

Into the Woods

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Lois, Clark, and Jimmy go camping with Lex and four scientists. In a newly-discovered universe. In the Ice Age. Involuntarily. (Part 4 of the Ice Age series)

Story Size: 3,579 words (21 kB as text)

Previously in series:

[An Icy Reception](#)

[Welcome to the Tundra](#)

[Walking in a Winter Wonderland](#)

Getting the story should have been very straight-forward: interview the LexLabs scientists about the newly discovered universe, add a few quotes from Lex about its potential for solving the overpopulation problem, have Jimmy snap a few pictures of a woolly mammoth or something, and collect her awards the following year. “Luthortopia” would be a guaranteed Kerth, maybe even a Pulitzer. But once again, Lois Lane had become a part of the story, and once again, there were doubts as to whether she’d live to tell it.

Clark’s voice called to her from outside the tent she now shared with Dr. Jill Plummer. Given her stiff muscles, Lois’s first thought was to ignore him and go back to her dreams of Superman’s arctic castle; however, said dreams involved sitting frustratingly alone next to an inexplicably-placed air conditioner running at full tilt. Given a choice between two realities in which she was freezing cold with no Superman, she chose to sit up.

Dr. Plummer was already gone. Lois unzipped the tent and scrambled out, wrapping her thermal blanket around her shoulders and stepping into the over-sized galoshes Dr. Carroll had found to replace her even-less-practical high-heels. She still wore the clothes she’d arrived in, plus Clark’s suit jacket— though how the man could stand these sub-zero temperatures without it was beyond her. At least there was no risk of having to confront a mirror out here.

“Lois?”

She groggily rubbed at her eyes, blinking as they adjusted to the harsh daylight. “Hey. What’s up?”

The air in front of Clark briefly whitened as he sighed in relief. “Just making sure you’re okay. The sun’s been up for a while, and I was afraid that yesterday’s journey might’ve been...well...” Her partner trailed off, scratching at the new beard-growth on his jaw. The blanket he held around his

own shoulders fluttered behind him in the wind, reminding Lois of the annoyingly absent star of her recent dreams.

Lois groaned. Her limbs still throbbed from hours of pulling a heavy sled over ice in the second-worst-possible shoes, and a part of her was still afraid of possibly slipping. At the very least, her unconscious mind could have given her a break last night. “Well, I’m alive.”

“Good.” His smile was sincere and almost warm enough to make her forget the biting chill. “I got your breakfast for you.” He reached into the pocket of his slacks and pulled out two packets that were labeled “roast chicken”.

“Thanks.” She tore open one of the packets and managed to devour its contents before even registering a taste, assuming there was any. She eyed the second curiously. “Was Dr. Lewis feeling generous, today?”

Clark shrugged. “Well, we did manage to find the woods, so our situation is a lot better than it was when the portal first got destroyed. Oh: Dr. Plummer wants to call another meeting, soon,” he added quickly.

“Another one?!” Lois groaned again. “If it’s about needing to relocate to be near a river or a volcano or a prehistoric CostMart, I will throttle that woman!”

Mist billowed around Clark’s mouth as he laughed. The second packet of meat assured her that she’d missed nothing in not tasting the first, but at least she was nearly full for the first time in a couple of days. Maybe she’d get out of this alive, after all.

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The scattering of trees and shrubbery which preceded the evergreen forest was still an irritatingly long walk from the camp, but at least the ground offered much more traction than that ice sheet the portal had originally left them on.

Even so, her legs protested the continued abuse as she compelled herself forward. By the time she returned to the trio of tents, nearly everybody was standing in front of the middle one that Lex now shared with Dr. Diggory and Dr. Lewis.

Lex looked dramatically different, having gone from a smooth and perfectly-coiffed gentleman to an unkempt figure that she could picture yelling at the dumpsters behind a liquor store. Lois considered wishing him a good morning, but something about his bagged eyes and sullen expression warned her off.

Beside him, the plump and bespectacled Dr. Diggory shifted nervously and adjusted the hood of his parka. "You know, if you just turn me onto my side, that usually helps the—"

"Oh, shut up!" Lex snapped, thrusting his gloved hands into the pockets of his coat and lapsing once more into a fuming silence.

Quietly, Lois moved along past Dr. Carroll and Dr. Lewis, who seemed to be engaged in comparing long words, and came to stand by Clark and Jimmy.

Jimmy's eyes immediately lit up. "Lois! You're up! Everything okay?" Like Lois and Clark, he remained bundled in a thermal blanket as his only guard against the extreme cold.

She gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm fine. Really. How are you holding up?"

He shrugged beneath the blanket. "About as good as can be expected, I guess. I miss hot showers. I miss indoor toilets. Heck, I even miss shaving." He reached up to scratch his cheek.

Lois squinted, barely able to make out a few wisps of peach fuzz on Jimmy's boyish features.

The icy wind chased his hand back under the blanket, which he pulled more tightly around himself. "At least that's one thing you don't have to worry about, being a girl and all."

She gave a non-committal grunt. Mercifully, her blanket was long enough to cover her legs.

"Is everyone ready?" Dr. Plummer finally emerged from behind one of the partially-unpacked sleds and took her place next to Dr. Diggory. Jimmy curved around towards Lex, and the line soon closed into a shuffling, shivering circle. "Now, as I'm sure you all remember, we have up to six months until the rescue team arrives, and only a month-and-a-half's worth of supplies—"

"Yes, we know!" Lex spat. "We get reminded of this every time Dr. Lewis doles out meager crumbs that would insult a beggar! What else are you going to enlighten us

with, Woman? The blueness of the sky? The fact that it's colder than the final circle of Dante's Hell?"

Dr. Plummer took a deep breath which puffed white in front of her. "Always establish the relevant facts, Mr. Luthor, even if they seem obvious or like something that should already be known to all parties. For example, Eustace and I assumed it was *obvious* that if the emergency rescue protocol would take up to six months, then the emergency survival provisions should be enough to *last* for six months."

A hush fell over the entire circle. Lex stared at Dr. Plummer, his expression unreadable.

"We also don't want to assume," she continued as though nothing had transpired, "that we can easily use the wood from the forest once our propane runs out. We should harvest some now and start a bonfire, just as a proof-of-concept that we can."

The thought of a large, warm bonfire sent a cheerful murmur throughout the group.

Dr. Lewis cleared his throat and pushed his hood back slightly. "Speaking of using the forest before we're actually out of supplies, does anyone here know how to forage? Even if you only know how to safely identify one thing: maybe a certain mushroom, an herb, any type of berry...?"

The cheer evaporated. Everyone looked at everyone else, eyes widening with growing concern as each blank stare met several others.

"What about hunting?" The hopefulness had left Dr. Lewis's voice.

Lex straightened, regaining some of his cool and confident demeanor. "I've shot tigers before."

Lois stared at him in shock. "Aren't tigers endangered?!"

Lex only shrugged. "I doubt that's the case here."

Dr. Carroll stroked his darkening chin. "Our shotgun was only provided to defend the research base from wild animals, not hunt them. Do we have enough ammunition to even think about hunting, or should we save it for in case the predators attack?"

Jimmy stiffened. "Predators? You mean like that big cat we saw on the first day?" When all four scientists nodded, he gulped. "You think there could be more of those?"

Dr. Diggory pushed his glasses up his nose. "Oh, yes, of course, and other carnivores as well: the larger ones should all be out west, but we could still potentially see bears..."

"Like grizzly bears?!" Jimmy paled.

Dr. Diggory shook his head. “Oh, not grizzlies, no. They shouldn’t migrate to this continent for millennia, yet.”

Jimmy’s shoulders relaxed a little. “Well, that’s good, at least.”

“We’re more likely to see the genus *Arctodus*, of the short-faced bears,” Dr. Diggory continued, “the smaller species of which is about the same size as a grizzly.”

Lois put an arm around Jimmy to keep him from falling over.

Dr. Diggory seemed completely oblivious to Jimmy’s whimpering. “Then of course there’s dire wolves, which are about twice the size of regular—”

“I think we get the point, Dr. Diggory,” Lois cut in.

Everyone turned to look warily at the forest which suddenly seemed **too** close to the camp. The wind howled as it shook the trees—at least, Lois hoped it was only the wind.

Dr. Lewis swallowed. “So, let’s put it to a vote: eating, or not being eaten?”

It was a difficult choice, but Lois finally voted to take the risk on getting more food. It was a sentiment that Lex seemed to share with fewer qualms. Clark and Jimmy both voted to reserve the gun for defensive use. In the end, fear of predators won. It probably didn’t help that they were called **dire** wolves.

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Every twig-snap made Lois and Jimmy jump as they wandered along the outskirts of the possibly-monster-infested woods, gathering pine cones and needley fallen branches. Even though neither of them had an ax or a saw, they could still do their part in gathering kindling for the upcoming fire. Lois tucked one corner of her blanket in such a way as to create a pouch hanging from her arm, while another corner wrapped around her hand to protect her fingers from both the prickly pine cones and the cold. The semi-amusing thought crossed her mind that it was so cold, even the trees were turning blue.

“Do you think we’ll be here for Christmas?”

Lois turned to find Jimmy staring at a rather stately tree that would have been a source of pride in any living room. She smirked. “Given that the city of Bethlehem probably hasn’t been founded yet, I hope not!”

He rolled his eyes, then stilled as something rustled close by.

Something flashed in the light of the afternoon sun, and the blade of a knife appeared just in front of Lois’s face. The handle had been lashed to a long piece of wood, and when

the mist from her gasp finally cleared, she saw the figure who was holding it: “Lex?”

Lex smiled at her, pulling the blade away and standing his weapon up. He turned to Jimmy, who had apparently attempted to bolt up the tree with little success. “Olsen, you can head back to the camp with the others; I’ll keep Lois safe.”

Jimmy sighed with relief. “Sure thing, Mr. Luthor!” He brushed off most of the blue-tipped needles he was now covered in and ran back to the safety of the tents.

Lex’s eyes turned to her again. “We haven’t really had a chance to talk, lately.”

“No, we haven’t.” Lois adjusted her grip on the blanket, making sure her cargo wouldn’t fall out.

He stepped closer. “I realize I’ve been a little more...on edge, than usual. The extreme circumstances have doubtless brought out the worst in all of us.”

“Makes sense.” She nodded towards the weapon in his hand. “Nice spear.”

He turned it over to rest across both palms and held it out so she could get a better look. “The first weapon mankind ever invented.” Lex beamed proudly. “Man already knew that he could bash his brother’s head in with a rock, or anything heavy enough to serve as a club; but this...” He twirled the spear a few times, looking at it almost reverently. “For the first time, man didn’t merely use nature: he shaped it to his will. The result is a weapon that allows you to strike a fatal blow while keeping well out of your opponent’s reach; excellent for hunting prey, fending off predators, and, of course, warfare.”

Lois let out a tiny laugh, though it sounded more nervous than she intended. “Well, I don’t think that last one is going to come up. Dr. Diggory said there aren’t any other humans on the whole continent, so there wouldn’t be anyone to fight.”

“Don’t be so sure, Lois.” Something scary glinted in his eyes. “We may be seeing violence very soon.”

She took an involuntary step back. “What do you mean?”

“Just basic game theory.” He lowered the spear again and met her eyes. “You’ve heard the numbers: rescue comes in six months; four people can last for three of those months, eight people for one and a half. But now, work the math in the other direction: two people could live quite comfortably for the entire six months.”

Her gasp billowed in front of her. “And let everyone else die?! Lex, that’s horrible! How can you even think that way?”

"I'm not the only one who's figured that out, Lois." Lex twitched his spear. "These scientists are not stupid: they will have already done the same math, and each likely knows that the others have, too. It's only a matter of time until factions form." He looked back towards the camp. "Dr. Diggory and Dr. Plummer will band together, of course." His tone was matter-of-fact. "Their little romance assures as much. I'm not sure yet who Dr. Carroll will ally himself with, but he'll certainly be quick to act. After all, the sooner it happens, the better for the victor as there will be more resources left to seize."

Lois shook her head. "It won't happen, Lex. We're going to pull together and survive this: all eight of us." She straightened, careful not to shift her bundle too much, and looked him in the eye.

His smile was condescending, as though she were a child who had just announced that Santa was going to bring her a pony. "By all means, my dear, keep working towards that scenario. But even so, I want you to think carefully about one thing: when the camaraderie breaks down and people begin to turn on each other, who do you want to have your back?" He hefted his spear again, the metal blade glimmering, then turned and walked through the thinning foliage back toward the camp.

Lois watched him leave, stunned. After a moment, a noise from deep within the woods made her whip around to look behind her. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, only the trees shaking their branches in the wind. Most likely, the sound was just from a dropped pine cone or a prehistoric squirrel. Even so, she tightened her grip on the bundle in her arms and quickly followed Lex back to the camp.

* * *

A large, mostly-stripped tree lay in the middle of the open stretch between the tents and the forest. Some of the others were hard at work with knives, carving strips and chunks of wood to throw into a nearby pile. Jimmy was apparently helping by running after the bits that missed. Clark looked up from where he knelt by the tree and smiled at her as she approached.

Lois dropped her load of pine-cones near the growing heap of wood. The warmth of being surrounded by other people was helping to cancel out the icy wind, so she stood as close to them as she could without being in the way of a swinging knife or a flying wood-chip. "What's going on?"

Dr. Lewis grimaced. "Well, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that Clark here found a tree that had already fallen over naturally, so we didn't have to worry about trying to cut one down. The bad news is that it must have fallen very recently, because...well, feel it."

He motioned to the widening groove that had been cut into the trunk.

Lois reached out from under her blanket and touched it. "It's wet?"

Dr. Lewis nodded.

"We shouldn't have been surprised." Dr. Carroll paused in his cutting and sat back on his heels. "In retrospect, it's basic biology: trees are just giant straws that suck up water all day, every day."

Dr. Lewis lopped off another shard that barely missed Jimmy's head. "Hopefully, if we cut these pieces small enough, they'll dry quickly."

"*Hopefully*," Dr. Carroll muttered, resuming his task. "The low temperatures certainly won't help the evaporation process."

Clark adjusted his glasses. "They'll dry. I...have a feeling."

"So what did Lex want to talk about?"

Lois's eyes widened as her attention snapped to Jimmy. He, as well as the two scientists now, stared at her with open curiosity. Clark watched her too, though his expression was strangely unreadable.

Somehow, Lois didn't feel that sharing Lex's assessment of their situation would help with group cohesion and morale, so she forced herself to regain her composure. "Oh, *Lex*!" she replied as though she'd initially misunderstood. She waved a hand dismissively. "Nothing, really. He just...wanted to show me the new spear he made. He started going on about prehistoric man, and how the spear was the first weapon ever invented, and all that stuff."

"Hand-ax." Dr. Carroll had already returned his attention to carving up the tree.

Lois blinked. "What?"

He didn't bother looking up from his work. "Man's first invented weapon was the hand-ax: take a rock, sharpen one edge, and now you've got something that can cut wood, carve meat, or stab an enemy in the face."

Jimmy's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Huh. You never see anything like that in the movies."

Clark cut another strip of wood and tossed it towards the pile. "I guess a half-sharpened rock just isn't as glamorous."

"Sounds more practical, though," Lois reflected, tightening her blanket around her shoulders.

Dr. Lewis grinned. "Man's first multi-use tool." He waved his knife. "Of course, we've made some improvements since then."

Lois nodded, silently watching them work. After a while, she turned to her partner. “Hey, Clark? Can you help me get the stuff we dropped back in the woods?”

Clark blinked at her. “Of course.” He rose and followed her towards the tree-line.

Jimmy caught a thrown chip that had gone wide. “Be careful, you guys! If you see any of those giant bears or demon wolves—”

“Dire wolves,” Dr. Lewis corrected, as though that were remotely helpful.

Lois waved him off. “We’ll be fine, Jimmy.” Hopefully, it was true.

* * *

Clark followed her out past the bushes and the first few scattered trees. “Okay, so where—?”

Lois pulled him to a stop behind a particularly wide and full tree that just about shielded them from the view of the camp. “Clark, I want you to promise me something.”

The worry was clear on his face. “What is it?”

“I want you to promise me that...if things go crazy...” She gulped. “...If everyone starts turning on each other... Promise me that you and I will always have each other’s backs.”

He stared at her, wide-eyed, then his expression became serious. “Lois, nothing like that is going to happen.”

“Just promise me!” She grabbed at his arm, covered only in a thin shirt sleeve, and was once again sharply reminded that she still wore his suit jacket under the blanket.

His hands came up to rest on her shoulders. “I promise, Lois: I will always have your back.”

Her shoulders relaxed, and the relieved sigh misted in front of her. “Thank you.”

* * *

“Well, here goes nothing.” The golden haze of evening had settled over the world by the time Dr. Lewis took a match out of the box and struck it across the side. He considered the tiny flame for a moment before carefully setting it under a pine cone at the bottom of the pile. Everyone leaned forward, watching with held breath. Clark even lowered his glasses to get a better look.

At first, the match seemed to fizzle and turn black without accomplishing anything, but then the pine cone glowed orange and smoke began to rise. Cheers erupted as a bright flame reached up to lick the slivers of wood carefully stacked above it. A few of the pieces hissed and popped, but several reddened and the fire began to crackle in earnest.

Dr. Carroll leaped up and punched the air. “We did it! WE DID IT!”

Dr. Lewis whooped. “Score one for the human race!”

At a cautious distance from the smoke, Dr. Plummer misted a relieved sigh and reached out to hold Dr. Diggory’s hand.

Lex gave a satisfied smile and reached his hands out toward the heat of the growing flames.

Jimmy basked in the warm glow for a moment, then hesitantly turned to look at Lois and Clark. “You guys think we might make it?”

“We will.” Clark’s voice was firm and held no trace of doubt. His arm came up around Lois’s shoulders, further banishing the cold and creating a safe bubble that neither wind nor dire wolves nor half-crazed murderers could breach. “We’ll all get out of here alive.”

The End

Next in Series: [The Cold Truth](#)