

The Purloined Paintings

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Summary: A month ago, Lois disappeared while chasing a lead on stolen artwork. What happened to her defies belief.

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Clark collapsed on the sofa after his Superman patrol, once again thoroughly spent. The crooks were unusually busy, but that wasn't what had drained him. It was having to be the beacon of hope for the world when he, himself, had precious little hope left, either for himself or for Lois.

It had been just over a month since he had last seen his wife. She had been about to follow a lead in a story they were working on together. The suspect was Patrick Ulysses Nestor or, as he put it, "Call me Ulysses; I'm a warrior and no saint." His war was against the upper class, and he fought it by stealing the most expensive artwork from Metropolis' wealthiest residents; at least, that was what Lois and Clark suspected. They had no proof, only a suspicious pattern: Every couple of months, there would be a major theft. About three weeks after each theft, Nestor would fly to some foreign country, and the stolen goods would show up in that country's black market very shortly thereafter. This had happened too often to be a coincidence, but no one could figure out how he managed to smuggle ten-foot-long paintings (still in their original frames) out of the country.

The last time Clark had seen Lois, she had just hung up the phone and told him that one of their sources wanted to meet them to discuss the case; the caller claimed to have some inside information that they were only willing to divulge in person. He'd been about to head out with her, but someone called for his help just as they started toward the elevator. If only he had kept a super-ear on her while he was pulling the auto out of Hobbes Bay and repairing the Bogdanove Bridge, things might have turned out very differently. As it was, Lois just — disappeared. He had spent every waking minute outside of work (and many inside, as well) scanning the city and its environs for any hint of where she was or what had happened. He'd trailed both the source and Nestor time and again in the hope that one of them might lead him to her.

Nothing. Not a lead. Not even a hint of a lead. He kept expecting Wells to show up saying that Tempus had whisked Lois off to some other time or some alternate universe; he was in such dire straits that he would even have welcomed such news. But there was no knock on his door.

He was startled when the phone rang. The only reason he picked it up was because he thought it might be his folks, and he didn't want them to worry even more. (He wished his super-abilities let him ascertain who was on the other end of the phone

without first picking it up. Alas, they did not.)

"Hello?"

"Clark! I'm so glad you're home. I could really use you-know-who's help right now. Can he come get me?"

"Lois! You're alive! How are you? Where are you?"

"I'm fine, now. I'm in France. I'm sorry I worried you; I was unable to call before. You wouldn't believe what I've been through! Then again, maybe you would, after all we've been through together. But this is even stranger than usual."

Clark chuckled with relief at his wife's well-being and in delight at hearing her babbling — something he'd thought might never happen again. "Thank God you're all right. So what happened?"

"I was following Nestor the night I last saw you. I imagine you heard that the Chou painting collection was stolen last month? It was him. He and his flunkies carried the artwork from Chou's grounds into a van and drove off. I followed them in my Jeep as they made their way into a rather run-down area in the old manufacturing district. They parked in a large empty lot, then I saw Nestor himself climb out of the back of the van and stand right in the middle of the area. I could see him clearly in the light of the full moon; it was definitely him.

"And then something happened that could only be magic. Maybe it was Mxyzptlk or Baron Sunday's doing, I don't know. But he started to grow big — really, really big. And he changed shape. He turned into a huge building that blended in with his surroundings. His flunkies transported the artwork into the building. As soon as the lackeys left, I went in to explore. Then the walls started closing in and I blacked out. I woke up about an hour ago and saw the walls expanding. I raced out of the building to find that I wasn't in Metropolis anymore. It was a good thing I did, too, since just as I left, I saw the henchmen approach the building. I hid and watched as they took the artwork outside. Then I left to figure out where I was. I found a money changer so I could call you from a pay phone."

Clark sighed and repeated, "Thank God you're all right." Then the implications of what she'd said dawned on him. "So, you're telling me that Nestor was able to smuggle the stolen goods out of country because he is ..."

"That's right. He's a warehouse."

THE END