that Jimmy had sent over. “Yep, it just came through. I owe you.”

A pink flash in the room announced Aphrodite’s arrival. Lois paled when she saw the goddess nervously biting her lower lip.

“Jimmy, I gotta go.”

Lois didn’t wait for his response. She hung up the phone once more. Butterflies took flight in her stomach. She faced the goddess and walked dazedly to the couch.

“This isn’t good news, is it?” she asked as she sat down.

“Afraid not,” the scantily clad love goddess replied. “I don’t know how else to tell you this, but Alti’s on the move. Or about to be.”

“What do you mean?” Xena asked, her voice deadly serious.

“I finally tracked her down to some seedy, sleazy motel about an hour from here. I popped in on her. She couldn’t see me, of course. But I learned some totally disturbing things while I was there. I still feel grody.” She rubbed her bare arms and shivered for effect.

“Aphrodite, please,” Xena pleaded. “Focus. A man’s life is on the line. Could we get to the point?”

Aphrodite rolled her eyes dramatically. “I was getting there,” she complained. “Anyway, basically, I think she knows about Clark.”

Lois swallowed down the bile that had risen in her throat. “*What?*” she demanded, a bit more harshly than she’d meant to. After all, it wasn’t the goddess’ fault. She *was* only trying to help.

“I’m pretty sure that she knows that he and Superman are one and the same. Or at the very least, she definitely suspects that there may be more to their ‘friendship’ than meets the eye. She was doing some research on you guys from a laptop. She’s got

your address.”

“What?” Lois asked, the coloring draining from her face.

“So, she’s coming after Lois after all,” Iolaus surmised, jumping to his feet as though the battle were about to start.

“Not quite, Sweet Cheeks,” she replied, shaking her head.

Blonde curls bounced with the movement. “She was muttering to herself a lot while she gathered her info. She wants the kids.”

“My children?” Lois repeated. “Why? I thought she wanted Clark’s soul.”

“Exactly,” Xena said.

“Bait,” Lois said, horrified, as the realization set in.

Xena nodded. “Probably. But it’s more than just using them to draw Clark out into her trap.” She pinched the bridge of her nose for a second as memories came flooding back. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before. How could I have forgotten?”

“What?” Lois asked.

“Dahak,” Gabrielle said, by way of explanation. When Lois still looked confused, the bard continued. “The last time Xena and I dealt with Dahak, he was after the world’s children.” Gabrielle’s voice was heavy with remembered pain. “Dahak hadn’t quite made his way into the world yet, so he sent his daughter to do his dirty work. She teamed up with Xena’s arch nemesis, Callisto. Together, they went after the centaur village where Xena’s son, Solan, lived. She — Hope, that is — murdered Solan. We were able to stop Hope and Callisto, but the damage had already been done.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois heard herself say through the fog of fear that had suffused her brain. She shook her head, as if to clear her mind. “So, you’re saying that she wants to kill my children?”

For a long moment, no one dared to move or answer. Finally, Xena gave her the tiniest of nods.

“Probably,” she said quietly. “She’ll use them as bait first.

Once she has Clark, she won’t have a reason to keep them alive.”

“So what do we do?” Lois asked, resolve taking over her mind. “Meet her in battle?”

Xena’s lips curved in a subdued half-smile. “Not quite. Where are your kids now?”

“With Clark’s parents,” Lois replied.

“Good. Tell them to get out of town. Tell them to get as far away from this city as possible. Tell them to take the kids someplace where they’d never go in a hundred years. And tell them not to contact you, just in case Alti figures out what’s happened.”

“Then what?” Lois asked. She clearly remembered that Xena’s plans often consisted of multiple layers.

“Then I go after Alti,” the warrior princess said.

“How?” Iolaus asked. “We can’t kill her until Herc and Clark get back with the stone.”

“She doesn’t mean to fight Alti in the physical world,”

Gabrielle stated knowingly.

“Ah,” Iolaus said, seeming to understand. His head bobbed as he nodded.

“Can someone buy me a vowel?” Lois asked, now completely confused.

“I’ll put myself into the spirit world and fight Alti there. With Dahak on her side, I won’t be able to kill her, but I might be able to wound her enough to buy Hercules and Clark the time that they need to get the stone. And to buy your kids some more time to get away.”

“Is that a wise move? I mean, she’ll be stronger with Dahak on her side, right?” Lois said, brushing her hair back behind her ear.

“She might be. But I don’t see any other choice. Aphrodite, I want you keep an eye on the kids.”

“On it,” she replied, then flashed out of existence again.

“Xena, put me under too,” Iolaus said.

“And me,” Gabrielle chimed in.

Xena nodded thoughtfully. “All right. But only because we stand a better chance if we combine our strength. Lois, contact Clark’s parents.”

Lois stood and crossed to the phone again. She picked up the phone and dialed with trembling fingers. On the third ring, Jonathan picked up.

“Jonathan, hi. I need to ask a huge favor of you. I don’t have time to explain all of the details now, but the kids are in danger. I need you and Martha to take them as far away from Metropolis as you can. As soon as you can, throw things in a bag and get into the car. I think a woman is heading your way now. No, not there. Go someplace...unexpected. Don’t call me and don’t call Clark. I can’t be sure that the woman who is after them won’t uh...find a way to spy on any calls. When it’s safe, we’ll call you. Thanks. I will. Tell them I love them. Bye.”

Lois hung up the phone and turned decisively towards Xena.

“Whatever you are going to do to them,” she gestured to Gabrielle and Iolaus, “I want you to do to me.”

“Lois, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Xena said.

“These are *my* children,” Lois argued. “I *have* to do this. I *refuse* to just sit by if there’s something I can do to help.”

“I won’t risk you. Just because we will be fighting in the spirit realm doesn’t mean that Alti can’t kill us.”

“I would gladly lay down my life if it meant saving my kids.”

“I know you would. But there is no reason why you need to put yourself in danger. The three of us can handle this.”

Lois placed her hands on her hips, defiant. “Would you have stood by and let others take the risk for your son? Either you take me with you, or I find my own way of coming anyway. It’s your choice. But I refuse to sit here and do nothing.”

Xena nodded again. “All right.” The warrior princess stood and cracked her knuckles. “When your spirit separates from your body, I want you to join with my spirit. As one, we stand our best chance of doing some serious damage to Alti. Are you ready?”

Everyone nodded. Lois set her jaw. Her children were in danger. And Lois was ready to go to hell and back again if that’s what it would take to keep them safe. She had the passing thought that not even a mother bear protecting her cubs was more frightening than she was at the moment.

“I’ll have to do this the quick way,” Xena said, apologetically. “There’s no time to do all of the ceremony and incantations that normally go into this. Everyone, sit on the floor.”

When they were all seated on the floor, Xena knelt before them. She started with Iolaus. Quickly, she rammed the index and middle fingers of both of her hands into the sides of his neck. Lois remembered the move. She’d seen Xena use it against one of the thugs who had attacked them in ancient Greece when Clark was kidnapped by the gladiator traders. The move worked on a person’s pressure points, and blocked off the flow of blood to the victim’s brain. Before Lois could speak, Iolaus had collapsed and Xena was onto Gabrielle.

“What are you doing?” Lois demanded.

“Killing us,” Xena replied as Gabrielle fell to one side.

In the next instant, the raven haired warrior jammed her fingers onto Lois’ pressure points. Lois instantly felt a tightening in her neck muscles and a lightheadedness. She found it difficult to think and harder to breathe. She struggled against the pain that shot through her body. Blood flowed from her nostrils. She touched a hand to the blood, examined it without comprehending, then keeled over to one side, oblivious to her head striking the carpet.

\*\*\*

Clark slowed his flight speed down as he and Hercules approached Norway. He altered his altitude, dropping lower so that Hercules could clearly see the landscape spread out beneath

and before them. Hercules scrunched his brow, forcing his mind back to try and remember exactly where the Rainbow Bridge to Asgard was located. It had been many, many years since he'd last stepped foot in the country. He was still friends with the gods Balder and Thor, but his hectic life as an actor kept him too busy to spend much time traveling for pleasure. He wondered how long it had been. Two, maybe three mortal lifespans since he'd been to the Rainbow Bridge. He directed Clark as best he could, apologizing often for his vague memories.

"There!" Hercules called out triumphantly. "Finally!"

"Where?" Clark asked.

Hercules pointed northeast. "Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

"The bridge," Hercules explained.

Clark shook his head and he changed his course once more.

"Sorry, no. I don't see a bridge."

Hercules furrowed his brow. "Okay. See that valley between the two mountains there? The sort of narrow one?"

"That, yeah. I can see that."

"Land there," the demigod instructed.

Clark picked up a little speed again and landed where he'd been told. Gently, he put Hercules back on his feet. The half god stretched a little, arching his back as he looked around. Hercules looked up, drinking in the sight of the bridge that marked the way to Asgard. It was good to see it again, he mused, though the sight always brought back bittersweet memories. The first time he'd come to this place, he'd been grieving over the death of Iolous before Dahak had inhabited his best friend's body. But he'd also met Balder and Thor in this country; the only two gods besides his half sister, Aphrodite, that he'd ever built a true friendship with. He wished that the two gods were around now, if only so that he could say hello.

He pointed up and Clark followed with his eyes.

"You really can't see that?" Hercules asked again.

Clark looked up, seeing nothing but the blue sky and puffy white clouds sailing passed. He said as much to his companion.

"Huh," Hercules said. "Weird."

"Well," Clark said, thinking aloud. "You *are* half a god. Maybe the immortal blood in your veins allows you to see things that the rest of us aren't supposed to." He shrugged.

Hercules nodded thoughtfully. "Could be," he agreed. "I guess I just thought that since your blood isn't the same as Earth mortals, that maybe you might be able to see it too."

"So, now the question is: where is the stone hidden and how do we get to it?" Clark said.

"And what surprises have the gods left along the way?"

Hercules sighed.

Clark nodded. "There *is* that too, I suppose."

Clark surveyed the valley, standing with his hands on his hips. A stiff, cold wind was blowing, making his cape stream out behind him. Every so often, the material snapped in the breeze. Hercules turned his back to the wind and shoved his freezing fingers deep into his pockets. At first look, there was nothing to indicate a secret labyrinth or chamber. Clark gave the area a look with his x-ray vision, but again, nothing turned up.

"Nothing," he muttered, more to himself than anything else.

"Let's split up," Hercules suggested. "I'll go this way. I'll call for you if I find anything."

Clark nodded and began walking into the wind. His boots left firm imprints in the snow covered ground. This high in the mountains, there was always snow on the ground. Clark remembered the time, eight years ago, when he'd been assisting a disabled plane near this very spot. It had been a scorching summer, but the mountains had had snow even then. Back then, he'd have never guessed that he'd been close to the entrance to the home of the Norse gods. But, then again, back then he'd thought that the gods were only a myth in his universe.

He walked slowly, scanning the ground and surrounding cliffs as he went. After a while, he picked up his pace, becoming more frustrated. Pulling himself from his thoughts, he realized that he'd covered more than two miles and was at the outer most edge of the mountains. He stopped and turned back, wondering if he should check on Hercules' progress. The demigod hadn't called for him yet, but perhaps he should x-ray the ground that Hercules had covered so far, to ensure that they didn't miss anything. Making up his mind, he floated back over the ground that he'd already checked, rescanning as he went, just to be on the safe side. Before long, he came to where Hercules' footprints began in the snow.

Clark came to a rest on the ground once more. Following Hercules' footprints, he began to x-ray the area, just as he had over the miles that he had covered. Nothing turned up, adding to Clark's frustration. Time was slipping away. And then there was Lois. She was not exactly unprotected at home, but he hated to be so far away from her when he knew that a danger was being posed to either of them. His hands curled into fists and the muscle in his jaw twitched. Where was the piece of the stone?

"Clark!"

Clark snapped to attention as his super-hearing picked up the demigod's call. He allowed himself a burst of speed, snow spewing out behind his boots as he raced along. In seconds, he was at Hercules' side.

"What did you find?" Clark asked, skidding to a halt.

Hercules gestured to the cliff face to his left, particularly a slightly discolored section of rock. Clark knocked a fist to the left and right of the section, then on the section itself. He heard a distinct change in the resulting thuds. The middle section sounded somehow hollow to his super hearing.

"This is the only section I've seen where the stone is a slightly different shade of gray," Hercules explained.

Clark quickly x-rayed the section of stone and nodded.

"Looks like this section is a few feet thick, but there does seem to be an empty space behind it. Nice catch."

"Thanks."

"Wait a second," Clark said, still x-raying the stone. "It looks like this section is a door of some sort." He slipped back into his normal vision. "I can't see exactly how this is rigged. It's too dark. Let's see what we can do though."

They tried pushing on the discolored stone, first at one end, then on the other. It would not budge. There was no way to slide it either. Hercules bent to the ground, searching for a space to wedge his fingers. There was a shallow indent in the middle. He stuck the fingers of both of his hands into the crevice as far as they would go. He began to lift, the muscles in his arms and neck straining with the effort. He grunted as he struggled with the stone.

"Let me," Clark said.

"No. I've got it," Hercules said through gritted teeth.

With a terrible grinding sound, the stone began to move, disappearing into a hidden crevice higher up in the side of the mountain. Hercules continued to struggle with the door. He shifted his hands to place his palms beneath the bottom of the door once it was a few inches off of the ground. That seemed to help him a little, and the door began to rise more swiftly. Clark placed his own hands beneath the stone to help.

"No," Hercules said, shaking his head. "I want to do this on my own."

Clark frowned, troubled that the half god wouldn't allow his help. The door cleared Hercules' knees and continued to rise. The demigod continued to straighten, bringing the door's bottom up to his waist. When it was high enough, Hercules stepped beneath the door and rested the stone on his shoulders, behind his neck.

With a roar of effort and a final push of strength, he stood to his full height.

“Go,” he instructed Clark, his voice reflecting the strain of his body.

Clark ducked into the opening. Just at the edge of the sunlight that penetrated the eternal darkness of the passageway into the mountain, Clark caught sight of a torch in a sconce on the wall. With a burst of heat vision, he set it aflame. On the opposite wall was another torch. In less than a second, he had lit that one as well. Hercules was watching and grunting under the weight of the door. As soon as there was light enough to see by, he threw his body out from beneath the doorway, tucking into a roll as he did so. The heavy door crashed to the ground with a deafening screech of stone on stone, and with a thud that sent both heroes scrambling to maintain their footing. Hercules coughed as a spray of dust and dirt was thrown into the air.

After a moment or two, Clark lifted his torch from the sconce closest to him. Hercules did the same. It was cold in the passageway, but warmer than outside. Hercules, in particular, was grateful to be out of the wind. He brushed some dirt and snow from his jacket.

“You know, I could have done that for you.” Clark raised his brows questioningly at Hercules.

“I know,” Hercules said, shrugging a knot out of his right shoulder blade.

They began to walk into the inky black passageway before them, taking it slow so that they did not miss any important signs or trip any deadly traps.

“So...why didn’t you let me?”

“I just...every once in a while, I just need to remind myself that I can do stuff like this. I’m sure you’ve experienced the frustration of not being able to use your...unique talents. Having to hide what you can do. Having to pretend that you are something that you’re not.”

Clark nodded. “I know exactly what you mean. That’s why I created Superman. I needed a way to be able to use my powers in public without fear of exposing my true identity. And I *do* get frustrated anytime I’m not able to use my powers. Like the first two years that Lois and I worked together. She didn’t know that I was both men, and it pained me to have to pretend to be more inept than I was, when all I wanted was for her to notice me. I almost lost her because of the need to hide. But I was lucky in that I had at least some outlet to be able to use my powers. I can’t imagine being in your situation.”

Hercules nodded. “So, anyway, thanks for letting me do that.”

Clark smiled in the dark. “Anytime.”

They walked in silence for a long while. Nothing attacked from the darkness. No traps were sprung on them. Hercules and Clark each kept one eye ahead and one eye on the walls to either side. Unlike the passageway in the previous location, nothing was scratched, scrawled, or otherwise written on the walls. No runes of power, no graffiti, no instructions on where to go next.

The dark and silence weighed on Clark like a physical load on his body. He could scarcely wait to get out of this place and back out into the sunlight.

“Hey,” Clark said, after a long while of enduring the oppressive silence. “Can I ask you something kind of personal? If you don’t mind, of course.”

“Sure.”

“Well, I was wondering. What’s it like to live as long as you have?”

Hercules sighed. “Not as great as some might think it would be. I know that for Iolous, Xena, and Gabrielle, that a life as long as mine must *seem* desirable. I’ve been to the Underworld before to help Hades, and even the Elysian Fields is a sort of flat comparison to the world of the living. But I have to say, I’m a little disillusioned with this unending life of mine. I don’t have a death wish. Far from it. But sometimes, well, sometimes it just gets downright depressing. Having to shed identities every so

often, watching everyone I get close to age and die...it’s too high a price to stay in this world. Why?”

“Just...curious.”

Hercules threw a look over at Clark. “You’re worried about your own life, aren’t you?”

Clark frowned, drew a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “Yeah. My body...because of the yellow sun and my genetics, my body doesn’t seem to age the same way as a normal person. I mean, I look the same now at forty-five as I did ten years ago. Not even a gray hair to speak of. And I still feel as good as I did at twenty-one. The point is, I fear winding up in a situation like yours. No offense of course. But I just hate to think of what I might do if I outlive Lois and my kids.” He sighed heavily. “Hey, there’s a fork up ahead.”

They moved forward in the darkness to where the passage split off to the left and right. They checked the walls and floor, looking for some indication of what direction they should be heading in. There was nothing.

“Now what?” Hercules asked.

Clark shook his head. “I don’t know. But Ares did call this location and the one in Egypt labyrinths. I’m not willing to just pick a passageway and hope for the best.”

“I agree. There has to be some indication of which way to go. We just haven’t seen it yet.”

They stood in place, side by side, for a long moment, then rechecked every inch of the walls and floor, as though some marker would miraculously appear for them. Again, they found nothing. Clark stood still for a moment, centering himself between the two forks and closed his eyes. He stretched out his hearing, straining against the utter silence, and blocking out the sounds of Hercules’ steady heartbeat and deep breaths. He heard nothing. He clenched his jaw again and took a calming breath in through his nose. His eyes popped open.

He faced the right passage and took another deep breath in through his nose. He did the same with the left fork. Yes, he was certain of it now.

“It’s the right fork,” he announced.

“Are you sure?”

“It has to be. The air isn’t as stale down this fork. There has to be an opening somewhere further down. The left fork smells much more stale and dusty. I’m guessing it branches off into dead ends.”

“Okay then,” Hercules said, moving towards the right fork. He seemed slightly disturbed that he hadn’t thought of that old trick. He smiled to himself after a minute. “Iolous would have thought of that. Him and his old hunter’s tricks.”

For a long time, Hercules and Clark meandered through the passageway. New forks began to appear ever more frequently. Writing now appeared on the walls in various languages, some even in the ancient Greek that Hercules knew, though the intervening centuries had made him a little rusty. Still, he was able to help navigate them through the maze of passageways. All of the writing was in riddles, causing them to pause frequently while they worked the clues out. They made a few wrong turns and had to backtrack a couple of times. Clark noticed that the further in they got, the more confusing the labyrinth became. And more deadly.

For the third time, Clark threw himself in front of Hercules’ body. Sharp, ancient looking crossbow bolts skipped harmlessly off his impervious skin. The first time, it had been poisoned darts. The second time, it had been bursts of flame. Now the arrows. Clark wondered darkly what else the labyrinth had in store for them. Of course, the bolts that Clark had just deflected hadn’t really come close to skewering Hercules. But Clark had simply reacted the instant that his sensitive hearing had picked up the shifting of ancient gears hidden within the walls.

“Sorry,” he apologized to the demigod. “Force of habit.”

Hercules chuckled and clapped one hand on Clark's shoulder. "I understand. And I appreciate it."

"Are we doing something to set these things off?" Clark asked, glancing around. He was sure that he hadn't touched, knocked into, or stepped on anything.

Hercules shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "We're here in this place. That's all that matters. The traps must be set to react to any sort of human life coming near them." He bent and picked up one of the bolts. The arrowhead was untouched by rust, and the shaft was free from rot. "The gods and their spells," he said with disgust, tossing the weapon aside. He tossed it with enough force that it buried itself halfway into the wall.

Time seemed to stand still in the eternal gloom of the labyrinth as they moved forward once more. There was no telling how long that they had been wandering the passageways. Clark began to grow antsy again. To give himself something to do, he began to scout ahead, trying to trigger any traps well before Hercules could get close to them. He succeeded in finding two more places where spikes shot out from the walls and floor.

At last, the passage spit them out into a large chamber. Crystalline pillars ringed the circular room in a double row. Clark touched one of them with a tentative hand. They were as cold as ice and as solid as stone. He wasn't quite sure what they were made out of, but they glowed with a blue-white light bright enough to mimic daylight. They also vibrated ever so slightly with energy, the source of which Clark couldn't determine. More spells from the gods, perhaps.

Hercules and Clark doused their torches in the dirt floor, as they were beginning to sputter and die anyway. As with the first piece of the stone that they had retrieved, this piece of stone was situated on a raised altar, this one in the middle of the room. The altar glowed with the same ethereal light as the pillars. Clark's hearing picked up a faint buzzing sound in the room — the energy that ran throughout the room and made the crystalline stones glow.

The piece of the Stone of Creation stood in a holder in the middle of the altar. This time, no weapons stood around the shard. It was completely alone. Clark scanned the room quickly, looking for anything threatening. He saw nothing and took a hesitant step towards the altar. When nothing happened, his steps became more confident that nothing was going to happen to Hercules. With a determined stride, he made his way to the raised altar, Hercules trailing behind at a safe distance.

He slowed to a more deliberate, respectful step once he reached the first of the three steps leading up to the altar. He did not hesitate to plant his foot on the first step. In a second, he was standing on the top step, looking down on the altar. Unlike the first one, this one had no writing on it at all. He glanced back at Hercules, making sure that the demigod was still safe, then reached his hand towards the shard of stone. It looked like the second part of the top section of the stone. His fingertips brushed the frigid surface and he gently lifted it from its cradle.

Immediately, the chamber began to rumble and the altar sank into the ground, disappearing from view. A door slid open at the far end of the room and two hulking shapes entered the chamber. The door slammed shut behind them. The ground shook slightly as the figures made a beeline for Hercules and Clark. Clark hastily put the piece of stone in the pocket on the other side of his cape, remembering Ares' warning to keep the pieces separate until all three were in hand.

The immense creatures picked up speed as they came. They were blue-gray giants, at least fifty feet tall. Their bodies looked as though they were made of ice and stone; great lumps of both seemed to be thrown together with next to no order. Gruesome faces were twisted into nightmarish grimaces. Eyes like polished onyx burned with hatred and violence.

"What the heck are these things?" Clark asked as he dodged

the grasp of one of the giant creatures.

"Frost giants," Hercules said, troubled.

"How do we stop them?" Clark asked, speeding over to Hercules and flying them both out of the giants' grasps. There was barely enough room between the giants' reach and the ceiling.

"I don't know," Hercules admitted. "I've heard about them in passing, but I've never actually fought one."

"Wonderful," Clark grumbled, zipping out of the way of a groping hand that was trying to pull them out of the air. "Any guesses at least?"

"I'm working on it," Hercules replied.

One of the giants stretched up and gave a slight jump. Clark was so busy assessing the situation and avoiding the other giant, that he never saw the hand behind him. The giant swatted them from the air so hard that Clark and Hercules were sent flying across the room and into the wall. Clark barely had enough time to twist in the air, so that he struck it with his back, instead of crushing Hercules between the wall and his body. He smashed into the wall with such force that he formed a slight crater in it, which split and shed large chunks of stone. Clark was dazed from the impact and all of the air was driven from his lungs. He and Hercules slid to the ground before he could compose himself once more. Hercules fared better, with Clark's body taking the full impact of the hit. The demigod was instantly on his feet, reaching down a hand to help Clark up. Clark coughed and wheezed as he tried to take in enough air. His lungs burned with the effort, but he took Hercules' hand and pulled himself up.

"Thanks," he managed, as they both avoided being squashed by a giant foot.

"Don't mention it," Hercules shot back.

Hercules grabbed the giant's foot and began lifting, trying to throw the behemoth off balance. He succeeded in causing the monster to fall backwards, then jumped back away from the giant as it crashed to the floor. Immediately, the frost giant was struggling to get back onto its feet. Hercules and Clark dashed off between the legs of the second giant, just missing the groping fingers that reached for them. They reached one of the pillars and ducked behind it. The fallen frost giant was already back on his feet.

"That bought us about eight seconds," Clark said wryly. "I guess we're past the point of talking out our differences."

Hercules chuckled, despite his slightly labored breathing from the exertion. "You know, you remind me a little of Iolaus," he said with a smirk. "No wonder why I like you so much."

Clark chuckled in response. "You're not so bad yourself."

They were forced to run again as the frost giants converged on their pillar.

"Towards the door," Clark shouted to the half god. "I'll distract them. Go!"

Hercules heard the command in Clark's voice and obeyed, just as the first giant wrapped his hands around the pillar that they had been hiding behind. There was a deafening crack, then the pillar was in the monster's hands. It used the jagged pillar like a club, swinging at Clark. Clark saw that the demigod had turned back to look at what was happening.

"Hurry," he yelled again. "Get the door open!"

For the briefest of seconds, Clark had ceased to exist to Hercules. Only Superman stood there, doing battle with a frost giant and issuing orders. Hercules shook his head and went to do as Clark bid.

The giant swung the makeshift club at Clark once more. Clark caught the other end and tried the wrest it away from the monster. He strained every muscle in his body, but the giant had a strength and power that Clark hadn't really expected. The giant raised the pillar, lifting Clark right off the floor along with the glowing club. It swung Clark into the closest standing pillar with

such force that the end that Clark was clinging to cleaved straight through the crystalline stone. He let go of his end, flying off to one side.

The second giant was doing battle with Hercules. He hadn't yet gained the door. Clark twisted in the air and sped towards the demigod. As he had hoped, the frost giant that he'd been fighting turned to follow. Clark alighted on the second monster's shoulder. The monster was so fixed on Hercules that it never noticed the tiny figure on its shoulder. The other giant raised its club and roared at Clark. It took aim and gave a mighty swipe.

Clark darted away at the last possible second. The stone smashed into the frost giant's neck, severing the head from the body. Clark winced as the head flew through the air and hit the far wall with a solid thud. He hadn't meant for the creature to meet its end; he had hoped only that the blow to the head would disable the creature long enough for them to get to the door.

"Thanks," Hercules called up to him. "Get the door. I'll deal with the last giant."

Clark nodded sharply, then sped off towards the sealed door. He set to work trying to find a groove to set his fingers into. He refused to just smash through the stone if he could avoid doing so. He wanted to be able to seal the monster inside the chamber, assuming that the giant still lived by the time Hercules was through with it.

Behind him, Hercules nimbly dodged the glowing stone club that the giant swung at him. It didn't seem to notice that Clark was at the doorway, and that was just fine with the son of Zeus. He ducked behind another pillar and grabbed it tightly. With a roar of his own, Hercules managed to tear out a section of the pillar, like a long, jagged spear. He ran towards the giant a few steps, then launched the makeshift spear at the giant's head. The stone flew through the air in a straight and true path, and found a resting place in the giant's left eye. The force of Hercules' throw allowed the stone to bury itself deep into the monster's brain. It dropped the club it was carrying and fell to its knees, thick, huge hands reaching up to its hideous face. A scream ripped from its throat the entire time.

Clark, meanwhile, had not found a finger hold in the stone door. He pounded his fist into the rock twice, making an indent in the stone. With a slight amount of effort, he began to lift the door until he'd made enough of a space to pass under.

"Hercules!" he called. "Time to go!"

Hercules threw one last glance over at the dying frost giant, then raced to the door. The monster groaned, a soul wrenching sound that was primal rage and sadness all at once. Hercules ducked under the door as soon as he reached it. Clark ducked under as well, letting the heavy door fall back into place. They now faced a long corridor of the same glowing crystal rock. Apprecensively, they began to follow the path.

"Sorry for interrupting with that frost giant," Clark teased.

Hercules laughed and smiled back. "Eh, he was giving me a pretty cold reception."

Clark chuckled in response. He felt perfectly at ease with the son of Zeus. In fact, he could see a long lasting friendship forming with the man.

At last, the corridor spit them out into the open again. It looked to Clark like they had traveled straight through the mountain to the other side. He took a deep breath, glad to taste the crisp, fresh, snow-tinged air again. He lifted his face to the sun, glad to be drinking in its healing rays again.

Hercules stomach rumbled and he laughed, slightly embarrassed. Clark smiled at him.

"Come on," Clark said. "I know a place we can go to get some food. It's getting late, but we have plenty of time before I want to be in Egypt."

Clark gathered Hercules in his arms and made a beeline for Italy.

\*\*\*

Lois felt her life slipping away from her as the flow of blood to her brain was blocked by Xena's pinch. The pain was unbearable. At first, she fought against it. But at Xena's urging to go with it, Lois loosened her grip on the world of the living ever so slightly. It was just enough to allow herself to slide closer to death. She felt herself detach from her mortal body. She opened her eyes, now fully in the spirit realm, and found herself looking down on her unmoving body. Lois felt a sensation of vertigo as she looked down upon herself.

She saw Xena put the pinch on herself, saw the blood trickle from the warrior's nose as her life ebbed away. Lois watched as a translucent image of Xena floated up from the seemingly lifeless body on the floor. Xena stretched and flexed, reacquainting herself with the spirit realm. The she grinned, pleased with what she had accomplished.

"Are we dead?" Lois asked fearfully. She was surprised to find that she could speak in this state.

Xena shook her head. "No. We're just in the spirit realm now."

"Are we *going* to die?" Lois pressed.

Xena shook her head again. "No. Time doesn't flow the same here as it does in the mortal world. We should be able to drive back Alti and return with plenty of time for me to undo the pinch."

"*Should?*" Lois asked. "You mean you don't know?"

Xena shrugged. "It's not an exact science, but I've done it before with great success."

"Oh, well I feel a whole lot better," Lois said dryly.

"I can go back into my body and undo the pinch on you," Xena said. "If you want me to, that is."

Lois shook her head defiantly. "Not a chance. I'm coming with you."

A flash of light in the room caught Lois' eye. Ares materialized. He saw the bodies on the floor and checked for signs of life. Lois was surprised at the war god's gentleness and concern. Guessing what had happened, or perhaps having been filled in from Aphrodite, Ares spoke to the empty room around him.

"Go get her, Xena," he urged. "I'll keep watch here."

"All right, everyone. Merge your spirits with mine. As one, we stand a chance of being stronger than Alti."

Lois drifted to where Xena was. It had been many years since her three day stint as Ultra Woman after a red Kryptonite laser had transferred Clark's powers to her. But she'd apparently never forgotten how to control the power of flight. Maneuvering in the spirit realm was a lot like flying, she realized. She reached Xena and allowed herself to sink into the warrior woman's spirit. She felt Gabrielle and Iolaus join them.

It was a disconcerting feeling. Lois was aware of every thought, every movement of the others. Her mind remained independent, but it was merged with those of the others, like a network of computers. She no longer remained in control of her muscles and limbs. Xena was in complete control. And that was unnerving as well. Lois had never really been all that good about relinquishing control of anything to anyone else. To not be in control of her own body (so to speak) was unsettling, to say the least. Lois felt herself become much stronger, as her essence was reinforced by those of the others, and as her own spirit bolstered theirs in return.

"All right everyone. Hang on!"

Xena shot off, exiting the house through Clark's open window. Lois watched as the world sped by beneath her. It felt strange to see the world through Xena's eyes.

Lois was aware of Gabrielle and Iolaus, and their unease with the flight. She tried to reach out to them to reassure them, trying to share memories of flying with Clark and feeling so safe in his



arms. After all, flying with Clark was one of her favorite activities. Flying with Xena now was little different, though, perhaps, slightly more freeing. She'd forgotten how incredible it was to fly under her own power, without being nestled safely against Clark's solid, comforting chest. True, she wasn't currently moving under her own power, but it was close enough. She decided that she didn't care all that much for the freedom and that she vastly preferred flying with her husband.

She continued to watch as Metropolis rushed past her. Xena deftly avoided the obstacles that stood in their way — telephone poles, buildings, people walking down the sidewalks, and taxis racing to deliver their passengers to their destinations. Lois was duly impressed by Xena's agility in the unfamiliar landscape. She felt the same sentiment coming from Gabrielle and Iolau.

"How do you know where to find Alti?" Lois asked. She spoke aloud but the question was uttered only in the minds of the joined friends.

Lois sensed Xena shrug. "I know Alti. I know the energy she gives off. All I have to do is follow it to where ever it takes me. We need to hurry though."

Xena's voice was a ghostly, disembodied sound. Lois felt like she was trapped in some vast, empty chamber without end, and listening to a voice that she could not see. The effect gave her the creeps. She would have shuddered, had she been able to.

Xena forced herself to move faster. Metropolis receded behind them as they sped over the city limits. Office buildings gave way to trees and mountains. The spirit realm seemed to heighten Lois' senses, or perhaps it was an effect of having her soul melded with three others. But Lois could smell the clean scent of pine and earth in a way that she never had before, save for the days that she'd been custodian of Clark's powers. She had completely forgotten what that was like, and how overwhelming it could be.

Clark.

Lois wondered where he was and if he was facing trouble. A cold finger of worry tickled her brain and made her nonexistent stomach clench. She felt Xena's mind tug at her own, urging her to remain focused on the task at hand. Stubbornly, Lois shut Clark out of her mind. She tried to open her mind to let Xena take charge of that organ too. Too much was at stake for Lois to get distracted now. And if Xena needed to fight her, valuable strength would be lost. Lois felt Xena's gratitude at her determination to help, no matter what the cost.

Xena began to follow a winding road; the surrounding woods becoming too thick for her to avoid the trees. To slow down was to give Alti the advantage, and the merged group of souls refused to give the shamaness any more of a head start on them than was possible. Lois could feel the grim determination in each of the others. Xena careened around the turns, pushing them faster.

Ahead, on the road, Lois could see a pack of motorcycles tearing down the road. She held her breath as they grew closer, then let it out in relief as they swerved around the bikers. Through Xena's eyes, she got the fleeting impression of seven middle aged bikers racing down the asphalt. Xena left the bikers in the dust. Moments later, they veered into the oncoming traffic lane to pass an eighteen wheeler. For what felt like a long time, they saw nothing else. Then, in the distance, they saw a lone motorcycle riding down the center lane. Lois could feel the evil emanating from the rider.

The rider's head snapped up, somehow sensing Xena's presence. The bike's blinker went on as the rider pulled her machine to the shoulder of the road. Xena followed as the rider pulled the machine back behind a screen of trees and brush. One leather booted foot put down the kickstand as the rider killed the engine. One leg swung over the seat as the rider dismounted. Both hands came up and pulled the helmet away.

"Xena, I know you're here," the woman said in a raspy voice.

The voice reminded Lois of her second grade teacher, Mrs. Roberts, who had been a two pack a day smoker for forty years. Lois took a brief second to get an overall impression of the woman. Her adversary was very tall and painfully thin, dressed in tight, dark jeans and a black leather jacket. Dark makeup ringed her eyes and only served to highlight her high, gaunt cheekbones. A length of auburn hair hung past the middle of her back. A tribal looking necklace hung about her neck and she moved with all the grace and threat of a stalking wildcat.

"Alti?" Lois asked, not really needing an answer.

"Alti," Xena confirmed.

Before Lois knew what happened, she saw Alti collapse to the ground, eyes rolling to the back of her head. A second later, the spirit of the shamaness lifted up from her inert body. Lois watched as a couple of dead leaves tangled into the woman's hair in the light breeze. Both Alti and Xena alighted on the ground. They stood apart, each eyeing the other warily.

"Oh, Xena," Alti crooned evilly. "It's been too long."

"Not long enough," Xena countered.

"And you aren't alone," Alti observed. "You're brought along your little friend. Gabrielle, wasn't it? And a man. Since when has the great Warrior Princess ever needed a man? And Lois, so nice to meet you. Thanks for making it so easy to find you. Once I have you and your children, your dear husband won't dare to oppose me. His soul *will* be mine."

"You don't know Clark," Lois shot back, heatedly. The words came out in Xena's voice.

"Oh, but I do," Alti said. "I know that the second he knows that you're in danger, he'll be flying off to the rescue. Straight to me. Straight to Dahak. I can hardly wait to watch as his life drains from his body."

"Enough," Xena commanded. "I didn't come here to chat."

"You don't stand a chance against me," Alti boasted.

"Partnering with Dahak has vastly enhanced my powers."

"We'll just have to put that to the test, now won't we?"

"You're a fool, Xena."

"That may be," Xena returned calmly, "but I'm not going to stand aside and watch you murder innocent children."

"Still bitter over the curse I put on your son," Alti observed tauntingly.

"This has nothing to do with Solan," Xena replied evenly.

"Don't lie to me, Xena. I can see the hatred burning in your eyes."

Lois felt the warrior's phantom muscles as they coiled and readied themselves for the attack. Without warning, Xena rushed at Alti. She collided into the other woman, knocking the shamaness off balance. Lois felt the collision as surely as if she, herself, had been the one to hit into the woman. As one merged mass of spirits, whatever Xena felt, they all felt. Lois sensed Gabrielle and Iolau recovering from the attack as well. Alti was only momentarily stunned. She recovered quickly, delivering a blow to Xena's stomach. Lois felt the air rush out of her nonexistent lungs.

Xena seemed relatively unfazed by the blow. In an instant, she was on her feet again. Alti took another swing at Xena, who deftly parried it with one strong arm. Alti tried the other hand. Xena grasped it with her free hand. The shamaness struggled, bringing up a knee to strike at Xena. Xena was faster and brought her own knee into Alti's midsection. The shamaness staggered back a step as Xena loosened her hold on the other woman's wrists.

Alti recovered quickly and sprang at Xena. But the warrior princess took a defensive stance and turned the other's momentum against her. Alti went sprawling into the dirt, landing directly on top of a sharp rock. The stone left a gash in the woman's left leg. Blood flowed from the wound that opened up in the shamaness' unmoving, mortal body. Lois gaped in surprise.

In her mind, she heard Gabrielle explain that what happened to the spirit manifested in the real world. Inwardly, Lois groaned. She hadn't expected that. She had hoped that whatever happened in the spirit realm would stay there. But she had to admit, it made sense. Why else would Xena hope to slow Alti down by battling her in the spirit world if it didn't affect the living body?

Alti pushed herself off the ground. Xena stood ready, waiting for whatever attack would come next. The two stood facing one another, unmoving, for a long moment. Then, together, they rushed at one another. Feet left the ground as they flew towards each other. They clashed together in midair, each one grabbing the other's forearms. The force sent them spinning off towards the trees. Xena's back smashed into a pine tree, narrowly avoiding being impaled by a sharply broken off branch. Alti kept her grip on Xena, only loosening one hand long enough to grab Xena around her throat. Lois felt the incredible power in the shamaness' grip as it tightened. She felt it become harder to breathe, even in this spiritual state. A flash of fear seared through her mind.

Xena's free hand was immediately on Alti's hand, trying to pull the vice-like grip off her neck. Alti laughed evilly, tasting victory.

"Pathetic," Alti gloated. "You came all the way back from the dead and didn't even offer me much of a challenge."

"Be careful what you wish for," Xena hissed through clenched teeth.

She wrenched her other arm free of Alti's grasp and used it to bash her rival square in the face. There was a crunch as the shamaness' nose broke. Blood gushed from the woman's physical nose. Alti flew backwards, putting some distance between her and Xena. Xena gasped as she took in a deep breath. Lois felt her lungs burning. But Xena didn't stop to rest. Using the pine tree as a springboard, she flew at Alti, mustering all of the speed that she could in the short distance between them. She caught Alti in the throat and forced her back against a cedar tree.

Xena's fingers curled around her enemy's neck and began to squeeze.

For one horrifying moment, Lois was afraid that Xena was going to kill Alti. True, the woman was after Lois' kids, but Lois was terrified of being part of a murder. She felt Xena reassure her that, even if she wanted to kill Alti, the shamaness was too powerful right now. They would need the stone that Clark and Hercules were retrieving. Lois relaxed a little.

Alti's eyes continued to bulge as Xena squeezed her throat. Finally, the woman mustered her strength and head butted Xena. Lois felt her head blossom into a starburst of pain. Xena quickly recovered, even as Alti slipped out of her grasp. Xena was on her immediately, tussling with her in mid-air once more. A swift kick from the warrior princess sent her foe crashing into an oak tree. Her left arm caught a branch and twisted into an unnatural angle. Lois heard the dry snap of bone as the arm broke. Xena didn't relent. She flew at Alti and grabbed her by the collar of her shirt. Another quick move broke the shamaness' other arm. Two more rapid blows broke both of Alti's legs. Still holding on to Alti, Xena forced the other woman's spirit onto a broken off branch of the tree. The wood easily passed through the gossamer spirit, impaling the woman through her left shoulder. Blood burst from a new wound on the woman's inert body. Xena smiled with grim satisfaction at her handiwork. Alti screamed in rage rather than pain.

"There. That ought to keep you busy for a while," Xena said, pleased with the picture before her. "Oh. Was that enough of a challenge for you? Because *you* disappointed *me*."

"You'll pay for this, Xena," Alti swore. "When Dahak is released back into this world, you'll be the first one he captures. Death will be denied to you while he tortures you. You will watch as the world crumbles before his might."

"Save it," Xena said, delivering a punch to Alti's gut and driving the air from her lungs. Xena floated back away from the broken shamaness, eyeing her with cold disdain. "This is your last warning, Alti. Leave Clark and his family alone."

"Never," Alti swore again. "I will have his soul, if I have to kill half the world to get it."

"And then what? You turn it over to Dahak and become his slave? That doesn't sound like the Alti that I know. She'd never settle for playing second fiddle to another. Do you want to know what I think? I think that you plan on attaining Clark's soul for yourself and betraying Dahak. I've got news for you. Even the gods themselves were too afraid to betray Dahak when he was at the peak of his strength."

"The gods! The gods are weak! Doddering old fools well past their prime. Face it, Xena. You're outmatched this time. I'm stronger now than I have ever been."

Xena raised one eyebrow. "Oh? Doesn't look that way from where I'm standing." Her voice sank to a dangerously calm hiss. "I won't warn you again. Back off. Leave Clark and his family alone. Or I swear on the head of any god you name, I will kill you."

Alti laughed. "The power of Dahak flows in my veins now. You may kill me, but my soul will come back again and again."

"We'll see about that."

Xena floated even further away from Alti's wrecked body. When she was a safe distance away, she finally put her back to her old enemy and sped away from the scene of the battle. She swiftly retraced her earlier path, heading straight back to Lois and Clark's house. A few times, Lois urged Xena in different directions, giving her shortcuts back to the house. Xena gratefully took the advice, speeding up even more as she rushed through the city. Oddly, Lois felt no better after the confrontation with the powerful shamaness. In fact, she was more afraid of the woman now than she had been before. She tried to bury that fear, so as not to let Xena, Gabrielle, and Iolaus know.

At last, Lois' house was in sight. Xena zipped into the living room through the same open window. Their unmoving, slowly dying bodies remained on the floor where they had been left. Ares was sitting on the couch, his booted right foot on the coffee table, and his sword laying across his lap for easy defense, if need be. Xena hovered above their bodies and Ares stirred, as though he could feel their presence in the room. In fact, he *could* feel Xena's presence, so attuned to her as he was.

"Okay everyone," Xena said. "I need you to separate from me and go back into your bodies now. I'll undo the pinch on myself and get to each of you as soon as I can. Just remain calm. Once your soul reconnects with your body, you'll feel the strain of the pinch again as it prevents the blood from reaching your brain. If you struggle, you'll only be in more pain and hasten your body's move towards death. We should have more than enough time, so just stay calm."

Lois felt Iolaus separate himself from the entangled mass of souls that they currently were. In a way, Lois mourned the loss of that connection. It was strangely comforting to be so close to her friends, now that she was getting used to it. She felt Gabrielle start to peel away from the group next. Lois set herself to freeing her spirit. It was harder than she thought, but after struggling for only a moment, she felt herself come free of Xena at last. She floated above her body and then gently sank down into it once more.

Instantly, she felt the pain and strain of the pinch on her body. The muscles of her neck were clenched. She felt the blood trickling from her nostrils. She felt the warm, sticky fluid running down her cheeks as she lay on her back. She had the craziest thought of the blood as some sort of war paint. Every instinct in her body wanted to fight against the pinch that was stealing her life force. Stubbornly, she tried to remain as calm and serene as

possible. She wondered what Xena was up to, but found moving her head to be too taxing of a task.

Seconds later, she felt Xena's warm hands on her neck. With a quick jab of her index and middle fingers to both sides of Lois' neck, the warrior released the pinch. Instantly, Lois felt her muscles relax as relief flooded her body. She gasped for air and sucked in a large lungful, as though she'd spent too much time underwater. She coughed as her body readjusted itself back to normal. After a moment, she found that she had enough strength to sit up.

Iolaus and Gabrielle were doing the same as she was. Gabrielle was coughing, gagging on the air that she had been denied. Xena seemed to be in the best shape out of all of them. But then again, Lois knew from Gabrielle's stories that Xena had been under the pinch many times before. Iolaus raised one hand and wiped away the blood beneath his nose.

"Now *this* I didn't miss," he said as he looked at the blood covering his fingers.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Ares said.

Everyone ignored the god.

Lois wiped the blood from her nose with the back of one hand and inspected it. "Wow," she said at last, looking at Xena. "Now I know why that technique is so effective when you use it to question people."

Xena nodded distractedly. The wall clock chimed and Lois looked at it without understanding. Less than half a minute had passed since she and the others had first gone under the pinch. She gaped and Xena noticed.

"Like I said, time flows very differently in the spirit realm," Xena explained.

Lois nodded. "Do you think we put Alti out of commission?"

Xena shook her head. "Probably not. She's strong, very strong. She wasn't lying about that. At best, we've slowed her down."

"How long do you think we have?" Gabrielle asked.

"There's no telling. It could be days before she heals or hours. I wish I knew. But I'm betting on hours."

"Okay, so what do we do now?" Iolaus asked, standing up and starting to pace.

Lois could see that he was itching for a real fight. She sympathized with him. She also had a hard time sitting still when facing a threat. She could see that Xena felt the same way.

"There's nothing we can do," Xena said with a heavy sigh. "We can't do anything until Hercules and Clark get back with the stone." She turned to Ares. "Thanks for keeping watch. I guess I owe you one."

Ares only nodded his acknowledgement.

\*\*\*

Clark and Hercules hovered far above the earth, waiting. They were hidden in a thick bank of clouds in a pink and orange streaked sky. Clark watched as the sun crept closer to the horizon in a ball of red flame over the desert. In the distance, he could see the three great pyramids standing proudly against the sky, a sight that always amazed him, no matter how many times he saw it. Tearing his gaze away from the sight, he zoomed back in on the Valley of the Kings and loosed a heavy sigh.

"Still not empty yet?" Hercules asked impatiently. He had long since disposed of the heavy snow gear that he'd been wearing, and was now only in his jeans and a thin t-shirt. But up this high, the air was cooler than he would have liked.

Clark shook his head. "No. There's still at least six groups of tourists roaming around."

"Well, they can't stay all night," Hercules sighed.

"Wait, two groups are starting to leave now," Clark said, still watching intently.

"Good," Hercules nodded.

The sun sank lower. Shadows grew ever longer and the sky

flared into a brilliant sunset before darkening to the bruised purple-blue of twilight. In the valley below, the last group of tourists finally left for the night. Clark groaned.

"What?" Hercules asked.

"Armed guards," Clark said. "I never thought about security being left behind. But I guess it makes sense."

"Where?"

"The valley floor. If we're quiet, we can check around the upper ledges of the cliffs without being seen. I think."

"Well, nothing ventured..."

"Nothing gained."

Clark slowly and quietly descended from the sky. When his feet touched a narrow ledge around the uppermost portion of the cliffs, he eased Hercules to his feet. Below them, a group of guards patrolled half heartedly. Clark tuned his hearing to the men and listened to their rapid-fire conversation. They were complaining about their new head of security, a man with a short fuse and a smug sense of superiority. Satisfied that they hadn't been spotted, Clark tuned the men only half out of his hearing. He gestured to Hercules, signaling that it was all right to begin searching the cliff face for the entrance into the third and final labyrinth. Hercules went left, feeling along the rock for any subtle difference in the stone that might indicate a door. Clark went to the right, doing the same thing. It was now getting too dark for his x-ray vision to be of much help. He dearly wished that he could have done the search during the daylight hours, but he feared bringing attention to his task. Though he knew that Ares had said that full humans could not pass into the labyrinths, he had seen firsthand how deadly the places could be. It would be much better if the human race never found out about the existence of the labyrinths of the gods. Besides, if one half god existed, who was to say that there wouldn't be others that might wander into the labyrinth? It was infinitely better that no one else know about it.

Clark felt nothing but smooth stone beneath his probing hands. The moon began to rise; full, large, and bright. With the stars, it cast enough light for him to see fairly well by. He carefully inspected every inch of rock, searching for any indication that he was in the right area. He still kept half of his attention on the patrolling guards, but they were still deep in conversation with one another and completely oblivious to Clark and Hercules' presence. Clark began to speed up his search, unsure how long their luck would hold. He took another side step to the right, his hands pressed firmly to the stone before him. As he moved, the stone suddenly gave way beneath his hands. It remained intact, but Clark felt himself fall through it, with little more resistance than water would put up beneath his touch. His foot caught on a lip of stone and before he could catch himself, and he fell face first onto the stone floor within the hidden chamber.

He pushed himself up and dusted himself off. "Well, I guess I found the labyrinth," he muttered to himself in the pitch black.

As if on cue, there was a series of whooshing sounds as torches roared into life in the darkness.

"Okay, well that solves that problem," Clark spoke aloud to himself, feeling slightly spooked. "Better tell Hercules where to find me."

He turned around and was faced with the solid-seeming stone wall of the cliff. He pressed his hand against it, half expecting to fall right through, half expecting to be met with resistance. His hand easily sank through the wall. He drew a deep breath and stepped through and out into the cooling night air of the desert. He gave the surrounding area a quick scan. The patrolling guards had drawn up a couple of beat up chairs and were playing cards in the light of a small floodlight. Clark mentally noted exactly where the entrance was, counting his steps as he made his way to Hercules.

“I found the entrance,” Clark said, leaning in to the ancient hero’s ear, after lightly tapping him on the shoulder. Clark’s voice was barely above a whisper.

Hercules nodded and motioned for Clark to lead the way. Clark retraced his steps back to the entrance to the labyrinth, counting out his paces once more. When he’d retraced his two hundred and thirteen steps, he pressed his hand to the stone and raised his brows at Hercules. Then he stepped in, poking his head out again once he was on the other side.

“Careful,” he warned the demigod, “there’s a bit of a — oof!”

Hercules tripped over the lip of stone at the base of the doorway and crashed heavily into Clark’s stomach. Clark caught the hero before he could fall to the floor.

“Step?” Hercules finished for him with a laugh.

“Yeah,” Clark replied, unable to keep an amused smile off his face. He shot another glance at the way they had entered from.

“Wow, that whole illusionary wall thing is creepy.”

Hercules nodded. “I know the feeling. You never quite get used to it.”

Hercules looked around the chamber they were in. A long flight of wide stone steps stood directly before them, leading into a large square room. A double row of pillars supported the roof, each one extensively and elaborately decorated with perfectly preserved hieroglyphs. Stone statues of various gods and goddesses stood at regular intervals against the walls. Glittering piles of golden trinkets stood in a numerous places, with the occasional gemstones gleaming in the flickering torchlight. Clark took the lead once more and descended the steps into the chamber. He moved cautiously, expecting traps to spring at any moment, but none did. Hercules was right behind him. The demigod eyed the gold with disinterest and did not touch it.

“What is it with gods and tribute?” he muttered darkly.

Clark, meanwhile, was eying the hieroglyphs with interest as he walked. He stopped briefly at each pillar, taking in the symbols as quickly as he could. Hercules noticed.

“What?” he asked as Clark paused again.

Clark shook his head. “Just looking for any clues that might have been left behind.”

“Oh. Okay. See any?”

“Not yet.”

“Wait, you can really read those?” He gestured at the symbols on the pillars.

Clark nodded. “Yes.”

“Huh,” Hercules said, genuinely interested. “First the language on the altar in the arctic, then the meals you ordered for us in flawless Italian, and now hieroglyphs. How many different languages *do* you know?”

“Three hundred and forty-seven,” Clark said with a shrug.

“Wow!” Hercules eyes grew wide in surprise for just a moment. “Okay, I guess that makes sense, what with all of your international rescues and whatnot. But ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs? Is there really a demand for that?”

Clark laughed a little and shrugged again. “No. Actually, I picked up the different languages well before I ever became Superman. After college, I bounced around for a while, lived in different countries all over the world. So I studied the languages as I traveled, never knowing when or where I would find the place that I would call home. And, I was genuinely interested in learning about the cultures and languages of different places.”

“Okay, that makes a lot of sense. But no one uses hieroglyphs anymore,” Hercules argued with amusement. “What would possess you to want to learn them?”

Clark chuckled. “Yeah, I know. But I was always fascinated by them, so I took some courses during the short time that I lived in Egypt. I never thought that I’d actually *need* the knowledge. I always thought that I’d use it just for my own amusement when at museums and the like.”

“Three hundred and forty-seven languages.” The demigod shook his head in disbelief. “How do you keep them all straight in your head? I mean, I’ve had to adapt and learn new languages over the centuries, but I can barely remember any of them, except for ancient Greek. And only because I’ve forced myself to hold onto that little piece of home. I’m starting to even get a little rusty on that.”

“My memory is pretty good,” Clark said vaguely and with a shrug, uncomfortable with admitting just how close to flawless it was. He liked Hercules a good deal but so far, using his powers before the demigod had felt a little like showing off, which he was never comfortable with.

Hercules laughed lightly. “You are just *full* of surprises,” he observed teasingly.

Clark laughed also, relaxing once again. “Well, so are you.”

“So what do the pillars say?”

“Nothing much. At least, nothing that can help us. This one has the Egyptian creation myth inscribed on it. No mention of the stone though. That one there is all about the afterlife. That one is a listing of the various gods. That one is a set of rules for the Pharaohs to follow.” Clark pointed as he spoke of each pillar.

Hercules nodded, admiring the skillful work as they passed by.

Clark and Hercules soon reached the far side of the chamber, where a wide passage awaited them. Torches flickered into life at their approach, revealing walls covered in murals and more hieroglyphs. Clark stopped at the mouth of the passageway, ill at ease.

“What’s wrong?” Hercules asked. “Hear something? See something?”

Clark shook his head. “No. Just a bad feeling in my gut. Think about the last two places we were at to retrieve pieces of the stone. We had to find our own torches, light our own way. There was virtually no markings within the passages that we traveled through. Some runes of power and a few riddles, sure. But this place...it’s bright and almost airy, it’s so large. It’s filled with murals and writing and bright colors. What are the gods playing at here? Trying to lull us into a false sense of security? Or is this just meant to mimic the splendor of the tombs? Either way, this place is far more...accommodating...than the others. And that makes me very nervous.”

Hercules shook his head. “Could be either reason,” he admitted. “The gods of every civilization are different. Each play by their own set of rules. Most are similar only in that they are petty and cruel. I should know, I’ve met enough of them. I do know that the Egyptian gods are fond of this type of decorative touch though.”

“Well, either way, I don’t trust this place any more than I trusted the others. I think I trust this place even less, if that’s possible. Stay close, but behind me,” Clark said.

“Fine by me,” Hercules huffed in mock indignation.

They entered the wide passageway. Clark braced for a trap and was not disappointed. Short spears burst forth from hidden slats in the walls. They bounced off his invulnerable chest. He stopped to inspect one.

“Poison tipped,” he said, sniffing at the brownish stain on the otherwise shining steel point.

“How unoriginal,” Hercules said. “But again, that’s the gods for you.” He shrugged as though it were no big deal.

They kept walking. Soon, the passage began to twist and turn. The floor sloped up and down at uneven intervals. Clark lost all sense of direction after a short time. He knew that they had been facing east when they entered the labyrinth. He was no longer sure what direction they now faced. Not that it mattered much, he supposed. They had no choice but to follow the path before them.

“You know,” Hercules said, breaking the companionable silence that had fallen as they followed the passage. “I almost

played you on television once.”

“Oh yeah?” Clark asked, a little surprised at the admission.

Hercules nodded. “Yep. It was right around the time that Superman first started making rescues. I was between acting jobs and auditioned to play the part of Superman on a TV series.” He thought for a moment. “I think that was ABC or Warner Brothers, if I remember correctly.”

“I remember that,” Clark said thoughtfully as a couple of memories surfaced. “I was approached by the producers for the approval so that they could use the character of Superman. I had to deny them though.”

“How come? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Well,” Clark shrugged. “A number of things actually. I wasn’t comfortable with the concept. Some of the things that they wanted to do hit a little too close to home, while others were just flat out ridiculous. They had Superman living a double life as a mailman and living in a crystal palace on the moon. And they weren’t particularly open to giving over any portion of their profits to charity. I just couldn’t find a way to be comfortable with the whole thing. Sorry that I cost you a job though.”

“Eh, that’s okay. I wound up getting offered the chance to play myself on Hercules at the same time. So it all worked out for the best.” Hercules waved away Clark’s concerns.

“Looks like the passageway splits up ahead,” Clark noted. “Let’s see if the gods have left us any directions.”

They moved forward in silence once more. Images of various gods and heroes passed by on either side as they traveled down the brightly lit corridor. Clark skimmed them all as he walked, seeing nothing of any help whatsoever. He fought down his unease, trying to stay positive that they would find some sign that would guide them in the correct direction. At length, they reached the end of the passage and found themselves in a semicircular room. Eight doorways stood before them, fanning out in every direction. Stone statues of the gods peered down on them from their perches above the doorways. Clark recognized each of the deities as he scanned the room. Hathor, Horus, Isis, Osiris, Ptah, Toth, Anubis, and Ra. He glanced at Hercules. The demigod appeared to recognize the figures as well.

“Thoughts?” Clark asked, gesturing to the doorways fanned out before them. He sounded as if he had already come to his own opinion on which one to use.

“Working on it,” Hercules replied, distractedly. “I’m thinking the right most passage though.”

“The doorway of Ra,” Clark said.

Hercules nodded. “The stone works with the power of sunlight. I’m guessing that it’s a fair bet that it is located somewhere past the doorway that is protected by the god of the sun.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Clark agreed.

Clark took the lead once more. He stepped tentatively over the threshold, waiting for a trap to be sprung. Hercules was hard on his heels. As soon as they both stepped fully into the passageway, there was a sudden scraping sound. Heavy iron bars shot forth from the ceiling and snapped closed behind them with a thunderous clang, cutting off their retreat back through the doorway. For both men, the bars were little more than an inconvenience. For any other person, however, the bars would have presented an insurmountable obstacle.

As before, torches continued to flare into life before them, illuminating the path ahead. Whatever the cause for it, Clark was glad for it. After the last two labyrinths, it seemed somehow considerate of the Egyptian gods to provide such a service. Surely, it was a lot easier than trying to light the way with a handheld torch.

Hercules glanced at the bars behind them. “Okay then. I guess we keep going forward.”

“It does seem like we’re being led that way,” Clark agreed

with an uneasy grin, though he tried to make his voice light.

Both men sobered once more as they faced the long, narrow passageway before them. Clark started down the path before them, every muscle taut and on alert. He couldn’t quite place the source of the disquiet that he felt, but it had grown stronger every moment since the bars had slammed into place behind them. His gut told him that the biggest dangers were still ahead of them. A quick glance at Hercules told Clark that the demigod was feeling the same gut instinct.

The passageway bent sharply to the left after a time, then made a series of left and right twists. Clark stayed ahead of Hercules. Each step seemed to be met with resistance as they plunged further and further into the labyrinth. After the tenth left bend, a series of stone warriors stood in a line to each side of the passage. As Clark passed between them, the massive, gleaming swords and axes that the statues held came down forcefully. Clark stayed one step ahead of the weapons with little effort, though the first one took him by surprise. The axe caught him squarely on top of his head, then shattered and splintered as the metal met the resistance of his invulnerable body. Clark would have laughed at the absurdity of it if the situation hadn’t been so tense. He threw frequent glances back at Hercules, ensuring that the half god was not in any danger. Clark was glad that the trap seemed to be set to spring only once. Once the weapons struck the floor, they stayed put and Hercules was easily able to pick his way around the obstacles.

Several times, the passage split into two or more different choices. Each time, Clark and Hercules studied the surrounding areas, looking for a clue to tell them which way to go. Clark’s x-ray vision was of no help, for the passages beyond were too dark to allow him to see anything. The torches on the walls would not light until they came close to them. Twice, they choose the wrong pathway and were forced to double-back when they came upon dead-ends. At the first dead end, the floor gave way beneath them. Only Clark’s lightning fast reflexes and power of flight saved them both from a long drop into who -knew-what. The second time that they hit a dead end, the walls began to shake violently as the narrow passage began to collapse. Clark had only just enough time to grab Hercules in his arms and use the fastest burst of speed that he dared, in order to clear the passage before the walls and ceiling completely caved in on them. After that, they spent even more time at each fork in the road, choosing their path ever so carefully, though both of them grudged every delay.

Skill, or luck, or perhaps even both, saw that they hit no further dead ends.

Eventually, the passage stopped forking once more, leading them in a straight line again. Clark nearly breathed a sigh of relief, but the hairs on the back of his neck still stood at attention. He couldn’t say how he knew it, but he was certain that the dangers had not yet been left behind. And he felt quite certain that even worse things still lay ahead. After a time, the passage spit them out into a large, square chamber. Clark moved to the center of the room, looking at the ornate paintings upon the four walls.

“Interesting,” Clark said as he studied the murals.

“What?”

“The paintings. Do you know the story of Osiris, Seth, and Isis?”

Hercules nodded. “Seth was jealous of Osiris’ position as king, so he plotted to kill him and take his place. He tricked Osiris into trying out a coffin that had secretly been made to his exact measurements. Once Osiris was inside, Seth had the coffin sealed and thrown into the Nile. Isis set out to find Osiris, fearing that without the proper ceremonies, he would not be allowed to enter the Underworld. She found thirteen out of fourteen pieces of his body and fashioned the last out of gold. Osiris was then resurrected and became the God of the Dead.”

“Right,” Clark said. “That’s the story I’ve always heard too. But look at the murals. The basic story is the same, but see there? That first panel there. Notice anything out of place?”

Hercules followed Clark’s glance. In the picture, Seth sat brooding upon a carved wooden chair, while across from him, Osiris sat upon a throne of gold. A dark robed figure whispered in Seth’s left ear. Osiris, his back to Seth, remained unaware of the plot on his life, all of his attention fixed on a line of petitioners before him.

“Dahak,” Hercules said with a sudden realization and certainty. “Dahak was the force behind the betrayal.”

Clark nodded. “It does seem like that is what the mural is telling us. Look there.”

He pointed to the next panel. The same robed figure stood half hidden behind a pillar while Osiris unwittingly stepped into the coffin. The representation of Dahak looked out with fiery red eyes, and although his face was hidden in the blackness of his hood, Clark could feel a sense of immense satisfaction coming from the painted figure. It made a chill run up his spine.

“Do you think it’s true?” Clark asked as they made their way to the doorway on the opposite side of the chamber. “That Dahak influenced Seth?”

Hercules shrugged. “Anything is possible. Dahak is one of the oldest evils, from what I understand. It wouldn’t surprise me if he had a hand in something like this.” They reached the doorway. “After you.”

Clark stepped through the doorway and into another, larger chamber. This time, the room was long and wide, with stone statues of some of the gods lining the room on either side. In the center of the room, a shallow reflecting pool stood smooth as glass, flanked by two stone obelisks. The pool swept around in a wide circle, torchlight glinting off the dark, peaceful surface. In the middle of the pool, a small island stood. And upon the island, the third and final altar awaited on a raised dais. As with the previous two altars, the sapphire piece of the Stone of Creation stood in a golden cradle.

Hercules and Clark both breathed a small sigh of relief. No matter what else might happen once Clark took the stone, they were finally at their journey’s end. Clark was particularly glad that they were nearly through with their quest. He had the worst nagging, gut-wrenching feeling that he was needed at home.

As they stepped into the chamber, a heavy stone door shot down from the ceiling, sealing them into the room. But by now, Hercules and Clark were becoming used to such things, and neither the idea of being closed in nor the threat of whatever might happen once Clark plucked the stone from its holder rattled them. Still, Clark hesitated for a moment before approaching the altar, scanning the room for hidden threats.

Not seeing anything off hand, he took a deep breath and slowly exhaled it again. He stepped forward, into the heart of the chamber. Another chill ran up his spine, and he felt as though dozens of eyes were upon him. He threw another glance around the room, but nothing had changed. After a few moments, he reached the edge of the reflecting pool. He bent down to examine it as an odd odor reached his sensitive nostrils. He threw a handful of loose sand from the floor into the pool. It hissed and bubbled as the sand made contact.

“Acid,” Clark said with a weary sigh. “The gods weren’t fooling around when they constructed this place, were they?”

Hercules only shrugged, saying nothing. His weariness and disgust towards the gods were plainly written on his face.

Clark hovered a few inches off the ground and floated gently over the pool. He landed lightly on the first step of the dais, then swiftly ascended to the top. He reached out a hand and gingerly plucked the shard from its cradle. As the stone came free, there was a hiss of air and Clark barely had time to react before a spray of salt acid spewed forth from the altar. Still, Clark was the faster

of the two and managed to dodge the trap, fearful of what the acid might do if Lois accidentally touched a place on the suit where it might have landed.

“They *really* weren’t messing around with this place,” he muttered, mostly to himself. “Now, to put this stone together and get out of here.”

Before he could follow through on his spoken promise, a scrape of stone on stone snapped his head up.

“Uh Clark, we’ve got company.”

The stone statues of the gods were on the move, having been brought to life by some ancient magic. Clark saw it all in an instant. It was far from a representation of the entire pantheon, but it was enough. Bull headed Ptah. Baboon headed Toth. Falcon headed Horus. Jackal headed Anubis. Sobek with his hideous crocodile head. Hathor, who had the head of a cow. Sekhmet, with the head of lion. Nekhbet, who sported the head of a vulture.

“Great,” Clark muttered. He zipped to Hercules’ side, tucking away the last shard of the stone as he did so. “Plan?”

“Destroy them all,” Hercules said simply.

“Herc...”

Hercules shook his head, his shoulder length dirty blonde locks bouncing with the movement. “It’s the only way out. They aren’t alive. Just enchanted stone.”

Clark sighed, though he had to admit that the demigod was right. If the other labyrinths were anything to go by, a doorway wouldn’t appear until they defeated the trial that the gods had set before them. He cracked his knuckles, sizing up the approaching figures as he did so. He focused his heat vision at the closest one, Toth, and blazed it as hot and intense as he could make it.

Nothing happened.

Clark abruptly stopped, shocked and confused. His shock only lasted a moment, though. With a burst of speed, he launched himself at Toth, his hands before him and curled into fists. He barreled straight into the statue’s chest, colliding into it with all the force he could muster in so short a space. Clark bounced off the statue like bullets typically bounced off his own chest. He was thrown backwards by the force, landing on his back on the limestone floor.

“What the...whoah!”

Toth brought a scythe down on Clark’s head. The stone weapon cracked straight across his forehead, and would have scalped him if he hadn’t possessed invulnerability. As it was, the sheer power behind the blow shattered the weapon as it connected with Clark’s skull. Clark rolled to one side, pushing himself up in the process. He kicked as he moved, his feet connecting with the statue’s chest. This time, Clark knew how to direct his power, and managed to send the stone god reeling backwards into Nekhbet. As the two struck each other, bits of their stone bodies cracked and broke off.

“Nice work,” Hercules commented approvingly. “Seems like you found their flaw.”

Clark stood, rolling his neck to one side to work out a kink that had formed when he hit the floor. He put his back to the half god’s.

“My pleasure,” he said with grim sarcasm. “Well, this should be interesting.”

Hercules chuckled, sounding somewhat thrilled at the prospect of another fight, though Clark imagined that the demigod had to be getting tired. After all, it had been a very long day so far for them both. And who knew how long this battle was going to last?

Hathor rushed at Clark, head and body bent low. Her horns caught Clark in the ribs, driving him backwards a few steps, and thereby pushing Hercules at Nekbet. Clark grabbed hold of the cow goddess’ horns and pushed back, giving Hercules some space to edge backwards if the need arose. Clark twisted his arms sharply, flipping the massive statue over and onto the floor. He

was on the fallen statue instantly, lifting the writhing body into the air. He flew above the crowd of spelled sculptures, eyeing his target. Nekbet was doing battle with Hercules, a long spear in her stony hands.

“Herc! Bombs away!” he called out.

Hercules deftly flung himself to one side, rolling away from the vulture headed goddess. As soon as Hercules was clear of the path, Clark threw the statue of Hathor down. The representations of the two goddesses smashed into one another. The force of the throw caused the two to fracture and explode out in all directions. Hercules was pelted with a fine shower of small chunks of stone.

“Thanks,” he called up to Clark. “That’s two down. But you know I had that under control, right?” His voice was light and teasing as he turned to face bull headed Ptah.

“Plenty left for you to fight,” Clark assured him with a wink. “I can just hang out up here if you’d like.”

Hercules laughed deeply as he grabbed Ptah by the horns and began to wrestle with him. “Eh, I’m feeling generous. Feel free to join in the fight.”

Clark chuckled, amused at the demigod’s ability to joke around in a fight. Then he zoomed back down, planting his feet into the back of Sekhmet. The lion’s face changed into a snarl as the statue stumbled forward, before whirling around to face Clark. Sharp claws sprung forth from the chiseled human hands. She leapt at Clark, pouncing into his chest. Clark saw the move and let her come at him. The instant she was upon him, his arms closed about her. He squeezed tightly, but was unable to cause a single crack in the enchanted stone. Sekhmet managed to loosen one arm free from Clark’s vice-like grasp and tore at his face with her claws. The first swipe would have removed his right eye, had he been a normal man.

“Hercules,” Clark called out.

The demigod was still wrestling with Ptah. Both seemed pretty evenly matched, and it was hard to say if either one had the upper hand. Hercules heard Clark’s call, and with a burst of strength, wrenched Ptah around enough so that he could face his friend. Clark held Sekhmet before him, like a protesting stone shield. Hercules took the hint. He pushed against Ptah while Clark moved forward with Sekhmet. The distance between the two statues closed.

“Brace yourself,” Clark warned Hercules before spiking Sekhmet into Ptah as though she was a football.

With a great cracking sound, the two stone gods met. Rock splintered and crumbled, leaving nothing behind but rubble and dust. Hercules kicked a small section of rubble with his foot.

“Halfway there,” the son of Zeus grinned at him. “And the fun’s just getting started.”

“Herc, behind you!”

Hercules spun on his heel, but it was too late. Crocodile headed Sobek launched himself at the demigod. Massive stone jaws opened as he came at Hercules, then fastened around his bare left forearm. Knife-like teeth tore into Hercules’ flesh and the ancient hero cried out in pain as his blood started to flow. He tried to pry open the god’s jaws, but with only one free hand, he was unsuccessful.

“Clark,” he called out in pain and desperation, as the jaws continued to tighten.

Sobek twisted his head, trying to tear Hercules’ arm from his body.

“Hang on,” Clark replied as he punched Toth in the face, sending the statue reeling backwards. “I’m coming.”

Having bought himself a few precious seconds, Clark rushed to Hercules’ side. He gripped the reptilian head, one hand on the upper jaw and the other on the lower. With a grunt of effort, he began to pry the clamped jaws open. It was a tougher task than he’d thought it would be. The magic that was bound to the sculpture gave it a strength that nearly rivaled his own. But bit by

agonizing bit, he forced the crocodile’s jaws open. As soon as he could, Hercules yanked his arm free. Blood issued forth from at least a dozen wounds, if not more. It trickled down his arm, over his hand, and dripped off his fingertips to the floor below, making tiny red pools. Hercules clutched at his injured limb for a brief moment, then seemed to steel himself for the rest of the battle. There was no time for tending to wounds. Anubis and Horus were converging on the two men.

Clark dug his fingers into an even tighter grip on Sobek. He lifted the statue by the elongated snout, flipping the god into Toth. The two collided and disintegrated with a sharp boom. Hercules moved to meet with Horus, while Clark faced the jackal headed Anubis statue. Horus swung a great stone sword at Hercules. The demigod had barely enough time to duck out of the way. At the same moment, Clark sidestepped as Anubis rushed at him. The blow that Horus had meant for Hercules caught Anubis in the left arm. The stone cracked as the limb severed at the elbow and fell to the floor. It wriggled for a few moments, then lay still as the magic bled out from it.

Horus whirled around again, his sword broken off at the hilt from the force of the blow. He threw the rest of the weapon to the floor. It hit the floor with a heavy thud. Hercules stooped low, grabbing up the discarded arm, his eyes never leaving Horus. But the move cost him. Horus came at him with a speed that belied his heavy stone self. He caught Hercules around his neck and began to squeeze. Hercules gagged and tried to wrestle his way free. He swung the arm like a club, managing to chip off chunks of the falcon’s beak in the process, until the statue opened what was left of the beak and yanked the makeshift weapon away from Hercules.

Clark, meanwhile, was doing battle with Anubis. The god wheeled at him, not slowed down in the least by the loss of his arm. His good arm was clenched into a fist. He reared it back and slugged Clark in the gut. Clark’s attention had briefly shot over to Hercules, so the punch caught him off guard. The strength behind the punch sent Clark flying backwards. He cleared the pool of acid and smashed into the alter. It collapsed as he made contact with it. Clark coughed and clamored to his feet as he took a breath, all of the air having been forced from his lungs from the impact.

Anubis watched silently, then turned to Hercules. Clark flew at the god, barreling into Anubis with all his speed and power behind him. Together, they smashed into the far wall of the chamber. Clark was instantly up and on the move, racing back to Hercules. The demigod was turning colors as the air was cut off from his body. Fear fueled Clark as he grabbed Horus’ arm, tearing it free from Hercules’ throat in one savage motion. Hercules sank to his knees, gasping for breath. Clark immediately made a second grab for Horus. Lifting him up above his head, Clark shot back across the chamber, pushing Horus into Anubis. In a shower of stone chips, the two broke apart into a thousand pieces.

Grimly satisfied, Clark raced back to Hercules’ side. He knelt beside his companion. Hercules was still coughing and gasping for air.

“Are you all right?” Clark asked, putting a hand to the man’s shoulder.

“Peachy,” Hercules choked out with a nod. “The statues?”

“Destroyed,” Clark confirmed.

“Good,” Hercules wheezed. “Let’s get out of here.”

“First things first,” Clark said gently. “Here, let me see your arm.”

Hercules gingerly lifted his injured limb for Clark’s inspection. The arm and hand were a mass of blood, but Clark could easily see each of the wounds where Sobek’s teeth had punctured the demigod’s skin. He quickly x-rayed the limb and was relieved to see that it wasn’t broken as well.

“We need to stop the bleeding,” Clark said.

“No time,” Hercules said. He made to tear the waist of his shirt as a makeshift bandage.

“Wait,” Clark said. “I can help. This might sting a little though.”

With quick darts of his heat vision, Clark swiftly cauterized each of the demigod’s wounds. Hercules clenched his teeth against the pain and discomfort, but to his credit, he did not cry out. When Clark had finished, Hercules inspected his handiwork.

“Not bad,” Hercules said approvingly, flexing the arm.

“Now we can go,” Clark said with a grin.

It was late when Clark and Hercules finally flew back in through the living room window. Lois was half dozing on the couch while Xena, Gabrielle and Iolaus sat playing a heated game of poker. As the familiar whoosh heralded their arrival, Lois was instantly awake again. Clark gently lowered Hercules out of his arms. In a heartbeat, Lois was at Clark’s side, all of her pent up fear melting away when she realized that both men were okay. She stretched up on her toes and kissed her husband, needing to feel him.

“What happened to you?” she asked them both when she pulled away, noting the various smudges and stains on their clothing, the dust in their hair, and the dried blood on Hercules’ forearm.

“You don’t want to know,” Hercules said wearily.

“Of course I do,” she quipped.

“I’ll tell you later,” Clark promised her. “Let’s just say for now that it wasn’t pretty out there. What happened to your neck?” He took a double take as he realized that she and the others all bore red marks on their necks. “All of you?”

Lois shooed away his concern. “We had a bit of an adventure of our own while you two were out. Why don’t you guys go get cleaned up? We can swap stories afterwards.”

Clark nodded hesitantly. He recognized the tone in her voice. Arguing with her wouldn’t yield any results. And she was definitely downplaying whatever had happened. His stomach twisted into fresh knots, despite the fact that she was standing before him, seemingly unharmed.

“All right,” he agreed at last. “Follow me, Herc.”

He led the ancient hero up the stairs and directed him to the guest bath. Clark rummaged for a few moments, gathering up some fresh towels and first aid items, so that Hercules could tend to his wound once he was washed.

“Hey,” Clark said, as he handed Hercules the items. “I can zip by your hotel to get you some fresh clothes if you’d like.”

“Uh, sure. That’d be great. Thanks.”

Hercules fished the plastic card key out of his back pocket and gave Clark the room number and hotel name. Clark ducked into the master bathroom and took a long, leisurely two minute shower. Feeling refreshed, he slipped into a fresh suit and sped over to Hercules’ hotel. Glancing around the hallway to ensure that no one was watching, he let himself into the dark room. He found a light switch on the wall, and took in the mostly orderly room he was standing in. Then he got to work, quickly stuffing a few items into a black gym bag that he found on the floor. Satisfied, he turned off the light and slipped back out of the room. He was back at his house less than three minutes later. He hung the gym bag on the doorknob of the bathroom, where, even without his super hearing, he could hear Hercules whistling a tune while the shower splashed. Clark retreated back to his bedroom and changed out of the Superman suit and into a pair of thin, red plaid sleep pants and a black t-shirt.

He was about to exit the room when he suddenly remembered the shards of stone in his hidden pockets. He retrieved the besmirched cape from the hamper and fished the pieces out. He did not join the pieces, not just yet. He would wait until they were all together to do so. At any rate, Hercules certainly

deserved to be there when he did so.

He found Lois and the others still in the living room, though the card game had stopped. Everyone seemed to be waiting for Clark and Hercules to join them. Clark slumped onto the couch next to Lois, putting the shards on the coffee table before him. A sense of weariness settled over him, catching him off guard. But, he reasoned, he had spent a good portion of the day below ground and away from the energizing rays of sunlight that he needed. It was no wonder that he was feeling tired. He leaned over and kissed Lois lightly on the lips, needing the contact with her desperately. He’d spent the entire day worried about her safety. But to see her now before him in one piece, he felt like he could finally breathe a small sigh of relief. Still, he was worried about the markings on her neck and his gut was still twisted into knots.

A few minutes later, Hercules came down the stairs to join everyone in the living room. He was dressed in the items that Clark had gotten for him, and a length of gauze was wound around his injured arm. Clark could smell the faint trace of antiseptic ointment beneath the wrappings. Hercules held the diamond dagger in one hand.

“Thanks,” Hercules said, the one word encompassing his gratitude for everything.

Clark nodded. “Anytime.”

“You guys must be hungry,” Lois said, standing.

“Starving,” Hercules agreed.

Lois nodded. “There’s some leftover pizza in the kitchen. Let me go heat it up for you.”

“Just bring it in here. I’ll heat it up,” Clark offered.

Lois nodded and breezed out of the room to retrieve the cold pizza. Hercules placed the dagger onto the table next to the shards. Then he settled onto the couch opposite from Clark. He sighed heavily in his tiredness. A peaceful silence stretched out into the room. Not long afterwards, Lois reemerged, armed with a box of pizza and a couple of cold Pepsi bottles. She set the box down and Clark lifted the lid. Pushing his glasses down, he quickly reheated the food with his heat vision until it was steaming. He and Hercules both grabbed a slice and ate hungrily. In no time at all, Clark had wolfed down four slices and Hercules an additional two and a half.

“So?” Gabrielle asked finally. “What happened?”

Clark sighed and reached for one of the Pepsi bottles. With a quick twist, he removed the cap and drank, emptying half the bottle in one thirsty swig. He exchanged a look with Hercules. In unspoken agreement, they decided to let Clark be the one to tell their tale.

“Okay,” he said at last. “The good news is, as you can see, we got all three pieces.”

“And what about the dagger? Ares didn’t mention that,” Xena said with a frown, eyeing the weapon on the table.

“No, he didn’t,” Hercules agreed. “But he might not have known about it.”

“We found it in the first labyrinth,” Clark explained. “There were markings on the altar with the stone, indicating that we need it to defeat Dahak.”

“Is that dagger made of what I think it is?” Lois asked.

“Pure diamond,” Clark confirmed.

“Incredible,” she said in awe, wanting to touch it but not yet daring to.

“Anyway, the first piece we retrieved was the one at the North Pole. The labyrinth was easy enough, but the whole place started to collapse once we took the stone. Even with my speed, we barely got out of there in time. Next, we went to get the piece in Norway. That one was a little harder to find, and the labyrinth had a few extra surprises for us.”

“Surprises?” Gabrielle asked.

“Booby traps and a couple of frost giants to do battle with,” Hercules said.



“And I missed this?” Iolaus pouted.

“We went to Egypt last,” Clark continued. “We had to wait until the tourists left the area. I didn’t want to bring attention to what we were doing. That ate up more time than I thought it would. But we finally got the chance to search for the labyrinth. That one gave us our biggest challenge of all. There were a ton of traps and when we finally got the shard, stone statues of the gods attacked us. They were impervious to anything but the other statues, so we had to force them together to destroy them. That’s when Herc got wounded.”

“What happened?” Iolaus asked.

“I got bit by the crocodile god’s statue,” Hercules replied with a shrug.

“Man, you just had to go and have all the fun. I can’t believe that I missed out on this!” Iolaus said, throwing his hands up into the air. His tone of voice suggested that he was truly devastated to have missed such a grand adventure.

Hercules squeezed his friend’s shoulder lightly. “I’m sorry, Iolaus. You know that I would have loved to have had you with me if it was possible. There’s no one else I’d rather have fighting at my side. No offense, Clark. I’m glad to have fought with you, but Iolaus and I were quite the team in our day.”

Clark grinned. “Absolutely none taken.”

“So that wound on your arm. It’s from what? A stone crocodile?” Lois said.

“That’s about the extent of it, yeah,” Hercules nodded.

“Well, shouldn’t we get you to a hospital or something?” she pressed. “You might need stitches.”

Hercules shook his head. “We can’t afford to raise eyebrows right now. Or the time delay. Besides, it’s not even bleeding anymore thanks to Clark.”

Clark tapped the rim of his glasses, indicating his heat vision. “So what about you? You said that you had some sort of adventure without us?”

Lois nodded and faltered for a moment, looking for the right way to put her story into words, without upsetting Clark. Xena spoke up first.

“We were forced to confront Alti,” the warrior princess said gently. She seemed unwilling to alarm Clark.

“What? Why?” he asked.

“She was a threat that we couldn’t afford to ignore,” Xena replied vaguely.

“You should have waited. I would have taken care of her,”

Clark said adamantly.

“We couldn’t wait,” Gabrielle said.

“Why not?”

“She was after our kids, Clark,” Lois said in a quiet voice.

“What?”

Clark stood, his hands clenched into tight fists. Cords of muscle stood out on his arms from the sheer tightness in his body. His dark eyes flashed with anger and fear. He looked ready to fly out into the night to track down the threat to his family. Lois lightly touched his arm, trying to soothe him. After a tense moment, he relented and sat down once more, though he remained on edge.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice tight with his controlled anger.

“Aphrodite came to us and said that Alti was on the move. She wanted to use our kids as bait to lure you to her,” Lois explained. “So Xena decided to go out and meet her in battle to prevent her from doing just that.”

“How?” Clark looked confused. “I mean, she could have been anywhere, right?”

“I went into the spirit realm,” Xena explained. “It was easier to find her and fight her there.”

“We all went,” Lois said.

“Spirit realm?” Clark asked, arching one eyebrow.

Xena nodded guiltily. “I had to separate our souls from our bodies. Together we fought Alti and slowed her down.”

“Separate your souls from your bodies?” he repeated, sounding concerned. “Sounds extremely dangerous.” He sent a pointed look at Lois.

Lois blushed a little. Clark’s tone told her that she hadn’t heard the last of his concerns over her actions.

Xena shrugged. “It can be, if you don’t know what you’re doing. As luck would have it, I’ve done this several times before. I tried to make Lois stay behind, but she’s pretty stubborn.”

“Tell me about it,” Clark said.

“Our children were in danger,” Lois said hotly. “I wasn’t going to just stand aside and wait to see what happened.”

“I’m glad that she forced me to bring her along,” Xena admitted, quickly coming to Lois’ aid. “Alti’s strength and power has been augmented by her unholy allegiance with Dahak. It took the combined strength of all of us to triumph.”

“And the marks on your necks?”

“Wounds sustained in the spirit realm manifest in the real world.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully. “So, what now?”

“We beat her pretty soundly,” Iolaus boasted. Xena glared at him for the briefest of moments and he took the hint. “I mean, we bought ourselves a little time, and enough time for your kids to get out of harm’s way.”

“Where are they now?” Clark asked, worry creeping back into his voice.

Lois shook her head. “I don’t know. I told your parents to take them as far as they could and not to contact us, in case Alti has spies eavesdropping. Once this is all over, we’ll call them and have them come home.”

“I should go look for them. Make sure that they are okay.”

“How would you find them?” Iolaus asked.

Clark tapped his right ear once. “I know their heartbeats as well as I know my own. As well I as I know Lois’. I can find them if I try.”

“No.” Xena shook her head. “If you go after them, and if Alti is already back on the hunt, you’ll only draw her to them.”

Clark ran a hand through his hair, a sure sign that he was still ill at ease. “You’re right,” he said after a moment. “And thanks for what you did. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. I just wish I could have done something to help,” he said, addressing Xena, Gabrielle, and Iolaus.

“But you did. You got the stone,” Gabrielle pointed out.

“Speaking of, we should probably put it together,” Hercules said.

Clark nodded. He reached over to the coffee table and took up the three sections of the stone. He swiftly arranged them and pressed the pieces together, wondering how in the world they were going to stay together. He looked questioningly at Hercules, but as the pieces came into contact with each other, a piercing blue-white light shot forth. Everyone was forced to avert their eyes, even Clark. The light illuminated the whole of the living room, bathing it in an ethereal glow. It lasted a full half a minute, then abruptly vanished. Everyone blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the lingering spots in their vision. When they could see again, they turned their eyes to the stone.

It was completely fused together.

Clark slipped his glasses down again, x-raying the sapphire in his hand. He could see not a single crack or flaw within the gem. Whatever magic was wound around it, it was strong. It was as if the gem had never been split in the first place. He was impressed. Remembering that Hercules and the others could now touch the stone since it had been restored, he handed it to Hercules.

“It looks flawless to me. How does it look to you?” he asked.

Hercules took the stone and inspected it from every angle, just as Clark had done moments before.

“It looks exactly as I remember it.”

“Good,” Xena said.

“So what’s the plan now?” Gabrielle asked.

“We draw Alti into battle,” Xena replied. “Tomorrow we pick a spot and wait for her to show up. If she’s already healed herself from the damage that we caused today, I have no doubt that she will find us.”

“We have to fight her in her mortal form,” Hercules cautioned. “The stone and the dagger are useless in the spirit realm.”

Xena nodded and a half smile ghosted over her lips as she gazed over to the spot where her weapons stood. “I know.”

“So the next question is: where do we have the battle?” Iolaus said, grabbing the last half slice of pizza from the box on the table.

“Someplace out of the city,” Clark said. “I don’t want to risk having anyone else get hurt.”

“How about up near Perry’s fishing cabin?” Lois asked. “It’s pretty desolate up there. No chance of any passersby being in danger. Or accidentally coming across certain secrets.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Clark admitted with a grin. “Okay, I think that settles that part then. What else?”

Xena shook her head. “We get a good night’s sleep. That’s all we can really do.”

“There has to be something else,” Clark pressed, sitting forward on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees.

Xena shook her head. “Hercules, Iolaus, Gabrielle and myself will be doing the bulk of the fighting. And if all goes the way that I think it will, it will mostly be me. I know Alti. I know how she thinks and how she fights. When the battle begins, just make sure that I have that dagger ready to go.”

“You shouldn’t be fighting on my behalf,” Clark argued. “You already did that once before, remember?”

Xena smiled at the memory. She had enjoyed throwing a wrench into Caesar’s gladiator fights when she’d had to rescue Clark on their last adventure together.

“I remember,” she said. “And I also remember you being unwilling to go for the kill. Unless that has changed, I need to be the one to take on Alti.”

Clark hesitantly relented. It was true. Despite the threat to himself and his family, he knew that he would never be able to bring himself to take a life. He handed Xena the dagger and Hercules gave her the Stone of Creation. She thanked him with a look and a nod of her head, her blue eyes intent and rivaling the sparkle of the large sapphire she held. Carefully, she placed the stone into the open space on the pommel of the dagger. The stone was a perfect fit. There was a flash of golden light as the two fused into one object. Xena held the dagger to the light coming from one of the lamps in the room. The stone seemed to draw in the light like a sponge. It flooded down into the diamond blade, making the whole weapon glow. Clark could only imagine what the weapon would look like once it was absorbing the sunlight.

Suddenly, he felt very uneasy about the whole affair. A thought occurred to him that hadn’t before. Were his actions going to make him an accessory to murder? He shivered a little at the thought. If all went well, Alti would not be leaving the field of battle alive. And he *had* been the one to retrieve the dagger that would end her life. Or did the very fact that if Alti died, she’d be doing so in battle, which was always carried an uncertain outcome, take away the responsibility from him? Either way, he suddenly was very ill at ease with the upcoming battle. He squirmed a little in his seat.

“If it makes you feel better,” Xena said, seeing his unease, “I’ll do what I can to spare Alti’s life. If I can separate her from Dahak’s embrace, I’ll keep her alive so that your local magistrate can deal with her. But I *will* make the kill if I have to. Dahak needs to be destroyed at all costs.”

Clark dragged his hand through his hair again and slowly nodded. Xena was right. If Dahak wasn’t stopped, all of mankind would suffer. He only hoped that they could separate Alti from the evil deity without killing her.

“Agreed,” he said finally. His eyes lingered on the dagger in Xena’s hand. “Let’s hope tomorrow is going to be sunny. Otherwise we don’t have a chance.”

He picked up the remote and turned the television on. He rapidly pressed the buttons to bring up the Weather Channel. His fingers tapped impatiently on his leg as he waited for the local forecast to come on screen. The others sat in rapt attention, still somewhat mystified at the strange vision-box. At last, the local forecast came up on screen. Clark breathed a sigh of relief. There was nothing but mostly sunny skies for the next few days, with scattered showers and colder temperatures later in the week.

“You still have Oracles?” Gabrielle asked, surprised.

“What? No,” Clark said. He kept forgetting that half the people in the room were unused to modern living.

“Then how do they know what the weather is going to be like before it happens?”

“It’s... complicated. But there’s nothing magical or special about the people who predict the weather.”

“And they’re wrong as often as they are right,” Lois said.

Hercules stifled a yawn. “Sorry,” he said, as a second one racked him. “It’s been a long day.”

“We better all get some rest,” Xena said. “Tomorrow’s battle isn’t going to be easy.”

“It never is,” Hercules said with a grin and a shake of his head.

Clark did not sleep well at all that night. He saw every hour, in between fitful periods of troubled dreams and nightmares that chilled him down to the very marrow of his bones. He responded to three emergencies in the small hours of the night; a fire and two car accidents. At the second accident, he was forced to deliver a thankfully healthy baby girl when the mother went into sudden labor. He almost wished that there was more of a need for Superman that night, to give himself something to do as he fought the nervous insomnia that had gripped his brain and body. He did a quick patrol over the city, but it was mostly a quiet night. Eventually, he could find no further reasons to stay out. He returned to a quiet house. Checking in on his new found friends, he found them all sound asleep in the living room, with Iolaus snoring loudly. He envied the warriors. They had been through so many battles that the prospect of this one didn’t faze them enough to interrupt their slumber. Even Lois seemed to be sleeping deeply when he returned to the bedroom, though he knew that her rest came purely from fatigue.

Finally, around five in the morning, he passed out from sheer exhaustion and slept soundly for a good three hours. He awoke feeling stronger, as he was laying in a pool of warm sunlight. Lois had thought ahead and left the blinds open, knowing that he had spent a good portion of the previous day below ground as he quested for the Stone of Creation. She was asleep in the crook of his arm, pressed against his chest, having sought out contact with his body even in her sleep. He smiled down at her and kissed the top of her head. She murmured groggily as she awakened.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” he apologized, his voice a soft whisper.

“No, it’s okay. We should probably be getting up anyway,” she said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with the back of her free hand.

Within the hour, Clark and the others had eaten a hasty breakfast of frozen waffles and were headed off to the woods outside of the city limits, near to where Perry had his fishing cabin. Xena, Gabrielle, and Iolaus rode with Hercules in his car. Lois drove on ahead of them, alone in her Jeep, while Clark flew above, scouting the area. They reached the woods with no

incidents, pulling their vehicles off the road and carefully winding through the trees to a small clearing that Clark directed them to. They had seen neither hide nor hair of Ares, Aphrodite, or Hades, though one of them had left Iolaus, Gabrielle, and Xena's old battle clothing for them. Xena looked grateful to be back in her dark leathers. Hercules and Xena seemed to believe that they would not be seeing the gods again until the dust settled from the impending battle.

Clark and the others were leaning against the Jeep, talking, when an old red Chevy Blazer with tinted windows burst into the clearing. Clark was instantly on his feet, standing away from the car. His hands were balled into tight fists as he prepared to meet his rival face to face. The car stopped as the driver threw it into park and killed the ignition. Clark focused his senses, aware of everything around him. The rejuvenating, warm shafts of sunlight. The light breeze that rustled through the leaves and made his cape flutter out behind him like a battle standard. The sharp bursts of yellow and red leaves on a handful of trees. The increase in Lois' heartbeat. The steady, even breathing of the four ancient warriors who stood two steps behind him and to either side. The nearly imperceptible rasp of Xena's fingertips on her chakram. Iolaus, clearing his throat, impatient for the battle. The ticking of the Chevy's engine as it began to cool.

And then the sound that made Clark's heart stop.

Three distinct heartbeats that were half his own and half his wife's.

The door of the red Blazer opened and a tall, impossibly gaunt woman emerged, dressed in tight dark jeans and a black and purple shirt. She smiled malevolently as she turned to face Clark. Clark felt his blood run cold as she fixed him with her stare. Even without knowing of her unholy pact with Dahak, he could feel the evilness that exuded from her body. It froze him in his very tracks.

"Alti," Xena said in a hard, cold voice. "You look pretty good for a woman that I left half dead yesterday."

"Xena. You'll pay for what you did to me. You'll be the first one that Dahak and I kill once he is released."

"Over my dead body," Hercules said, his voice a dangerous growl.

"Oh, I'll get to you too, Hercules."

Clark heard Xena's hand tighten on her chakram. "Stand down," he ordered, afraid of what the shamaness might do to his children.

"Now, Clark," Alti said, shifting her attention. The same vile smile was on her face. "It is *so very good* to meet you. I have something that belongs to you."

She popped open the trunk of the car and hauled out each of his children, throwing them roughly to the hard ground. They were blindfolded and bound with heavy lengths of chains. They struggled against their bonds, wriggling like fish out of water. Clark could hear the hammering of their hearts as fear gripped them.

"Let them go," Clark demanded, his voice like stone. "I'm here. There's no reason for you to hold them hostage any longer."

"Dad?" Michael called out.

"It's okay, I'm here," Clark said, mustering up the calmest, most reassuring voice that he could.

"Grandma and Grandpa are in the back seat of the car," Hunter added.

"Daddy, help us," Rebecca pleaded. "Hurry!"

Clark tuned in his hearing and heard the muffled protests of his parents beyond the darkly tinted windows of the car. He grit his teeth in anger, then softened as he addressed his children again.

"It's all right," he repeated to them. "I'm going to get you out of here. Just stay calm, okay?"

"Leaving so soon?" Alti asked, a knowing smile curving her

lips. "You make one move and they will be dead before you can reach them. You may be fast, but I can kill your precious children with no more than a thought. That goes for *any* of you."

"You're bluffing," Clark said, though he dared not make a move.

He didn't even feel confident enough to use his heat vision to melt the chains that bound his children. It would take several long seconds for him to cut them all the way through, seconds he didn't have if Alti truly could kill them with a thought.

"Am I? Care to find out?" Alti asked, one eyebrow raised and daring him to test her.

"What do you want?" Clark asked.

"Oh, I think you already know the answer to that," the shamaness replied with a smirk.

"You know that I'll never surrender myself to you and your evil god. I'll fight you with my last breath."

"You can fight me, but you will not win. I'm too powerful, even for you. And as for the rest of you..."

Alti put two fingers to her mouth and blew out a sharp, high pitched whistle. From the surrounding trees, figures emerged. All wore ancient looking leather armor and carried an array of weapons. Some of the grizzled faces were scarred, some bore tattoos, and some had missing fingers or other evidence of the hard lives they had led. They stopped about twenty feet from where Alti stood. Clark heard Xena's sharp intake of breath as she sized up the violent looking gang that had them encircled.

"Recognize them?" Alti asked her rival.

Xena crossed her arms and nodded. "The last time I saw these men, I was killing most of them. So what? Dahak's in the business of resurrecting dead murderers and warlords now? Doesn't seem like his style."

"This is but a taste of Dahak's new found power," Alti said. "Between his power and my mastery of the dark arts, the world doesn't stand a chance. None of you can stop us, not even you, *Superman*."

Alti motioned sharply with her hand and the dead warlords moved forward. Xena's sword was out in a flash. Gabrielle's sais were clenched in her hands; Clark could hear the leather grips creaking in protest as her grasp tightened. Iolaus and Hercules, though weaponless, stood in a battle ready stance, ready for the fight ahead. Xena was the first to launch herself into the fray as the first warlord drew near. Her war cry pierced the air and her sword glinted in the sunlight. Her sword met his in a loud clang that rent the air. In a flash, the others had also engaged the enemy.

Clark had the fleeting impression of being on an island in the midst of a raging sea as the battle surged around Lois, Alti, and himself.

Alti stood back, watching the action with great amusement. She eyed Lois and Clark, a self satisfied smile on her face. Lois stepped forward, coming to stand at Clark's side. She fixed the shamaness with a look that could have killed. Lois took another step forward. Alti raised a warning finger, wagging it back and forth in the air before her.

"That's close enough," she warned. "Think of the children."

"Touch one hair on my kids' heads and I will rip you apart," Lois threatened.

Alti snorted a laugh in response.

"Clark," Lois whispered, so quietly that only his super hearing could pick it up, "what's the plan?"

He shook his head, so slightly that she barely missed it. "Not sure yet."

"I'm growing tired of this game," Alti said in a bored voice. "I'll make you a deal. I'll trade you. Your life for that of your wife and children. I was just going to kill them all after I got done with you."

"And I'm supposed to believe that you are just going to honor this agreement? I don't think so." Clark shook his head, crossing

his arms before his chest. He was stalling and he knew that she knew that. But he had to buy himself some time to think, and for Xena to make her move.

“You don’t have a choice,” Alti said, her eyes narrowed dangerously. “Either submit and save your family, or resist and watch them die. Either way, it doesn’t matter to me. I *will* have your soul.”

Clark hesitated again, his mind racing. He really hadn’t expected Xena and the others to be forced to fight a group of thugs. He could have used Xena’s help at the moment. He wished that she could find a way to break free of the fight to help him deal with the shamaness.

Alti sighed in impatience. “Fine, have it your way.”

She produced a razor sharp hunting knife from a sheath that hung from her belt. The steel glinted in the sunlight, cold and deadly. She stepped to Rebecca’s side and grabbed a fistful of her long, dark hair. Pulling roughly, she bared the child’s throat to her blade, pressing it carefully against her flesh. A small, thin trickle of blood appeared on her skin. Rebecca squealed in pain and fright. Alti smiled cruelly.

“Not so invulnerable,” she observed, obviously pleased with the revelation.

Rebecca whimpered fearfully, frozen stone still in her terror. Clark raised his hands in a pacifying gesture.

“Okay,” he said. “You win. Leave her alone. Please. Don’t hurt her.”

“I knew you’d see things my way.”

Alti pulled the knife away from the girl’s throat, sheathing the blade in a swift, graceful motion. She released Rebecca’s hair and pushed her to the ground once more.

“Let them go,” Clark repeated. “And then, I’m yours.”

“I’m not stupid enough to do that,” Alti said, shaking her head. “First, you die.”

“First I want to see that my family is safe,” Clark pressed, still trying to buy Xena some time.

“You aren’t in any position to make demands,” Alti growled, her raspy voice barely audible over the din of fighting that was all around them.

Alti fixed Clark with a cold, hard stare. Clark felt as if his body was stripped away, allowing her to look into his very mind and soul. In fact, she was doing just that, ransacking his memories, even those he’d carefully tucked away and had tried to forget. There were plenty for her to choose from; sinister memories of pain and fear that she could use against him. Clark realized this far too late, though even if he had known, there was nothing that he could do to escape her power.

Pain shot through his body as Alti turned his memories against him. Clark felt the burning, tearing sensation of the Kryptonite bullet that he’d once taken in his shoulder. He cried out in surprise as the hurt tore through his body. His hand shot up to injured body part of its own accord, though, of course, there was no bullet and no wound. It was all in his mind. He grit his teeth and remembered Xena telling them about this particular ability of the shamaness. Another jolt of pain rocked his body as Alti used his memory of the Kryptonite bullet that had grazed his neck. That one had been thanks to a sniper rifle when his powers had gone haywire from exposure from the red variety of the deadly rock. His hand flew from his shoulder to his neck, his mouth agape from the shock of the pain.

Next, Clark found himself within his memory of his fight with Metallo, the Kryptonite powered cyborg. Clark once again experienced the anguish of that battle. He felt the cyborg kick him as he once had. Clark’s body reacted to the memory, and he flew backwards in the air. He slammed violently into the side of Lois’ Jeep, caving in the passenger side nearly all the way through the vehicle. Clark groaned and forced his body out of the tangled mass of twisted metal. Alti allowed him to stumble

forward, nearly to the place he had started from. Clark wheezed from the remembered exposure to the Kryptonite that Metallo had carried within him.

“Clark?” Lois screamed, but he had no breath to answer her with.

Alti smiled and found a new memory to assault Clark with. Once more, he felt the agony of the Kryptonite cage when Lex Luthor had imprisoned him in his wine cellar. That had been on the day that Lois had almost married Luthor. The pain brought Clark to his knees, crippling him in place. He tried to fight the pain, tried to force his mind and body to recognize that the pain was an illusion. But Alti’s power was the greater force. He was dimly aware that Alti probably hadn’t been bluffing when she’d said that she could kill his children with a mere thought. He was infinitely glad that he hadn’t dared to test her.

But what was her game now? If she really could kill with a thought, why hadn’t she already killed him? Had she been bluffing about her powers? Or did his molecular make-up make him different and more resistant to her powers? Or was she just playing some sick game with him, getting her amusement from his misery?

He felt his body growing weaker with every passing second. Before he knew it, he was laying on his side in the grass and dirt, no longer able to sit, let alone stand. He drew his body into a tight fetal position, groaning in anguish. He no longer saw the woods around him. He was back in the musty wine cellar. He could smell the dust in the air. He could see Luthor, standing above him, taunting him. He could hear the man’s laughter.

Suddenly he was ripped from that memory and found himself on the street before the Daily Planet. The street was completely deserted. He saw Lord Nor on the ground, defeated in their duel. The next thing he knew, there was a hiss and a pop as a rocket exploded, filling the air with a green cloud of gas that was laced with deadly Kryptonite. He felt the gas enter his lungs, tearing at the organs like shards of glass. He coughed and sputtered, trying to catch a clean breath of air.

“Clark!” Lois’ terror-filled voice sounded a thousand miles away.

At first, Clark couldn’t tell if her voice was coming from his memories or from the present, until he realized that she’d called him Clark. He tried to call out to her, but his tortured lungs seemed incapable of doing anything more than wheezing — and they were rapidly losing even that ability. His breaths became more shallow and his body began to feel like it would shut down at any moment.

“Stop it!” Lois roared, launching herself at Alti, reckless in her panic. She barely made it three steps.

Alti darted her eyes at Lois, entering her memories even as she continued to hold Clark in the mental hell she’d devised for him. Lois felt an excruciating jolt of pain rocket up her leg from her ankle. The scene flashed before her eyes. She’d gone skiing with Perry and Jimmy and various other members of the Daily Planet staff when she’d first started out at the paper as a reporter. She’d managed to break her ankle on that trip as she lost her balance coming down the slope. The remembered pain took her by surprise and sent her sprawling forward onto the grass. She yelped in pain as it radiated through her body.

Around them, the battle raged on. Xena’s sword was slick with blood. Three of the warlords already lay dead by her hand, a tribute to her battle skills. Two others lay bleeding into the dirt, a testament to Gabrielle’s own handiwork. A few others were unconscious, thanks to the efforts of Hercules and Iolaus. But many more were still on their feet. Iolaus threw a punch, catching one of the men in the gut. The man doubled over and Iolaus finished the job with a swift round house kick that swept the warlord off his feet. Hercules dodged a punch that a man named Draco threw at him. In the same moment, Gabrielle came up

behind Draco, plunging her sais into his back. The slender blades sunk into his spinal cord. Gabrielle pulled the weapons free as the man fell to one side. A bright bubble of blood oozed out of his mouth and burst as he expelled his final breath.

"I've been wanting to do that for a long time," she said coldly.

Draco had once stalked her and tried to force his affections on her after Cupid's infant son, Bliss, had used one of the love arrows on him. He'd even threatened to kill her so that no one else could have her. Gabrielle had never stopped being disgusted by the lovesick warlord's attempts, though it seemed that the spell had worn off in death. He had fought as brutally as he had before the divine intervention that had altered his life.

Xena, meanwhile, was doing battle with a man named Darfus. He'd once been her right hand lieutenant in the days when she herself had been a ruthless warlord, back before Hercules had helped her to change her life around. Darfus had turned on Xena, stealing her army and forcing her to walk the gauntlet — a double line of men who had beaten her so savagely that it had been a miracle that she'd survived it. Xena easily parried Darfus' every move as they fought. She knew his fighting style well; after all, she had been the one to teach him many of the maneuvers. She feigned a thrust to his left side, then pulled out of the move and struck out against his right side instead. He was too slow to block the blow and took a gash to his shoulder and upper arm. He grimaced and struck out. Xena nearly caught the point of his sword in her own shoulder, but managed to sidestep just in time. She jumped and flipped, landing behind the warlord who had snuck up behind her as she'd faced Darfus. Her sword erupted from the man's chest in a spray of red blood. He fell face first to the ground. Xena stepped around him, facing Darfus once more. Her sword met his, the force creating a shower of sparks. He raised his sword again. Xena stepped beneath the swing, thrusting upwards with her own blade. It caught him in the gut. The weapon dropped from his hands as they fled to his wound. Xena's blade was already on the move again, arcing through the air until it neatly severed his head from his neck.

"Consider that payback for the gauntlet," she spat at his corpse.

Clark was in a world of pain. He seemed to be held in multiple memories all at once. He could still feel the throbbing agony of the radioactive cage that Luthor had built. His lungs still felt as though flaming glass was lodged within them from the Kryptonite laced gas bomb. He felt the weakness from the Kryptonian virus that had once ravaged his body. His body was reacting strongly to that memory. His body temperature had risen in response and sweat poured from his body. His sodden suit clung more tightly to him than it normally did. Xena had said that Alti could only make a person experience the pain of their memories once more but could not make the wounds appear in actuality. He wondered dully if that was still true. He felt as though the life was bleeding out of him. Could Alti's alliance with Dahak augment her abilities enough to give her the power to kill him with his memories? After all, a mere memory had sent him flying through the air already.

He tried several times to push himself up off the ground enough to move towards the shamaness. But each time, his limbs turned to jelly beneath him and he'd flop back into the grass. Another bolt of pain shot through him as a phantom crossbow bolt slammed into the juncture of his chest and shoulder, a reminder of his adventure in ancient Greece when he'd been powerless and shot by Tempus. A cry erupted from his lips and he silently cursed himself for allowing that to happen. He didn't want to alarm his kids any more than was necessary.

Beside him, Lois was experiencing a similar assault to her body and mind. Her ankle throbbed fiercely. She felt hands around her neck as Alti brought out her memory of being

strangled by Mr. Make-Up, a man who could alter his appearance with make-up and prosthetics to look like just about anyone. She began to choke and gasp as his fingers tightened around her throat. Lois clawed at the air before her, trying to fight the apparition who loomed over her. It continually surprised her when her hands cleaved nothing but thin air. She tried to call out for help, but found her airway too restricted. She gasped and wheezed, trying to suck in enough air.

Hercules and Iolaus were fighting back to back. Iolaus laughed as he leapt and kicked one of the approaching warlords. More surrounded them. Iolaus reached out to Hercules, and the demigod grabbed his wrists. Spinning as quickly as he could, Hercules helped Iolaus to rise off the ground. As the shorter man's feet left the soil, he began to kick his legs, taking out enemies with each strike. After a few moments, Hercules gently brought his friend back down to earth. But a couple of the warlords were already staggering back to their feet.

"Old routine?" Iolaus asked.

He didn't wait for a response. They both faced each other and clasped hands. Together, they jumped and kicked outwards, slamming their feet into their attackers' chests. Coming back down, they quickly went back to back. They swiftly flipped each other, one over the other, momentarily confusing their foes. Taking advantage, they both punched, knocking the men they faced unconscious.

"Works every time," Hercules grinned.

"And it never gets old," Iolaus grinned back. "By the gods, I've missed this!"

Xena disposed of another warlord, hardly paying attention as his dying body hit the ground. He hadn't been much of a challenge, all things considered. Zagreas was known more for his insanity than his cunning. Seeing her chance as the rest of the warlords were engaged in battle with the others, she pulled her chakram free. Taking only a split second's pause, she threw the weapon in the direction of the three Kent children. The chakram sliced through the air until it reached the chains that bound the children. As it ricocheted from one coil of chain to another, the metal snapped and fell away from the children. As soon as they were free, each of them pulled the blindfolds from their eyes and blinked at the sudden influx of sunlight.

"Dad? Mom?" Michael asked as he took in the scene.

"Run!" Xena instructed them.

"I can help!" he shot back, yelling over the din of the battle.

"There's nothing that you can do! Now *run!*" Xena yelled back.

Michael looked torn as he surveyed the battle, his eyes resting on his parents. A look similar to Clark's Superman mask settled over his features, though it was infused with fear.

"Come on," Hunter said, seeing the need to be the voice of reason. He tugged on his brother's hand.

Michael nodded slowly, as he realized that Xena was right. What could he really hope to accomplish in this fight?

"*Run!*" Xena screamed again.

A warlord came up behind her as she spoke. At the same moment, her chakram returned to her hand, completing its journey. Xena deftly caught the weapon, turned to meet her foe, and used the razor edge to slice the warlord's throat. Gagnon crumpled to the ground. Xena shot another look at the children, but they had already turned their back to the battle and were running towards the safety of the surrounding woods. Xena breathed a soft sigh of relief, then turned to impale the warlord who was currently trying to disembowel Iolaus.

"I had him!" Iolaus said, good-naturedly.

"Sure you did," Xena smirked.

Alti watched the scene play out. She did not move when she saw the Kent children flee. They had served their purpose. She had no more use for bait. She already had Clark right where she

wanted him. True, she still meant to kill Lois and the kids, but that could come later, at her leisure. Now it was time to end the game, as much as she was enjoying every moment of Clark's pain. She reached into the tailgate of the Blazer and pulled out the lead case she held hidden there. With a grim smile that even touched her eyes, she popped open the case.

Clark was instantly writhing in redoubled pain, his eyes squinted tightly shut. Even through the haze of agony that was his mind, he knew that this new assault was not a memory. Rough moans of pain escaped him as he rocked his body, trying to get away from the deadly chunk of Kryptonite that Alti had somehow procured. His body was already weakened from Alti's mental battering; he could feel how much more quickly the actual stone was bleeding his life from him as a result. He silently cursed his nearly flawless mind for not having forgotten those brutal memories in the first place.

Alti crossed the clearing and knelt by Clark. Clark whimpered as the Kryptonite was brought closer to him. He forced his eyes open, forced himself to see the world around him instead of the world of his tortured memories. The chunk of stone that the shamaness held was thick on one end but tapered down to a sharp, pointed end on the other side. It looked sharp enough to puncture his skin.

"I can hardly wait to take in your soul," Alti said, kneeling in the grass beside him. "Dahak thanks you for your sacrifice."

With that, she plunged the stone into his stomach. Clark cried out in anguish as the radioactive substance entered his body.

"Alti!"

Xena's voice was like the roar of a lioness. So fierce was her challenge that all movement in the clearing stopped for several heartbeats. The warrior princess threw herself at the shamaness, her sword raised. In an instant, the battle was rejoined.

"Again?" Alti asked, sounding bored and overconfident.

In the blink of an eye, Xena was upon her ancient foe. It was enough to break Alti's concentration as she squared off against Xena. Lois felt the phantom hands leave her throat. She gagged and coughed as her lungs sucked in precious air. She rolled to one side, getting off her back. As she did so, her eyes focused on her husband. Her eyes widened as she saw the green spike of stone protruding from his abdomen. His hands were loosely ringed about the deadly rock as he made feeble attempts to pull it out. His blood flowed from the wound, turning the vibrant blue of his suit to a sickly blackish crimson. Despite the weakness that she felt in her entire body, Lois pushed herself up onto her elbows. As Xena faced off against Alti, Lois crawled to Clark's side.

"Oh God. Clark?"

Clark's eyes had slammed shut against the unbearable pain once more, though he also felt the release of Alti's mental assault. He pried his eyes open again at the sound of Lois' voice. He tried to smile at her, but found himself incapable of doing anything more than grimacing.

"Are...you...okay?" he gasped out after a long moment.

"Yes," Lois lied. "I'm fine."

"The...kids?"

"Xena helped them to escape. Just lie still. I'll get this out of you."

"Hurry," he begged.

A couple of lines of tension had melted from Clark's brow as he learned of his children's escape. Lois pushed herself up to kneel at his side. She gripped the Kryptonite and began to pull it from his body. Clark bit back a cry of renewed pain, and although he kept his body still for Lois, he only managed it through sheer willpower. Slowly, she worked the stone from his body. With a wet pop, she finally freed the rest of it from him.

"Oh no!"

Clark didn't need to ask what Lois was groaning about. He could feel the answer well enough.

A good two inches of the green rock had broken off and remained deep within his abdomen. Clark went even paler as he gazed upon the broken spike. He grimaced again as a fresh wave of panic rolled over him.

"Got to...get it...out," he said through gritted teeth. His hands numbly raked across his stomach, as though he could tear it out.

"Easy," Lois said in a soothing voice. "Let me try."

Xena, meanwhile, had become the recipient of Alti's powers. The warrior woman crashed to the ground as Alti used the memory of Xena's crucifixion at the hands of Julius Caesar. She felt the heavy hammer crash into her legs and the snap as her bones shattered. A primal scream tore from her throat; a sound so chilling that even a few of the warlords paled at it. Hercules shot a concerned look over to Xena, and received a savage blow to his head in return. That memory had been one of the most excruciating moments of Xena's life, and Alti knew it. Next, she felt countless arrows piercing her body as she found herself once more in Japan, facing her death. Each remembered arrow sliced through her flesh and muscle. And although it was only in her mind, it could not have hurt more if it were actually happening. Xena sprawled on the ground, gasping against the pain rocketing through her body. Alti advanced to gloat over her foe.

"Oh, Xena, is that the best you can do? I'm disappointed in you."

"Oh, really?" Xena asked through gritted teeth, forcing herself to fight against the pain. "Then how's this?"

With one fluid motion, Xena rolled off her stomach and to one side, pulling out the diamond dagger with the Stone of Creation in the pommel as she did so. The sapphire seemed to pull in the sunlight, absorbing it and magnifying it. It glowed brighter and brighter as it soaked in the sun. Finally, the light spilled down into the diamond blade, until that too glowed. Sparkles of refracted sun bounced off the outer edge of the blade, throwing miniature rainbows around the clearing. They dazzled the eye, giving Hercules, Iolaus, and Gabrielle an added advantage over the last three warlords. Gabrielle plunged her sais into the chest of the man she was battling, a lean, bald, rat-like man named Sinteres, whose fighting technique employed the same pressure points that Xena so effectively used. But Gabrielle was the faster warrior on this day. Sinteres had tried to strike at her, but she had parried his every move. Of that, she was glad. Pressure points had been one technique that she had never mastered at all.

"A dagger?" Alti laughed, though she eyed the glowing weapon with veiled unease. "That's the best threat you can muster?"

"You don't know what this is, do you?" Xena asked, taunting the shamaness. She needed Alti to get closer before she could strike.

"A pretty trinket, nothing more," Alti said dismissively, taking the last, vital step towards Xena. She reached down to grab the blade.

"Wrong," Xena hissed, using all of her strength to bring the blade into Alti's right foot.

The shamaness roared in pain as the blade grazed her foot. Xena's brow furrowed in anger. She'd meant to impale the appendage. But Alti had shifted her foot at the wrong moment. Alti grabbed a fistful of Xena's raven locks and pulled so that Xena was forced to look into her face.

"I'm going to enjoy killing you," Alti promised. "You've always been a thorn in my side."

"Funny, I was about to say the same thing," Xena said mockingly as she tore herself from Alti's grasp.

Xena pushed herself up, pulling the dagger free of the dirt as she rose to her feet. The stone had done exactly as she had thought it might. The power flowing through the weapon had

broken the powerful hold that Alti had on her mind, though the blow had only succeeded in causing a minor flesh wound. The pain radiating throughout her body had vanished completely.

“Dahak cannot be stopped,” Alti hissed, as Xena waved the blade before her.

“See, now that’s where you’re wrong,” Iolaus said, having knocked out the last warlord and coming to Xena’s right side. “You see, we know a little secret about the psychotic god you’ve fallen in with.”

“That’s right,” Hercules confirmed with a smile. “You bet on the wrong horse.” He stepped up to flank Xena’s left side.

Alti shot a look at Clark and smiled a slow, triumphant smile.

“In another minute Dahak and I will have the most powerful soul in history. Then not even that fancy dagger of yours will be able to harm us.”

Clark’s breathing had become shallow and ragged. His skin was deathly gray. He no longer groaned against the pain; he no longer had the strength to. It was all he could do to keep breathing. He suspected that the Kryptonite had torn something vital inside. His eyes were locked on Lois’ eyes, silently pleading with her and shining with hurt and fear. Lois’ hands were bloody. She had tried desperately to reach the broken off point of the Kryptonite, but it was embedded far too deeply within him. All she could do now was to try and comfort him and rid the area of the larger chunk of Kryptonite.

“Hercules,” she called out, trying to think fast. “Catch!”

She tossed the glowing green rock in an underhanded pitch. The demigod deftly caught it. She didn’t need to tell him what to do. With a show of his strength, he launched the rock into the air. It sped away, tearing a hole through a thin white cloud that was drifting past. Lois watched it as rocketed through the air. She did not see it arc back towards Earth, and wondered if Hercules had managed to put the rock into orbit.

The absence of the larger section of the rock did little to improve Clark’s condition. Though only a small piece remained within him, the contact with it was sapping his life force with increased speed. Both Lois and Clark knew that it would be only a matter of minutes, if that, before it killed him. Lois fought back the tears that were welling in her eyes, putting on a brave face for Clark. She gripped one of Clark’s large hands with one of her smaller ones, trying to will some of her own life into her husband. Her other hand restlessly smoothed through his hair.

Clark’s breathing grew increasingly more ragged, sounding more and more like a death rattle as each second passed. He was starting to feel cold and the pain was becoming more distant. The knowledge chilled his very soul. Pain was good. It meant that he was still alive. Vanishing pain was only stark evidence that he was losing the battle to stay alive.

“Stay with me, Clark,” Lois whispered to him. “Please stay alive. Fight. You’re stronger than this.”

Clark forced himself to make a weak moan that might have been an agreement.

Xena lunged at Alti, barely missing stabbing her as the shamaness side stepped neatly out of the way. But her gait told Xena what she needed to know. Alti was favoring her wounded foot. The power of the dagger had managed to hurt her. Perhaps it had even drained Dahak’s gifted power from that portion of her body. And for all of her bravado, Alti seemed afraid of the blade. Xena grinned a feral smile and loosed a war cry. She struck out again, but Alti parried the blow, stepping beneath the arc of Xena’s blow and crossing her arms above her head. Before she could use her position to throw Xena off balance and claim the dagger as her own, Xena flipped out of the way, landing behind Alti. Alti whirled, reaching for her hunting knife in the same motion. She pulled it free and held it defensively before her, daring Xena to come closer.

Gabrielle took a step forward to help.

“No, Gabrielle. Stay back,” Xena ordered. “Keep an eye on those warlords.”

Lois got the impression that the order was meant for Hercules and Iolaus as well.

“How noble,” Alti sneered. “Trying to spare your friend the pain of my powers.”

With a thought, she sent Gabrielle to her knees as the strawberry blonde bard relived the time she’d been dragged behind a horse. Xena had tried to kill her after Gabrielle’s evil daughter, Hope, had killed Xena’s son, Solan. Xena had been mad with grief and had blamed Gabrielle for Solan’s death, though they had later learned to forgive one another for the various betrayals they had both committed against each other.

“Let her go, Alti. She’s not the one you want,” Xena said, warily circling as Alti did the same, looking for an opportunity to strike. “Clark will be dead in a moment. In the meantime, don’t you think Dahak would love to claim my soul as well?”

Alti laughed, the sound like a bag of gravel being kicked down a flight of stairs. “A tempting offer, if I was stupid enough to be distracted by it.”

She fixed Xena with another cold stare as she bored into the warrior woman’s memories once more. This time, Xena felt the agony that she had experienced when she had been trying to protect a young girl from a group of zealots who had wanted to make their prisoners into human sacrifices. One of the man had sprung a trap, and a huge battering ram of a tree had swung down and crashed into Xena’s back, sending her flying through the air into the trunk of another tree. She’d suffered numerous ruptured organs and internal bleeding as a result, and had, in fact, died from her wounds. But she had fought her way back from the Underworld with the help of Autolycus, the King of Thieves.

For good measure, the shamaness attacked Hercules and Iolaus as well. Iolaus found himself reliving the agony of the dagger that King Gilgamesh had thrown into his body. The blow had killed him and allowed Dahak the warrior heart that he required. Hercules found himself experiencing the pain from a beating he’d once received when he’d traded his power to pursue a life with Serena, the last Golden Hind. The god, Strife, had killed Serena but the townsfolk had thought Hercules had done the unspeakable deed. They’d savagely beaten him, fracturing his skull and dislocating his shoulder. Xena had later helped him prove his innocence, and Zeus had been forced to restore Hercules’ power.

Xena went down hard as pain exploded through her body. The dagger slipped from her nerveless fingers. Alti put her back to Xena, ignoring her enemy’s torment. Instead, she focused on Clark, quickly checking on his journey towards death. Unsatisfied with his progress, she fingered her hunting knife thoughtfully. She strode towards him, knocking Lois aside once she reached Clark. Lois landed several feet away, close by to Xena. Alti bent over Clark, pushing his head back to expose his vulnerable throat. The sunlight gleamed callously on the blade that she held as she brought it to his skin.

“Goodbye, Superman,” Alti said in a rough whisper, a hungry, predatory look in her eyes.

Clark screamed feebly as a phantom fire ignited in his entire body. He felt flaming razors of pain searing through flesh and bone alike. It was a markedly different feeling than the pain from the Kryptonite. He could feel his very essence being ripped away from his mortal body. He knew instantly that the shamaness had begun the process of tearing his soul from him. He grit his teeth against the dual assault of pain, trying to will his soul back into place. But he knew that he was losing the fight. Bit by bit, he could feel himself slipping away. In a haze of agony, he thought of peeling a bandage from skin, only his soul was the bandage, being torn from his body. He tried to call for help, but he was well past the point of being able to form a single word.

Alti grinned a feral grin and made the first slow puncture into Clark's neck. She moved slowly, deliberately, enjoying the sight of the first fat, round drop of Clark's blood as it welled up from the tiny hole. Lois fumbled on the ground as she panicked. Suddenly, her fingertips hit upon something warm in the grass. She grasped it as realization flooded her. The dagger! With a burst of adrenaline, Lois pushed herself off the ground and sprinted at Alti. The shamaness was too late in turning to meet Lois. The dagger slammed into Alti's back, between her shoulder blades. It didn't sink in far and the wound wouldn't kill the woman. But it was all that Lois could manage.

The shamaness roared in pain. She whirled to meet Lois, forgetting Clark for the moment. Both of Alti's hands went up as she tried to reach the Dagger of Creation. Smoke issued forth from the wound as the pure sunlight began to sear away the darkness of Dahak. A haunting scream filled the air as Dahak was irrevocably destroyed. The scream hung thickly in the air for a long moment, perhaps trapped by the trees, before it faded away into nothingness, like the master it had been born of.

At the same moment, Xena and the others were released from the prison of Alti's mental war with them. Xena was instantly on her feet. She stepped in between Alti and Lois. Alti was even more furious than before.

"What have you done?" she demanded, growling like an injured animal.

Xena arched one eyebrow. "What should have been done a long time ago. Your master is dead, Alti."

"Impossible! Nothing can destroy the almighty Dahak!"

"Nothing but the Stone and Dagger of Creation," Hercules said, stepping forward. "Dahak is dead."

"Surrender now and we'll let you live," Xena offered.

"Never! You see, you were right, Xena. I *was* using Dahak. Clark's soul will give me the power that I need to become the most powerful being on Earth. I will become the Destroyer of Nations."

Before Xena could make another move, Alti lunged at her. The blade of the hunting knife flashed in the sun, silver and cold. She aimed it for Xena's heart, but the warrior princess was quicker. She side stepped away as Alti rushed her, but deftly plucked the dagger from the shamaness' back. Alti roared again in pain and fury. She turned and rushed Xena again. Once more, the warrior princess was ready for her. Xena caught Alti's wrist and twisted it so the point of the knife faced the shamaness. Alti's own forward momentum did the rest. The knife sunk to the hilt into the soft flesh of her stomach, tearing through her guts with savage fury. Her eyes widened in shock. Before Alti could die from the wound, Xena took the Dagger of Creation and neatly plunged it through the woman's heart. Alti's eyes glazed over in death. Xena ignored the lifeless body as it sagged to one side and toppled over. Her eyes were only for Clark. Lois bolted to Clark's side as well, matching Xena stride for stride.

"There's a piece of rock in him," Lois explained, trying to quickly fill in Xena. She was well aware of the warrior's skills as a healer. After all, Xena had tended Clark's wounds once before, when he'd nearly been killed in the Coliseum. "We have to get it out. It's poison to him."

Xena nodded, needing no further explanation. She knelt beside Clark on the side opposite from Lois. She pulled Alti's knife from the dead woman's stomach and wiped the blade clean.

"I'm going to have to make an incision to get to it," she said. "Will he heal once it's gone?" She clearly remembered witnessing Clark's remarkable healing abilities once he had been brought back to his own time and his powers had been restored.

"Yes," Lois confirmed, bobbing her head up and down in a quick nod. At least, she hoped that he would. She'd never seen him so close to death before.

"Good."

Xena carefully cut away Clark's suit from the wounded area. Without his aura of invulnerability, the knife easily cut through the fabric. Xena narrowed her eyes in concentration. She hesitated for a split second, trying to decide if she should use her knowledge of pressure points to numb the area where she was about to cut. She ultimately decided not to risk it. If Clark healed as fast as the last time she'd witnessed his remarkable abilities, then she wouldn't have a chance to undo the pinch on his pressure points. She brought the weapon over his bared flesh. The point of the knife cut into Clark's stomach easily, but he was so close to death now that he didn't even moan in pain. Fresh blood welled up and spilled over the torn flesh. Lois felt a lump rise in her throat, which she fought back down. Xena widened the incision enough to slip her hand inside. She groped around for a moment, until at last she felt the shard of Kryptonite. Clark's eyes rolled back into his skull and his head lolled to one side. He expelled a shuddering breath and did not draw another.

Hercules and Iolaus were on the move from the moment that Alti died. As swiftly as they could, they crossed the clearing to Alti's car. They each threw open one of the doors and made short work of freeing Jonathan and Martha Kent. The Kents blinked as the blindfolds were gently removed from them.

"Who are you?" Martha asked, as Iolaus helped her from the vehicle.

"Friends of your son," Iolaus replied.

"What's going on?" Jonathan asked at the same moment.

"It's a long story," Hercules admitted.

"Clark!?" Martha cried, as she stepped from the car and saw her son laying on the ground, with Xena cutting into his flesh. "Get away from my son!"

Xena ignored the woman's outburst and focused on her work.

Iolaus gently held her back. "It's okay," he said gently. "She's not trying to hurt him. She's trying to help."

"Come on, Clark," Hercules muttered under his breath as he held back Jonathan. "You can make it. I know you can."

"Clark?" Lois cried out, when his chest failed to fill with breath again. Fat tears overflowed in her eyes and fell, unchecked, down her cheeks. A few dripped from her chin onto Clark's chest, mixing with his sweat and blood. "Xena..."

"Got it," Xena said.

She firmly grasped the deadly rock. Slowly, so as not to cause further damage to him, she worked the stone free of his body. With infinite care, she pulled the shard until she had finally gotten it free and out of Clark. The wound continued to bleed. Xena pressed her free hand to the wound, trying to stem the flow. Lois' hands rushed to aid the warrior princess.

"Why isn't he healing?" Xena asked, alarmed. She extracted her hand from Lois' and checked for signs of life. "He's still got a pulse, but it's weak and fading fast."

"We've got to get rid of that shard," Lois responded.

Without another word, Xena turned and tossed the rock at Hercules. Once more, the demigod reared back his arm and sent the Kryptonite rocketing away from the area. Clark did not stir and continued to bleed.

"Come on, Clark," Xena encouraged him. "Don't die on me now."

All thought left Lois. She found herself only doing. She followed her gut instinct and bent over Clark. Her lips pressed against his and blew into his lungs. Her hands began chest compressions when she failed to find a pulse in between breaths. Five times she repeated the cycle.

"Lois..." Xena said gently. She put one hand on Lois' shoulder. "He's gone. Let his spirit pass."

"He is *not* gone," Lois said savagely, shrugging off Xena's touch. "He can't be. Come on, Clark. Don't you dare leave me," she challenged in a thin, watery voice, as she pressed on his heart again. "I know you're still in there. Come back to me. Please."



As if in response, Clark suddenly sputtered, coughed, and drew in a large breath. The tears that Lois had been fighting back burst forth anew as her body sagged in relief. Clark opened his eyes and immediately fixed them on her. He managed a weak smile for her, raising one hand as he did so, and gently wiped away a few stray tears that were glistening on her cheeks. Lois covered his hand with her own, reveling in the returning warmth of his palm. She kissed his hand several times, unable to stop trembling as she did so. She did not see as his wound closed, his flesh knitting itself back together both within his abdomen and on the surface of his body.

"It's okay, Lois," he said as he continued to wipe away her tears. "I'm here. I'm alive. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Lois released a shuddering, watery laugh at her husband's poor attempt at lightening the mood with humor. She rewarded him with a thin smile as fresh tears slipped from her eyes.

Iolaus released Martha as soon as he saw Clark begin to stir. She and Jonathan rushed to their son's side. Xena stepped back to allow them to draw close to him. Hercules and Iolaus looked at each other and smiled in relief. And unspoken message passed between them both, and they turned away from the clearing and headed into the trees.

"I thought I'd lost you," Lois said as a couple more tears slid down her cheeks, though she was slowly coming to control herself once more.

"You almost did," he admitted.

"Oh, honey," Martha said, reaching his side and inspecting the flawless skin on his stomach. "Are you all right?"

"Fine now," he said, "thanks to Xena and Lois." He nodded in the warrior's direction.

"Thank you for saving my son," Martha said, turning to Xena.

"My pleasure," Xena replied. "I'm just glad that I could."

Clark sat up, testing his strength. Feeling almost as good as new, he stood.

"Take it easy, son," Jonathan warned him.

"It's okay, dad. I feel pretty good now. Are you guys okay though? What happened?"

"That crazy woman forced our car off the road last night. We were looking for a hotel to hole up in for a few hours of rest. We tried to get away, but she somehow made us relive old memories of pain. By the time the pain vanished, she'd bound us all in chains and blindfolds. She said she was going to use us as bait."

"The kids," Clark suddenly realized. His heart leapt into his throat and he began to scan the area.

"We're right here, dad," Michael said, stepping out from the trees with his siblings, Hercules, and Iolaus.

"They didn't get too far," the son of Zeus said, shrugging.

"Thank you," Clark said, his shoulders sagging in relief.

He rushed to his children, now feeling fully recovered from the exposure to the Kryptonite. He dropped to his knees and gathered them all in a warm embrace. Tears of relief slipped unashamedly from his eyes as he held them close. He reveled in hearing their strong, familiar heartbeats; heartbeats he had known from the first moment they had flared into existence within Lois' womb.

"I'm so glad that you're safe," he said to them, his voice rough and thick with emotion.

"We're glad that *you're* safe," Michael said. "We saw what happened."

"I'm fine now," he assured them, releasing them from his embrace. He remained on his knees for a moment longer.

"Dad? I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Clark asked Michael, not understanding. "What for?"

"I tried. I really did. But I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't

break the chains." Michael's voice wavered with regret and shame.

"Hey," Clark said, looking his oldest son in the eye. "There's nothing to apologize for."

"But I couldn't protect Hunter and Rebecca. I disappointed you."

Clark smiled lovingly at his son and shook his head. "Michael, I appreciate that you wanted to protect your brother and sister. But the truth is, you're still very young and your powers are only just starting to develop. You can't be so hard on yourself. It took me a long time to learn that. I don't know how strong you will eventually become. But there are going to be times when even super strength won't be enough or fails. The important thing to remember is that you could never do anything to disappoint me, so long as your heart is in the right place. No matter what happens, I'll always be proud of you. And I'll always love you."

Michael smiled and threw his arms around his father's neck. Father and son shared a fierce embrace. Then Clark stood, releasing Michael. He turned to Xena and hugged her close. She returned the embrace gently.

"Looks like I'm once again in your debt," he said with a wry smile. "We've got to stop this trend of you saving my life every time we meet."

Xena smiled back and laughed. "Don't mention it."

"And Dahak?" he asked, with a brief glance at Alti's unmoving form.

"Destroyed," Gabrielle confirmed for him. "Thanks to Lois."

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "How?"

"Let's get out of here first," Hercules said. "Then we can all get filled in on the details."

Clark shook his head. "I can't just leave her here like this. And the rest of these warlords need to be dealt with." He dragged a hand through his hair in thought. "I'm just not sure how I'm ever going to explain this to Police Chief Henderson."

He gestured at the men sprawled all around the clearing. A few groaned groggily as they began to come to. Iolaus bent and knocked out one of the men who had started to try and get to his feet again.

A flash of pink heralded Aphrodite's arrival. The scantily clad goddess looked with disgust on the bodies laying before her.

"Ewww," she squealed. "Clean up on aisle seven."

"Aphrodite," Hercules sighed. "Unless you're here to help, could you hold off on the comments?"

"Yeah, like I can do anything. Goddess of love remember? Not goddess of blood, guts, and gore." She rolled her eyes playfully. "Mini Kents! Right on!" she grinned, looking at Lois and Clark's children.

"She can't help, but I can. You might not want your children to watch this."

Another flash of light revealed Hades, his helmet tucked beneath his left arm. He waved his hand at Alti's body. In a flash, it vanished, leaving behind only bent blades of grass to mark that she had ever been there. Next to him, an elegant woman dressed all in white and holding a candle appeared. She floated an inch or two above the ground. She went among the warlords who still lived. Clark and Lois pulled their children close, turning them away from the battlefield. The woman with the candle touched each man lightly on the shoulder before moving on to the next. At each touch, the man beneath her hand collapsed in death. As soon as her task was complete, the woman returned to Hades' side.

"Thank you, dear Celesta," he said.

Death nodded and vanished from sight, as quickly and as silently as she'd come. Hades pointed at each dead warlord.

"Back to Tartarus," he muttered each time, sending them all back to the Underworld. Each time, the bodies disappeared. "No need to leave any evidence of this battle behind," he said,

addressing Clark.

“What about Alti’s tendency to be reborn?” Xena asked, crossing her arms before her.

Hades smiled. “The dagger and stone took her life. Its power destroyed her soul’s power when it pierced her corrupted heart. She will never walk this earth again. I only regret that she will go to the Northern Amazons’ land of the dead, where I have no jurisdiction. I would have come up with such a torment for her that it would have made Sisyphus’ uphill rock pushing look like a day on Olympus.”

“Hades,” Hercules began.

Hades put one hand up to stop his nephew from speaking.

“I know what it is that you want. You know that if I could, I’d let your friends remain in the land of the living. But I can’t break the law of the gods.”

“Can’t you give them a little more time at least?” Hercules pleaded. “They did just help save the world.”

Hades sighed and relented. “Under the circumstances, I suppose I could give you some more time together. I’ll give you until midnight tonight, but no longer. Then they have to return with me.”

“Thank you,” Hercules said gratefully.

Hades nodded and vanished. A second later, Ares took his place in the clearing. He surveyed the battlefield, as though he could still see the bodies laying there. He inhaled deeply and grinned.

“I love the smell of bloodshed in the morning,” he said, stretching his arms to either side, as if to embrace the battlefield. “Nice work here. Xena. By the gods, it was a thing of beauty to see you back in action. Your power. Your passion. How I’ve missed that.”

Xena rolled her eyes, though she appeared to be just as pleased with the outcome of the fight.

Clark looked towards Lois’ Jeep and groaned. He’d have to fly the vehicle out of the area and to a junk yard. It didn’t take a mechanic to realize that it was totaled. Hercules followed Clark’s gaze, as did Lois. Lois sighed sadly.

“Ares, do you think you could fix that?” he asked, pointing.

Ares frowned, offended. “I’m Ares, god of war. Not Ares, god of mechanics. *But* what I *can* do is get rid of Alti’s car for you.”

Before anyone could stop him, he hurled a ball of fire at the car. The vehicle exploded noisily, a plume of flames rolling up into the sky. Ares threw his head back and laughed. Firelight flickered across his features even in the bright sunlight.

“So much for subtlety,” Clark said.

“You are *so* twisted,” Hercules said at the same moment, shaking his head at Ares’ antics.

“I know,” Ares shot back with a deep chuckle, clearly entertained. He seemed to choose to ignore Clark’s remark.

“Are you done yet?” Xena asked.

Ares enjoyed the sight for another minute, then breathed a deep, contented sigh. He pointed to the inferno. What was left of the Blazer disappeared from sight.

“You never were one to enjoy such destruction,” Ares sighed. “Slaughter of epic proportions, sure. And don’t get me wrong. A field of rotting bodies still gets to me too.” He put his hand over his heart, as though moved to great emotion by the thought.

Xena shook her head. “You know that’s not who I am anymore.”

“And what a pity that is,” Ares countered, though his light ribbing was only for show. He truly had fallen in love with the woman Xena had become, not the warlord she had once been.

“I think it’s time that we went home,” Clark ventured, before Xena and Ares could continue.

The others nodded their agreement, eager to be as far from the battlefield as possible.

\*\*\*

Hours passed and everyone had regrouped back at Lois and Clark’s house. Between Clark’s flying and Hercules’ car, they had finally gotten everyone out of the battlefield. The gods hadn’t been of any help. They had needed to find the safe zone where the other Olympians had taken refuge. Olympus could not long survive without the gods to rule it. That had been a bit of a relief to Clark. He didn’t exactly trust the gods, even if the Kent family *was* under Zeus’ protection. Everyone sat in the now very crowded living room. Jonathan and Martha sat on one couch, digesting the entirety of the story that they had just heard. Michael, Hunter, and Rebecca sat on the floor, wide-eyed as they too tried to wrap their heads around the details. Rebecca was clutching her stuffed horse tightly. Lois, Xena, and Gabrielle were on the other couch, while Hercules and Clark occupied the floor on the other side of the coffee table. Ares and Aphrodite sat in chairs that they had both conjured into existence — a hard wood and metal, skull encrusted throne for Ares and an oversized fuzzy pink beanbag chair for Aphrodite. Clark had since changed out of the destroyed Superman suit and into his normal clothing — jeans and a navy blue shirt. Empty takeout containers littered the table. Clark fidgeted with his bottle of Cherry Pepsi.

A silence had fallen in the room after everyone had told their various tales from the previous two days. It had taken a couple of hours for everyone to tell their stories in their entirety, oftentimes stopping as someone else corrected them or threw in another detail or opinion. Jonathan cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him.

“So... gods,” he said simply. It wasn’t a question.

Aphrodite nodded. “In the flesh.”

Jonathan shook his head. “In all my years, and of all the strange things that I’ve witnessed, I never thought I’d see the day that gods would walk among men. When Clark told us about what happened in ancient Greece, I was so sure that he was right about crossing into another universe.”

“It *is* pretty unbelievable,” Aphrodite admitted, shrugging. “You mortals stopped believing in us ages ago. We’ve been relegated to the stuff of myth and legend. And not always in a truthful way. I mean, making my son *Cupid* the icon of Valentine’s Day? *Exsqueeze me?* I should *totally* be the one plastered all over the decorations. Cupid would be nothing if it hadn’t been for me!”

Hercules snorted. “You think that’s bad? Look at my story. Everyone reads about how Hercules went crazy and killed his family, when the truth of the matter is that Hera killed them.”

“And all of that supposed incest going on up on Olympus,” Ares complained. “The myths make us look so depraved.”

“You gods *are* depraved, Ares,” Hercules said, unable to resist.

“Not like *that* we aren’t!” Ares defended himself.

“Clark, why didn’t you tell us what was going on?” Martha asked, fixing her son with a look that spoke of her hurt and disappointment. It was as much to get information out of him as it was to stop the squabbling between the two half-brothers.

Clark shrugged, uncomfortable. It was rare that he saw that look on his mother’s face, and even though he was a grown man with children of his own, it never failed to make him feel like a child again. His kids stifled their laughter as they realized that their father was in hot water. It always amused them to see the tables turned, and their father in that situation, as rare as it was. Clark also suspected that they got a kick out of seeing the strongest man in the world reduced to a sheepish, blushing human man.

“I guess... I really didn’t fully grasp it all when I called you,” he said after a moment of struggling to find the right words. “I hadn’t really wrapped my head around it yet. Trying to explain it to you guys would have been impossible.”

“We could have tried to help you, son,” Jonathan said.

“I know. And I’m sorry. But I barely comprehended the enormity of what we were facing,” Clark said, weakly defending himself. “I mean, I knew it was a bad situation. I just never imagined that it would turn out the way that it did.”

Thankfully, his parents saw the weariness etched in his features. They let the subject drop. Another small stretch of silence fell over the room before Clark ventured the question that was foremost in his mind.

“I have to ask,” he said, his eyes sweeping across the ancient gods and heroes. “I know that Alti is dead now. But...were we successful? Are we certain that Dahak was destroyed?”

Ares nodded as he lounged on his throne, one leg casually draped over one of the chair’s arms. “Completely. I did some checking around after the battle. The small tear that Dahak was using to try and gain access to this world has already mended.”

“Good,” Lois said, relief flooding her features.

Iolaus smiled wryly at her. “You wield a pretty mean dagger. I’d hate to be against you in a fight.”

Clark chuckled. “You have *no* idea what it’s like to be on the receiving end of Mad Dog Lane’s wrath.” He turned his head and winked at his wife.

Lois only laughed. She reached down to where Clark sat beside her on the floor, and lightly swatted at his shoulder. He chuckled again.

“It was a good day’s fight,” Xena agreed, looking completely relaxed now that Alti and Dahak were no longer a threat.

“I just wonder where Alti got the Kryptonite from,” Clark said, looking down at his hands on his lap. “I stopped by S.T.A.R. Labs after I dropped the Jeep off at the junk yard. They aren’t missing any from their vaults, which means that there must be more out there than we imagined. And that worries me.”

“I guess we’ll never really know how much of it came to Earth along with your ship,” Jonathan said.

“Or how far it might have scattered when it hit the Earth’s atmosphere,” Lois added.

Clark nodded, clearly troubled. The thought made a small knot of cold fear deep within his stomach.

“Aphrodite, I have a question,” Gabrielle ventured. “I thought you were going to keep an eye on Clark’s parents and kids. So how did Alti get to them and why didn’t you warn us that she had them?”

The love goddess looked up from filing her nails, making the file vanish in a shower of heart-shaped sparks. “I would have if I had known. But unfortunately, I needed to check on things on Olympus first. You know how things get when the gods aren’t around to balance the scales of things. Anyway, by the time I went searching for the kids, they were gone. I looked, but I couldn’t find them until I happened to come across the battle.”

“Balancing scales was more important than keeping my children safe?” Lois demanded, aghast.

“Without the gods to keep the world balanced, society crumbles pretty quickly,” Xena explained, defending the goddess. “I’ve seen it myself. Ares once had his godhood stolen. Nobody could control their rage, except for people like me — people who had lived with their rage for so long, that it was just a part of who they were. It got very dangerous very quickly. It wasn’t until he was restored to the role of god of war and balanced the scales of things that things went back to normal.”

“Oh,” Lois said, not completely okay with the goddess tending to other duties before looking out for her children. But what had been done, was done. Nothing could change the events of the day. And, she thought, it wasn’t like she could do anything to the goddess. She was too drained to even want to try.

The clock chimed softly, alerting everyone to the passage of time. Precious hours had already slipped by since the end of the battle. It would not be long before Hades returned to claim Xena,

Gabrielle, and Iolaus. Hercules regretfully counted the chimes. He had only five more hours with his friends. And then — who knew how long it would be before he was reunited with them once more? He was fairly certain that their next meeting would be in the Underworld if and when he finally died. He knew with certainty, however, that saying goodbye would not be easy. He’d been with Iolaus when he’d passed away, at the ripe old age of one hundred. That had torn Hercules’ heart into shreds — as sudden as his friend’s passing had been. One day, Iolaus had been as healthy as could be. The next day, he had sickened suddenly and had been gone before the sun had set. For a long time after that, Hercules had wandered the globe, lost as to what to do next. He’d almost always had Iolaus at his side. Without his best friend, life had suddenly become very lonely indeed. With Xena, Hercules had been devastated when he’d run into Gabrielle and heard the tale of how they had both traveled to Japan, only for Xena to be killed in battle. And as for Gabrielle, she’d been involved in continuing the work that she and Xena had started. She’d been helping to defend a village from marauders when a arrow had pierced her heart, killing her instantly. Hercules and Iolaus had both been with her at the time.

Still, Hercules knew that this goodbye would be the hardest one yet. It had almost been easier to bear the sudden, unexpected deaths of his friends. Sitting and waiting for death to reclaim them was almost more than he could bear. Already, he could feel the chains of sadness squeezing around his heart. He sighed heavily and tried to push the dark thoughts from his mind. He didn’t want to spend the remaining hours with his friends with his head clouded by grief. He cleared his throat.

“I have to hand it to you all,” Clark said. “I don’t think I would have survived this one without your help.”

“Our pleasure,” Iolaus assured him with a grin. “Personally, I haven’t had that much fun in ages. I don’t get to do much fighting in the Elysian Fields.”

“Well, I definitely appreciate what you all did for me. And for my family.”

“Really, it was nothing,” Xena said. She glanced over at Lois and Clark’s children. “I’m just glad that we were able to keep you all safe.”

“And save the world,” Lois reminded her.

Xena chuckled. “That too. But there *is* one thing that I’ve been meaning to say to you, Lois.”

“Oh?”

“I give you a lot of credit. You aren’t quite the same woman that I met years ago.”

“What do you mean?” Lois asked, confusion written on her face.

Xena smiled gently. “The Lois that I met in the woods years ago would have been an absolute wreck these last couple of days,” she explained. “Do you remember how panicky you were when Clark was taken by the gladiator traders? Do you remember how hysterical you were on the voyage to Rome? Or when you found out that Clark was most likely going to see the inside of the arena the day after we arrived?”

Lois nodded. “Of course I do. I had nightmares about that whole episode for weeks after that. I’d wake up in the middle of the night panicked. Thank God that Clark was always at my side when I woke from those dreams. If he’d have been gone on a rescue and I found his spot in the bed empty, I think I would have cracked.”

Xena nodded. “Now, look at how you handled yourself this time. You kept a cool head even in the worst moments. You didn’t panic. You stayed focused. I’m proud of you.”

Lois smiled. “Thank you,” she said, blushing slightly. “I guess that, over the years, I’ve had plenty of practice in dealing with scary situations. I guess I’ve learned how to better channel my fear into something more productive.”

“Well, whatever the reason, I’m glad that you found a way to deal with it.”

“Xena,” Martha ventured, slightly overwhelmed by the events of the day. “I just wanted to thank you again. You saved my son’s life today. Not just in fighting that horrible woman. But also in getting the Kryptonite out of his body.”

Xena smiled. “You’re welcome. After hearing about just some of the things that your son has done for the world, believe me, it was the least that I could do.”

The room lapsed into another silence. Time ticked by, seeming to fly with all speed towards the midnight hour. Everyone seemed to be struggling with what to say next. Finally, Martha broke the silence.

“I’m sure you all have things that you’d like to say to one another,” she said. “Jonathan, why don’t we take the kids up to their rooms and get them all ready for school tomorrow?”

“Right,” Jonathan said, rising from his chair. His movement was a little stiff, an indication that his bad back was giving him a some trouble.

Clark recognized the weariness in both of his parents and shook his head. “We’ll do it. You guys look beat. Besides, I’m sure that Hercules and the others have some things they want to say in private, without Lois or me around.”

Jonathan stifled a yawn and nodded. “Let’s go, Martha. Clark’s right. We should give them some space.”

Martha stood, nodding.

“Oh,” Lois said. “You don’t have to go.”

“Jonathan’s right, dear,” Martha said with a gentle smile. “You all need some time alone.”

Michael, Hunter, and Rebecca stood to say goodnight to their grandparents. Hercules, Iolaus, Xena, and Gabrielle joined the Kent children in saying goodbye. Once again, the elder Kents profusely thanked the heroes for their part in saving their son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. Finally, they made their way out of the house, leaving Lois, Clark, the kids, and their guests behind. The kids glanced at one another, and an unspoken message passed between them. They recognized the truth that their parents needed some time alone with their friends. For once, they didn’t argue their bedtime. Instead, each of them approached one of the ancient heroes and hugged them tightly. They were a bit warier of the two gods, though they all knew that if it hadn’t been for the deities, chances were great that Alti would have succeeded that day in killing their father, for they had been the ones to ensure that Hercules and the others had been there to protect Clark.

“Thank you,” Hunter said, as he hugged Gabrielle.

“Thanks for saving my daddy,” Rebecca said, as Xena gently enveloped the girl in her arms.

“Thank you for helping all of us,” Michael said solemnly, shaking Hercules’ hand.

The kids spent the next few minutes expressing their gratitude to each of the heroes, and to the gods. Then they filed out of the room and silently made their way up the stairs to their bedrooms. Lois and Clark promised to be up in a few minutes to check on them. Both were quietly shocked at how cooperative the children were being about their bedtime. A glance to one another told them both that they felt the exact same thing. Xena watched the children retreat from the room. She smiled.

“Your kids really are beautiful,” she said. “You two are very lucky.”

“Thank you,” Clark said. “We’ve always felt extremely lucky to have them.”

“They’re lucky to have both of you too,” Gabrielle added.

Lois blushed a little. “Thanks.”

“Gods above!” Iolaus said, fidgeting in his seat, once everyone had gone silent again. “This is like torture, knowing Hades is coming to collect us. Better just to die in battle.”

“I know,” Xena agreed.

“Keep complaining,” Ares smirked at Iolaus, “and I can arrange for you to go back early.”

“Gee, thanks,” Iolaus said, sarcasm dripping from his tongue. “Don’t you have some animals to torture, or whatever it is that you do to amuse yourself?”

Ares snorted, crossed his arms, and gave the blonde man a look that seemed to say “I’m staying just to annoy you.”

Hercules had nodded when Iolaus had first spoken of the difficulty in awaiting Hades’ return. Only slightly more than four hours remained. And knowing Hades, he’d show up at exactly the stroke of midnight, not a second later. The thought saddened him immensely. Clark saw the demigod’s soft sigh and took in his troubled eyes. Clark tapped Lois discreetly on her shoulder, then rolled his eyes to the ceiling when she looked at him. She nodded in understanding.

“Uh, we need to go check on the kids. It’s never straightforward getting them all to bed on time,” Lois said. “This was far too easy tonight.”

“Besides, you guys need some time to talk,” Clark added. “I mean, it’s been centuries since you guys last saw each other, and you’ve barely gotten any time to talk alone. You’ve all been so busy saving my life and all.”

“Thanks,” Hercules said appreciatively. “That means a lot to me.”

“No problem,” Clark assured him with a half smile.

Lois and Clark rose from their seats, leaving Hercules and the others alone. They swiftly ascended the steps to the second floor. They found all three children already washed, in their pajamas, and with their teeth brushed. Rebecca was already in her bed, snuggled beneath the blankets and clutching an old stuffed bear that she’d long ago dubbed “Mr. Tuesday,” seeing as Clark had won it at a carnival for her on a Tuesday night a few summers earlier. Clark gently tucked the blankets around her even tighter. He knew that she would never sleep until the ritual was completed. She yawned sleepily at him as he bent and kissed her forehead.

“You okay?” Lois asked, fretfully checking her daughter over once again, after leaning in and placing a kiss on her head. After all, the poor child had had a knife against her throat not long ago. But it was, perhaps, that the girl was showing signs of emerging invulnerability, or at the least, of rapid healing. Already, the small, thin wound on her neck had closed and healed. Not a trace of it remained.

“I’m okay,” Rebecca said, nodding. “I was scared though.”

“Us too,” Clark said, playfully ruffling her hair. “But you don’t have to worry. That lady will never hurt you ever again.”

“Good,” Rebecca said. “She was a terrible person.”

Lois smiled and kissed her daughter’s head again. “She was. Now, get some sleep. Okay? Dad and I will be right downstairs.”

Rebecca nodded again. “Okay.”

“Goodnight, princess,” Clark said, kissing her brow and turning off the light as he and Lois exited the room.

“Night,” she murmured, stifling another yawn.

They found Hunter and Michael in their own room. Hunter was flipping through an old, beat up comic book from Clark’s youth, laying on his stomach with his feet on his pillow and his head at the foot of the bed. He scooted up and under his blankets as his parents entered the room. Michael was already beneath his bed sheets, a dog-eared copy of *The Hobbit* in his hands. He slipped a bookmark, shaped like the El family crest, into the book before setting it on his bedside table.

“Hey,” Lois said softly. “We’re sorry about how this weekend turned out. I know that we promised you guys something fun to do.”

Michael shook his head. “It’s okay. It wasn’t your fault.”

“We were just really scared for you guys,” Hunter said,

chewing his lower lip in his discomfort. It was a habit that he'd inherited from Lois. "I mean, we couldn't see what was happening. But we could hear it all. And then when we *could* see..." He shuddered and let his voice trail off, his eyes flickering with the memory of the horrors that he'd seen.

"I wanted so badly to help once Xena set us free. I wanted to do something to save you guys," Michael said. "But I was too afraid. I froze. Some hero's son I turned out to be." There was a world of self-derision in his voice.

"Hey now," Clark said, moving to sit on the edge of his oldest son's bed. He put his arm around the boy's shoulders. "We've already talked about this. It's not your job to take care of us. It's *our* job to take care of *you*. And being scared isn't anything to be ashamed of. It's natural to be afraid sometimes."

"But you aren't afraid of anything," Michael protested.

Clark smiled and shook his head. A soft laugh escaped him. "That's not true."

"Well, sure it is," Hunter said, coming to his brother's aid. "We've seen you fly right into burning buildings to save people. Mom's told us how you've swallowed bombs and how you flew into space to break up the Nightfall asteroid. You aren't afraid of anything."

"It's true that I have done things like that," Clark said softly. "But you can act bravely and still be afraid inside. You have to recognize that fear is nature's way of telling you that a situation could be very dangerous. You have to learn when it is right to ignore your fear and fight anyway, and when it is smarter to listen to that fear and flee. And I've been afraid plenty of times."

"Like when?" Hunter asked, his voice challenging his father to give him examples. Clark couldn't help but smile inwardly. Hunter's tone of voice was a perfect clone of the tone that Lois often took.

"Well," Clark said, thinking back over his life. "I was scared when the rest of Krypton's survivors came and asked me to go with them to save their world. I thought that I might die if war broke out. I was afraid that I might never come home again... that I might never see your mom again. I am afraid anytime there is Kryptonite around because I know that it can kill me. I was scared when red Kryptonite once made my powers go berserk. I thought that I might really hurt someone by accident. When I went to battle the Nightfall asteroid — both times — I was fearful that I wouldn't be able to divert it, and that it would wipe out all life on Earth. I grew up not knowing why I was developing such strange powers, afraid that I might hurt someone or be found out and be taken off to some lab somewhere to be dissected like a frog. And I was terrified today. I thought I was going to lose you guys. It was the most chilling moment of my life."

"Really?" Michael asked.

"Really," Clark said with a nod. He thought for a moment, then smiled conspiratorially at his boys. "And you know what else scares me?"

"What?" the boys asked together, eyes wide, ready for their father's confession.

"Your mom," Clark said with a wink.

The two boys erupted into laughter. Lois gave Clark a look of mock exasperation. She would have swatted at her husband's arm, but she was currently sitting on Hunter's bed on the opposite side of the room. She fought the urge to join in the laughter and lost. She tried to cover it with a stern expression that didn't quite work.

"What? It's true!" Clark said, laughing himself. "I was petrified when I asked her out on our almost-first date. And you haven't seen *anything* of your mom's anger until you hide the fact that you are really a superhero from another planet from her for two years."

"And then ask her to marry you before you tell her," Lois

added, crossing her arms, but with an amused half-smile on her face.

Hunter and Michael exploded into fresh laughter as their father's face flushed. Even after all of these years, Clark still felt embarrassed over that, admittedly huge, mistake on his part. He grinned at Lois, despite the heat that was rising in his cheeks.

"Luckily for me, you found me irresistible!"

"Don't flatter yourself, Farm Boy," she shot back teasingly.

"Hey, you married me, didn't you?" Clark grinned, tasting victory.

"Because you couldn't live without me." Lois gave him a winning smile. Standing, she plucked the comic book from Hunter's lap and set it on top of his dresser as she stood. "You know what?" she said, after kissing the top of Hunter's head and moving towards Michael. "I'm glad that you boys didn't rush into the fight today. I'm glad that you listened to Xena and ran when she told you to."

"Really?" Michael asked dubiously and a little dejectedly.

Lois nodded. "Uh-huh. I felt better knowing that you were out of harm's way." She kissed the top of her other son's head. "Now, get some sleep. You have school in the morning."

As usual, that brought a groan from the two boys. Clark smiled at them, then placed his own kisses on his sons' heads. They both hugged him extra tightly that night and for an extra long moment. Never before had they come so close to losing their father as they had on that day.

"Night boys," Clark said, shutting the light.

"Night," they said in unison.

Lois softly shut the door behind them as they entered into the hallway. Still wanting to give Hercules and the others some time alone, they padded quietly to their own bedroom. Clark closed the door behind them, then sank wearily onto the bed, sighing heavily. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, savoring the comfort of his bed and the relative silence. Lois climbed up onto the bed and got on her knees behind him. She wrapped her arms about his neck and rested her head on his sturdy shoulder. They both exhaled a relieved, tired sigh, then let out a shared chuckle.

"What a day," Clark groaned, feeling the energy ebbing from his body. He'd need a good, solid sleep and plenty of sunshine the next day to recharge his depleted body. He only hoped that no calls for Superman would wake him during the night. He slipped his glasses off, rubbed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, then replaced the frames onto his face. "I'm glad that that's over."

"Me too," Lois said. "And I forbid you from making any rescues tonight. You look like you need your sleep."

"Forbid huh?" Clark asked, amused.

"Mmm-hmmm," Lois said in agreement. "I need you here tonight." She kissed his left cheek to emphasize the point. "I think we *all* need you to stay home tonight."

Clark fought to stifle a yawn and promptly lost. "You might be right. I'm exhausted." He shook his head as he thought back over the events of the day. "What a day," he repeated.

Lois dropped her arms from around his neck and came to sit alongside him on the bed. Her feet dangled over the edge and her eyes dropped to study the carpet.

"I've never been that terrified for you in all of my life. Not even when daddy had to put you into a coma to rid your body of that Kryptonian virus. We've had our close calls before. We've both looked death in a face a number of times; more than anyone has a right to and then survive. But God, Clark, you stopped breathing. Your heart stopped beating. I was so sure that I had lost you."

"For a moment there, I think you did," Clark admitted. "It's hard to explain, but for a minute or so, I wasn't sure if I was alive or dead. Then the next thing I knew, I heard you calling me back and I was suddenly back in the world again. So...thank you. You've always been my reason for fighting for my life, anytime

things have gotten... well, like they did today. You and the kids.”

“I’m just glad that you are all right,” Lois said, snuggling into Clark’s side even more. She drew comfort just from the close proximity to his strong, healthy body. “Promise that you’ll never scare me like that again?”

Clark chuckled. “Oh, I promise,” he said dryly, putting his hand up and making the Boy Scout pledge with his fingers. His lips curled into a brilliant smile. “Come on,” he said after a few long moments. “Let’s go back downstairs. We’ve only got a couple of hours before Hades returns.”

Together, they rose from the bed and quietly went back down the stairs. The living room had gone silent, though it was clear to them that the ancient friends had been in deep, emotional discussions. Every eye was glazed over with a sheen of unshed tears. Even Ares looked bothered, and his eyes never left Xena. It was obvious that they had gotten a head start on the heart wrenching farewells that the night would soon bring. Clark’s heart sunk a little as he realized that he would also be forced to say goodbye to friends who had become dear to his heart. The last farewells with Xena and Gabrielle had been much easier on him. Though he had grown fond of the women and had been indebted to them for saving his life and for keeping Lois safe, he’d barely gotten to know them before it had been time for him to return to his own time. But now it was a completely different story. Now he had come to really get to know all four of the heroes on a deep, personal level. The bonds of his friendships with them were as strong as his friendship with Jimmy, and he regarded Jimmy as the brother that he’d never had. Having to say goodbye this time was already quietly breaking Clark’s heart. He knew that Lois must have been feeling the same way when she gave his hand a little squeeze.

Lois and Clark returned to their place on the couch. Clark saw Hercules covertly wipe at his eyes, trying to remove the evidence of the tears welled there. Clark quietly cleared his throat, at a loss for words. That alone was disconcerting to him. He rarely found himself speechless these days. Thankfully, Gabrielle’s gift of gab did not fail, and she broke the heavy silence.

“Kids okay?” she asked.

Lois nodded. “A little shaken still, but otherwise okay. They’re kind of downplaying it though.”

“I wonder where they get that from?” Clark said, with a mischievous grin at his wife.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lois said, feigning ignorance.

The easy banter was enough to break the spell of sadness in the room. The conversation picked right back up, moving on to happier topics. And the hours flew by. It seemed that they had only just begun to speak when the clock began to chime and Hades appeared. As Hercules had guessed, the god entered the room at the very first stroke of midnight. Every heart in the room sank, even Ares’. Clark could see the emotion in the war god’s eyes as he prepared to once again lose the woman that he loved. Clark’s heart ached for the god. He’d seen the same haunted look in his own eyes years ago when he and Lois had broken up after he’d revealed his secret to her. He pitied the god of war in that moment.

“It’s time,” was all that Hades said, solemnly.

Xena and Hercules turned to one another and embraced, while Iolaus and Gabrielle turned to Clark and Lois respectively. Hades said nothing. He only watched the farewells with silent eyes. Clark glanced over only once at the god of the dead, but his expression was unreadable. At least he wasn’t trying to hurry them along. At least he was giving them all a chance to say one final goodbye.

“Clark, I know I kind of gave you a hard time about you getting to go off on the quest instead of me. But thanks for

keeping Herc safe,” Iolaus said as he gave Clark firm handshake and a friendly slap on the back. “He’s my best friend. You don’t know how much it means to me that you were able to watch out for him when I couldn’t fight at his side.”

“Anytime,” Clark said with a smile. “And thank *you*, for everything. You didn’t know me from a hole in the wall, yet you risked yourself to fight on my behalf. You fought to keep Lois and our kids safe. You don’t know what that means to *me*.”

“I’m just glad that I could help,” the shorter man said.

Gabrielle stepped over to Clark, and Iolaus moved to speak with Lois. The bard gave Clark a smile and hug that he gently returned.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “Once again, you put yourself out there for Lois and myself. And now our children. I owe you more than I can say.”

“It was my pleasure to fight alongside you guys,” the strawberry blonde assured him. “And it was good to see you two again. I just wish that I had more time to spend in your world. It’s truly fascinating.”

“I wish you all could stay longer too,” Clark admitted. “And I’m glad that I got the chance to see you and Xena again. I just wish the circumstances could have been better.”

“Clark,” Xena said, striding over to join him. She leaned in for a hug, which Clark happily gave her.

“Xena,” Clark began. He paused, searching for the right words.

“I know,” she said.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure that you do. Three times now, you’ve saved my life. You’ve kept Lois safe when I couldn’t. And now, you’ve rescued my children when I was powerless to do so. I don’t know how to properly thank you for that. I am so indebted to you that even if I could spend the rest of my life trying to repay you, I don’t think that I could.”

Xena smiled and touched her hand to Clark’s shoulder. “You owe me nothing,” she assured him. “You’re a friend and a good person. Knowing that I was able to help you out is more than enough for me.”

“I wish there was something that I could do. To help you and the others... stay alive.”

Xena glanced at Gabrielle and Iolaus, where they stood talking with Hercules. A slight, sad smile crossed her lips. “You know... I’m starting to think that this time, death won’t be so bad. The company will certainly be a lot better. And it’s been far too long since I’ve seen my own son. Just promise me one thing though.”

“Okay. Name it.”

“Take care of yourself. And never, ever forget how lucky you are to have your children. You’re never really aware of what you have until it’s gone. Believe me. I know.” There was a touch of sadness to the proud warrior woman’s voice.

Clark smiled wistfully. “Believe me, I know that all too well. Lois and I have been thankful every day to have not only each other, but all three of our children as well. We were never supposed to be able to have them at all. We were told that it would be impossible for us to ever have a child. Each of them... it was a miracle that they were ever conceived.”

Ares cleared his throat and called to Xena. Xena favored Clark with another smile. “I should probably see what Ares wants.”

“Hey,” Clark whispered to her. “Do *me* one favor. Go easy on Ares. He does love you. I may not really know him, but I can see at least that much in his eyes.”

Xena nodded. “I know that he does. And maybe... if things had been different... if he and I had been different... maybe things would have worked out.”

She gave Clark another small smile and turned to speak with the war god. Iolaus and Hercules looked at one another. Clark

could overhear them speaking, as they stood only a few feet away. Lois came to his side and hugged him about his waist. Clark leaned his head on hers and sighed before placing a kiss on the top of her head.

“Herc, I...I’m gonna miss you, buddy.”

“I’ll miss you too, lolaus. I’m just glad that I got to see you again, no matter how brief it was.”

“Keep thinking of us. The dead can hear the thoughts of the living.”

“I know, and I will. I promise.”

Iolaus nodded. “I know you will. It’s hard to judge the passage of time in the Elysian Fields, but it seems like we can hear you at least once a day. I mean, Deianeira, the kids, Alcmene, Jason, and me. It’s made our separation from you a lot easier.”

Hercules nodded and swallowed around the lump that was steadily forming in his throat. “It’s hard *not* to think of you guys. Tell them...tell them that I miss them. And that I love them. And maybe...maybe one day...I’ll be coming home.”

“Herc, you’re not gonna...”

Hercules shook his head. “Of course not. But, just because I haven’t died yet doesn’t mean that I *won’t* one day. I’ve come close a few times. Not long ago, a couple of blood clots nearly ended my life. So I’m pretty sure that one day, I’ll be seeing you all again. For good this time.”

Hades subtly cleared his throat. Clark felt his own throat constrict around a lump of emotion. Hercules pulled his best friend into a fierce embrace. The two slapped one another on the back, then pulled away.

“It’s time,” Hades repeated.

Xena nodded slowly. “I’m ready.”

“Me too,” Gabrielle added, choking back a tear.

“Yeah,” Iolaus said, his voice breaking just a little. “Me too.”

The three moved to stand by Hades’ side. Clark, Lois, Hercules, Ares, and Aphrodite moved together to stand and face them. A look of regret crossed Hades’ features. He looked at a loss, torn between wanting to give the heroes a second chance at life — a chance they had clearly earned — and being bound to his duties as the god of the dead. He clasped his hands before him, and the group began to shimmer as they started to vanish. Clark noticed the glimmer of a tear as it worked its way out of the demigod’s eye and trickled down his cheek. The son of Zeus raised one hand in a salute, a gesture that the others returned.

“Goodbye, my friends,” he said.

In the next instant, they were gone. A second tear fell from Hercules’ other eye. Clark bit back his own tears, though he noticed that Lois had lost her own inner battle. Silent tears slid down her cheeks. He gave her a gentle, loving squeeze. Aphrodite sighed sadly and Ares looked positively miserable. The goddess of love turned to face them.

“I guess that’s it then,” she said, with a sad shake of her head.

“Yeah,” Hercules said, his voice hoarse with his grief.

“I’m so sorry, bro,” she added after a moment. “This whole thing majorly sucks.”

Hercules snorted a little laugh at his sister despite himself. “Thanks,” he said.

“Listen, if you ever need to talk, you know you just have to call for me,” she said, offering him a smile.

“I know.” He nodded once.

“Look, I’d love to stay and chat some more, but Olympus doesn’t run itself. And since Zeus and the others haven’t returned just yet, Ares and I really should go. Besides, we’ve got to get this dagger and stone someplace safe. Lois, Clark, I’m so sorry about the position you guys were put in. We totally owe you. If there’s anything that I can ever do, just name it. If it’s in my power to do it, I will.”

Clark shook his head. “There’s nothing to apologize for. It’s

not like it was your fault. If anything, I’m grateful that you — both of you — were on my side. And Ares...thanks for postponing the war that you had planned.”

“Like I said,” Ares said, crossing his arms, “we’re even, that’s all. I stopped the war, you helped to destroy Dahak. Make no mistake, this doesn’t make us friends or anything.”

Clark chuckled and shook his head. “I never expected that it would.”

“Good.”

“Actually,” Lois said slowly, her thoughts whirling. “There is something, Aphrodite. My sister, Lucy...she’s always finding the wrong men, and I thought that maybe, since you’re the goddess of love...”

Aphrodite clapped her hands gleefully. “I *love* match making. Now, let me think...” She paused for a minute, tapped her finger to her lips, and grinned. “You know, there *is* someone that would be good for her. And I wouldn’t even have to have Cupid do his thing with the arrows. You just get her and your friend Jimmy in the same place at the same time, and nature should do the rest.”

“That simple?” Lois asked with disbelief. “I don’t know. They’ve never really gotten along.”

The love goddess nodded. “They’ve both grown up a lot since they last met. Trust me on this. If I know anything, it’s love. Although you two,” she pointed first at Lois and then at Clark, “gave me a headache when you two were trying to figure out that you were meant for each other. It drove me *crazy* to watch.”

“Uh, thanks,” Lois said. “I’ll see what I can do about getting Jimmy and Lucy together.”

“You won’t regret it,” the goddess said. “I promise.”

“I *may* be sick,” Ares said with a grimace, pantomiming a gag. “A goddess gives you the right to ask anything of her and all you can think of is playing matchmaker. Pathetic.”

With a flash, the war god disappeared. Aphrodite rolled her eyes and followed suit. Lois and Clark turned to face Hercules.

“Sorry about him,” Hercules said with a sigh. “Ares is apparently allergic to manners.”

Clark waved the demigod’s concern away. “Don’t worry about it. Look, Hercules, I just wanted to thank you again for risking your life for me and for my family.”

“It’s no big deal,” Hercules said. It was his turn to wave away Clark’s concern. “To be perfectly honest, it was actually kind of...nice. Not the danger to your family and the world, of course. But it was nice to be able to, well, be myself. To not have to hide anything. You know what I mean.”

“I do.” Clark nodded. “So...what now?”

“Now, I think I’ll get going. I really should make an appearance on set tomorrow.”

“Right. I’d almost forgotten about that,” Lois said.

“Will we be seeing you again?” Clark asked.

“Of course you will,” Hercules said with a grin. “How about lunch on Tuesday?”

“Tuesday?” Lois asked.

“Well, sure. The production team has the day off while the construction team converts the set over to the aftermath of the dragon rampage.”

Clark chuckled and gave the demigod a wry grin. “You really want to see us again so soon? You’re not sick of us?”

“Hey, I still owe you an interview,” Hercules said with a wink and a laugh. “Besides,” he said, sobering, “I’d kind of like to keep in touch. It’s been nice having friends that I can be myself around. To not have to hide and lie about who I am. Who understand how frustrating it can be trying to lead a double life.”

“I’d like that too,” Clark said.

“Great,” Hercules said with a broad smile. “I’ll see you at noon then on Tuesday. Santoni’s Cafe okay?”

“Sounds perfect,” Lois agreed.

Together, they walked to the front door. Clark opened the

door. Outside, a cool breeze had begun to blow, indication of the fall weather to come. In the distance, a car horn honked and a girl talked loudly on her cell phone as she walked her dog past the Kents' house. She waved at Clark as she caught sight of him. He recognized her as Anna, one of Perry's newest interns at the Planet. He waved back and once Anna had turned the corner, he turned to Hercules.

"Thanks again, Her...Kevin," he said, extending a hand that Hercules took. "We'll see you Tuesday."

"Goodnight. And thanks for everything," the demigod replied. His tone suggested more than just gratitude for keeping him safe in the labyrinths and for their hospitality. It spoke of his sincere thanks for the unspoken promise to keep his true identity safe.

"Night," Lois said, shaking Hercules' proffered hand. Clark followed.

Lois and Clark silently watched as the man got into his car and then drove off into the night. Stepping back into the house, Clark closed the door behind them and sighed in weariness. He looked at Lois and smiled a tired smile.

"Well, that was one of the weirder weekends that we've had in a while," he said, trying to inject a little humor to lighten the somber mood.

Lois suppressed a giggle and swatted his arm playfully. "Well, weird weekend or not, Perry is going to expect us to be firing on all cylinders tomorrow."

Clark tried to stifle a yawn and lost. "True. Come on, let's go upstairs."

He guided Lois up the steps. Once on the second floor, Clark took a moment to listen to the silence. Then he tuned in his hearing to listen to the deep, even breathing of his sleeping children, and their steady, rhythmic heartbeats. He smiled to himself, once again feeling calm and content. The latest threat to himself and his family had been vanquished. But it had also brought to light his greatest fear. Someone had figured out his secret and had used his children as bait to get to him. The very thought brought a shudder to his body and made his blood run cold.

"It's okay," Lois assured him, rubbing his arm affectionately. "You know that this was not a normal circumstance, right?"

Clark didn't answer right away. Instead, he opened the door to their bedroom and stepped inside. He wasn't surprised that Lois was able to read his thoughts so well. Sometimes, he felt that she knew him better than he did himself. He began to undress and change into a sleep shirt and pajama pants.

"Hey," Lois said, closing the door gently.

Clark sighed and sat on the bed. "I know it wasn't a normal situation," he finally admitted. "But that doesn't change the fact of what happened. I wouldn't care so much if it had only been my own life on the line. But having you and the kids in danger because of who I am...it's always been my worst nightmare."

Lois sat alongside Clark. She put her arm around him and rubbed soothing circles on his back. "I know."

Clark softly sighed, folded his glasses, and shook his head, as if in response to his own thoughts. "Maybe...maybe it's time..."

"Time to what, Clark? Hang up the cape? Stop helping people?"

"It...could be. I can't...I'd never be able to live with myself if being Superman caused me to lose you guys."

"Clark, do you honestly think for one second that you'd ever be able to sit back and hear the cries for help and do nothing?"

"I could try."

"And it would tear you apart," Lois said in a soft voice. "You can't just give up an essential part of who you are. And do you have any idea of how proud your children are of you? Do you have any idea of the cheers and the pride they have when we see you making some impossible rescue on the TV? Because I *do* see

it."

"That doesn't excuse my putting this family in danger," Clark said, feeling utterly defeated in every way. "I just don't know what to do."

"Then I'll *tell* you what you are going to do," Lois said her voice quiet but strong. "You're going to continue being Superman. And you're going to stop worrying about this one lunatic who needed a god to tell her who you really are. Okay?"

"Lo-is."

Lois shook her head and her voice rose just a little. "Clark, if you are so worried about what kind of life our kids are going to live with you continuing as Superman, then think of this. What kind of world will they grow up in if Superman suddenly retires? Increased crime, more gang activities, natural disasters that take out entire populations of people. A world without hope. Is that what you really want?"

"No," Clark was forced to admit. "Why are you always right?" He allowed himself a small smile.

Lois grinned victoriously and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips. "It's a gift."

Clark stifled a mild laugh. He was still uneasy, but Lois had made perfect sense. He slipped beneath the bed sheets and settled himself into his pillow. Lois went around the bed and climbed in from the opposite side. She settled next to Clark and he pulled her gently into his embrace. For a long while, he lay awake, listening to his wife's heartbeat. Eventually, the sound of it lulled him into a deep, restful sleep. When he next awoke, it was an hour before he needed to get the kids ready for school and head off to work. He groggily wiped the sleep from his eyes, trying to place what had torn him from his slumber. Then he heard it. The call for help. Without thinking, he spun into the suit and raced to the scene, where a young woman was being mugged. In seconds, he'd apprehended the thug and handed him over to the police. As he flew back home, he remembered what Lois had said the night before. Superman was too much a part of who he was and far too important to the world. Retirement was definitely not on the horizon.

THE END

Disclaimer: Lois' Jeep suffered irreparable harm in the creation of this story, and had to be put out of its misery. In lieu of flowers, it is asked that you take a moment to appreciate the cars in your life.