

The Cold Truth

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Summary: While stranded in a parallel universe with Clark, Lex, and a few others, Lois discovers something shocking. (Part 5 of the Ice Age series)

Story Size: 6,203 words (35 kB as text)

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“Luthortopia”, as Lex had christened this ice-aged parallel Earth, was definitely not making Lois’s list of top vacation destinations. It had been days since she and her coworkers had come for what was supposed to be a short interview: Lex was going to pose for some pictures and talk about his plans for solving over-population thanks to this uninhabited version of Metropolis, and then they were all going to go back to the *real* Metropolis to enjoy things like takeout, and hot showers, and fresh changes of clothing. As it was, Lois pulled Clark’s suit jacket tighter around herself as she lay in her tent and swore that she’d never take anything for granted ever again.

She shifted beneath the spread sleeping bag, willing herself to fall back asleep despite the deep chill of permafrost seeping up through the tent’s floor and into her bones. Beside her, Dr. Jill Plummer apparently had much more luck as the woman’s soft snoring was barely audible over the wind howling outside. It probably helped that Jill and the other three scientists had already been dressed for the frozen climate when the portal was destroyed. It possibly also helped that Jill was in a committed relationship with one of them, so there was no reason for her sleep to be interrupted by dreams of Superman coaxing her out of her clothes only to begin dousing her with his ice-breath instead of doing anything actually fun.

With a sigh, Lois gave up her fight with insomnia and pulled her thermal blanket around her shoulders. Her back ached, her skin felt grimy, and she had an increasingly pressing desire to admire nature. For a brief moment, she thought about waking Dr. Plummer to ask for an escort, but ultimately decided against it. The woman probably wouldn’t be able to do much if a saber-tooth tiger decided to have a Lois-icle for a midnight snack, and besides, at least

one of them should be able to get some sleep tonight. She groped around for the flashlight, then donned the galoshes Dr. Carroll had scrounged up for her and quietly slipped out into the night.

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By the time the bushes had been sufficiently admired, Lois’s teeth were chattering and her toes had begun to feel worryingly numb. She quickly did her best to reinvent hygiene, then started on the long walk back to the tent. She hadn’t quite reached the ashes of the campfire when something moved in the darkness, and a noise from very close by made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

Lois stilled, the white mist of her breath barely visible as she clicked off the flashlight in an effort to disappear. She had clearly been detected, though, as something large and covered in fur began slowly moving towards her. Based on what she could tell of the height, it had to be a bear. Lois remembered a camp leader teaching her group the rhyme “If it’s brown, fall down; if it’s black, attack back!”, but the darkness made it impossible for her to tell what color it even was...

The flashlight! In a desperate gamble, Lois positioned herself on her toes, ready to run, and shone the blinding light right in the creature’s face.

Clark held his hands up in front of his eyes, blinking rapidly against the sudden illumination.

“Clark?!”

His hands slowly lowered as he stared at her, still blinking.

“Oh, Clark! Thank goodness it’s only you!” The flashlight fell to the ground and she threw her arms around him in relief. Soft fur greeted her fingers instead of the synthetic material of the LexLabs thermal blankets. She pulled back, reluctant to leave the warmth of his body but also needing to see him more clearly. His unshaven state had already begun to lend him a rugged look, and the new addition of animal furs now made him seem like a true citizen of the stone-age. All he needed was Lex’s homemade spear to complete the aesthetic. “What is all this? You look like you’re turning into a caveman!”

He tilted his head at her, then leaned forward and began to actually sniff her hair.

“Oh, knock it off!” She stepped back, pulling her blanket tighter around herself. “Besides, I don’t think any of us smell like daisies anymore.” She gave a short laugh, and the light still shining from the flashlight on the ground caught the bottom of the puff of white.

Clark frowned, moving around her in a slow circle and staring at her abdomen. “...Lolo?!”

“I said knock it off!” Lois rolled her eyes, then reached up to inspect the large animal skin draped over his shoulders. “Where did you even get this, anyway?” The pelt fell away from him at her tug, exposing a bare chest that had been smeared with an ‘S’ in red pigment.

Lois stared at the figure in front of her as an impossible idea began to knit itself together in her head. Despite his looking like her partner in the low light of the flashlight, Lois could now see that his beard and hair were longer than she would have expected given the rate at which Clark’s seemed to be growing, and he wasn’t wearing Clark’s ever-present glasses. He also seemed perfectly oblivious to the freezing wind now buffeting his naked torso.

“Lolo,” he said again, followed by a string of nonsense—or at least, it should be nonsense if Clark was just playing a weird joke on her that involved hair-growth tonic and furs and a red clay he’d found somewhere under all this ice and snow. He scooped her up as though she weighed nothing, cradling her against his chest the way Superman had done many times. Lois gasped, losing her grip on the animal skin.

Before the pelt even hit the ground, the two of them were airborne.

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Light appeared on the horizon, illuminating a vast ocean beneath them as the sun raced upwards. Flying with Superman had always felt a little unreal, but this...maybe this *was* only a dream, and she had fallen asleep next to Dr. Plummer after all. It would certainly explain why she no longer felt the cold despite the wind whipping through

her hair. It would also explain why her pilot so closely resembled Clark, even though she now knew he couldn’t possibly be.

Massive chunks of ice floated in the water, catching and reflecting the brightening daylight. The ice eventually gathered into a frozen shore-line, and soon afterwards they were passing over tree-covered hills and high mountains. As they drew closer to one of the mountains, they began to descend.

Not-Clark landed a short distance away from a natural opening in the rock and set her on her feet. “Lolo,” he began, and then started saying words that she had no way of understanding.

A few people began to trickle from the mouth of the cave, staring curiously at both of them. While Definitely-Not-Clark spoke, the crowd around them grew. Children clung to the hands of parents and elders; men scratched perplexedly at their beards; women turned to each other and shrugged. Then the crowd parted, and a small, heavily-pregnant woman waddled towards them.

“KAL-EL?!”

Most-Definitely-Not-Clark broke off in what sounded like the middle of a sentence and gaped. “Lo...lo?” He looked at Lois. He looked at the woman. He looked at Lois again.

There was something slightly familiar about the woman, maybe somewhere around the eyes. A part of Lois wondered if this could be her own far-distant ancestor; or at least, the ancestor of whoever this universes’ Lois Lane would be. The woman marched up to Super-Most-Definitely-Not-Clark, took in a deep breath, and began shouting incomprehensible gibberish at top volume.

The man who was somehow Superman and also a cave-man tried in vain to get a word in while the woman screamed and ranted, tears running down her face. She pounded on his chest, which of course had no effect on the man of steel—man of stone?—and finally fled back into the cave with a sob. The caveman who was Superman followed, calling after her and apparently forgetting Lois completely.

The crowd, however, had not forgotten Lois. They continued to stare at her, some daring to creep closer and a few even sniffing the air in her direction. They looked towards the cave, in the direction Super-Caveman and the woman had gone. They looked at her.

Lois gave a nervous chuckle. “I don’t suppose any of you can give me a lift back to Metropolis?” She shivered, pulling her blanket tighter and wrapping her arms around herself. The weather here was no warmer than it had been back at the campsite, and now that either Superman or his

distant ancestor had left, she was bereft of whatever had been shielding her from the cold.

The crowd spoke among themselves, then shuffled again, making way for an old man. He walked slowly towards her, leaning on the shoulder of a boy she guessed to be around Jimmy's age. The pair stopped just in front of Lois, and the older man looked her over. His gaze was surprisingly intense, and yet Lois found herself relaxing, slightly. Something about these two strangers felt inexplicably...right.

The old man held his hand up, and a hush fell. He spoke to the crowd in words that Lois had no hope of understanding, then he turned back to her and beckoned for her to follow. Lois didn't even bother to weigh her options before going with them into the relative warmth of the cave.

* * *

Clark stared at the lion skin on the ground, already covered with a sheen of frost that glittered in the gray light of dawn.

Dr. Carroll nudged it with the toe of his boot and turned to Dr. Diggory. "What do you think: an American Lion?"

The plump scientist adjusted his glasses. "Pre-Sangamonian, and this close to woodlands? Between that and the coloring, a Eurasian Cave Lion makes more sense."

"It doesn't make sense at all!" Lex snapped, white mist exploding in front of him.

Everyone stared at the lion skin.

Dr. Lewis took a deep breath, forming a small cloud which the wind carried away. "So, here's what the evidence is pointing to: Lois got up in the middle of the night and came outside..." He looked at Dr. Plummer who nodded, her forehead knitted in concern. He then motioned to the heap of ash and charcoal behind them, frowning. "She came to the remains of the fire, and was surprised by...a very lost lion. Lois somehow managed to kill it, without either of them drawing blood. She then skinned it and disappeared with the rest of the body."

Lex stared at Dr. Lewis. "*That* is your theory?!"

The scientist shook his head. "No, that's my *hypothesis*. Do you have a better one?"

Jimmy blinked up at them, still shivering beneath his blanket. His words came out in a white puff. "Could she have been abducted by aliens?"

Clark lowered his glasses and briefly ran a light dose of heat-vision over Jimmy's quaking form.

Dr. Carroll rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Please don't tell me you're one of those people who think all of man's early accomplishments were due to Promethean aliens."

"Well, it makes as much sense as a teleporting lion!" Jimmy's shoulders relaxed a little and he gradually stopped shaking.

Before replacing his glasses, Clark studied the lion skin once more, looking at and through it. He was no expert on hunting or skinning, but his gut told him that this lion hadn't been alive last night. A small rock lay underneath it, about the size of his palm, with one well-sharpened edge. The hairs on the back of Clark's neck began to rise.

Dr. Carroll snorted. "Well, if that's how we're meriting ideas, then maybe Santa Clause swung by in his magic sleigh and flew off with her!"

"Uh, guys?" Clark pushed his glasses back up. "Are we sure that there aren't any other humans here?"

The four scientists all nodded, and Dr. Diggory spoke. "Oh, very. Assuming humans still exist on this planet as on ours, the era in which they cross the land-bridge into Alaska is still a very long way away."

Dr. Plummer came to stand beside Dr. Diggory, slipping her hand into his. "And even if they did somehow arrive earlier, they wouldn't be able to survive the predators here for very long. In order to stand a chance on this continent right now, you'd either need the advantages of modern technology, or you'd need to be Superman."

Jimmy whimpered and pulled the thermal blanket up over his head, like a turtle retreating into its shell.

Clark stared once again at the skin and the sharpened stone, and one more thought crossed his mind: whatever had happened, he hadn't heard Lois scream. "I'm going to look for her." Without waiting for a response, he ran as fast as human speed would allow until the woods could shield his departure from their view.

The others shouted after him.

"Clark?! Clark, don't go alone! You'll die out there!"

"The megafauna—!"

"CK, don't be crazy!"

"So does this mean that the rationing—OW!"

* * *

The fire at the mouth of the cave crackled merrily, its light playing on the rough stone walls that shielded Lois from the icy wind just beyond. This might not be the romantic arctic palace that her dreams of Superman featured, but it was warm, and her hosts had graciously provided her with food. She let the thermal blanket fall to the ground beside her as she ate, though she chose to keep Clark's suit jacket on. The young man who reminded her of Jimmy examined the

blanket curiously, pulling it through his fingers and feeling all of its edges.

The roast beef smelled and tasted like heaven! Lois hadn't had high expectations when the old man had sent the younger out to dig up some meat that had been buried under a patch of ice. She'd braced herself for barely-palatable "caveman food", but somehow, the simple fare that was just burned in a fire with no seasonings put the modern, fancy-packaged foods provided by LexLabs to shame.

While the food was cooking, and even throughout the meal, several people came up to the fire with their own pieces of meat. They exchanged words and sometimes food with the old man, and a few even tousled the younger man's hair; but mostly, they sat by the fire and stared at Lois. One woman surrounded by several children had even come right up to Lois, looked her over with a decidedly belittling expression, and tried to feel Clark's jacket. At a word from the old man, the woman had let go and departed with her children, but Lois still burned with an instant dislike of her.

Deeper into the cave, the Super-Caveman she'd mistaken for Clark had apparently begun to lose his patience with the pregnant woman. Lois couldn't understand their words, but their tones and body language translated for them. The woman planted her feet apart and folded her arms over her belly, glaring at him. With a sigh, he rolled his eyes and turned away, pushing his fingers up through his hair. Something about the motion sent a jolt through Lois, and she tried to figure out why it seemed so familiar. It was certainly never something she'd seen Superman do back home...

Really, it was hard to imagine Superman, in any universe, having what appeared to be a marital spat. Imagining him married was easy enough: that was a fantasy she'd frequently indulged in, with herself as the co-star. But as for fighting, it simply wouldn't happen. His only flaw would be that he'd be so busy saving the world that he'd be late for dinner or miss an anniversary or two; but of course, that would be perfectly understandable, and so Lois would be more than willing to overlook it. No, Superman was perfect, and it followed that any relationship he entered would be perfect too.

Super-Caveman sighed and stepped away from the woman, as though he were about to leave, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. More chatter ensued, with occasional waving in Lois's direction. He gave a deep sigh. "Lo-Lo..."

Every hair on the back of Lois's neck stood up. The man who spoke that word might fly, like Superman did, and he might be called Kal-El, which was also Superman's name, but that voice and the tone he just used belonged entirely to Clark. It was exactly how her partner dragged out her name

whenever she was—well, whenever he *thought* she was being unreasonable.

The woman shifted from yelling to crying, one hand resting on her enlarged belly while the other came up to scrub at her tears.

The caveman, whoever he really was, softened his stance and spoke to her in a gentler tone. He reached up to his own shoulders but, finding the lion skin absent, settled instead for pulling the woman into his arms. She came willingly, and he brushed his thumb along her tear-dampened cheeks.

Lois absently raised a hand to the lapel of Clark's suit jacket, which he had put around her shoulders when they first arrived in this frozen world. Not for the first time, she found herself wondering how he could endure the cold without even the meager protection it offered. She stared at the caveman, whose furs covered very little now that the lion-skin cape was gone, and yet he hadn't even blinked when it had fallen from his shoulders and exposed him to the night's plummeted temperatures. Of course, the caveman was somehow this world's Superman.

And the caveman was Clark.

The smile he now bestowed on the woman wasn't the reserved one Superman occasionally favored her with after a rescue; it was the dopey one Clark had worn back when she first warned him not to fall for her. Clark, who kept checking her and Jimmy for frostbite but never seemed concerned about his own extremities. Clark, who still had the energy to set up camp after hours and hours of walking over ice and tundra while pulling a heavy sled. Clark, who somehow predicted where the woods were before they were even in sight; Dr. Lewis had needed a telescope to confirm it.

Lois's eyes flicked to the mouth of the cave and the frost-covered trees beyond. She rose to her feet, aware that people were staring at her as she left the warmth of the fire and stepped out into the wind's icy blast. Maybe they'd think she was crazy—frankly, she was starting to wonder it herself—but, she just had to know.

She inhaled. "HELP, SUPERMAN!"

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Before Lois could consider whether to shout again, a crack of thunder shook the forest and Superman stood in front of her. Slacks and a dress shirt replaced the tights, but Lois knew the truth.

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A crowd of on-lookers gathered in the mouth of the cave, but none dared to venture outside. The man in front of Lois didn't even seem to notice them as he looked her over, his face ashen. "Lois! Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." Lois studied his face, from the beard now covering a strong jaw that she had once described to a sketch artist, to eyes that she had in one breath called "vibrant" and "insipid". How had she worked beside him for months—been rescued by him for months—and never managed to see the truth right under her nose? She reached up to remove his glasses, and he made no move to stop her. "All this time..."

He swallowed. "I uh—I understand this might be a bit of a shock—"

"No kidding!" She stepped away from him, as though he were a magic-eye puzzle that needed to be viewed from a distance in order to make any sense. The biting wind chastised her for moving too far from his body heat, and she hugged herself in a feeble attempt to warm up. Paltry as the LexLabs blanket had seemed, she already regretted leaving it behind.

He swept his gaze over her from head to toe, and Lois suddenly felt warmer. She stared at him, her jaw slack.

"Better?" When she failed to answer, he quietly reached for the glasses still in her hand. Her grip loosened immediately, and he slipped them back on. Even though he didn't really need them. Even though she knew the truth.

Hot blood began racing through her veins, and she found her voice again. "So, were you ever going to tell me that my best friend is really Superman, or were you too busy laughing at me?!"

The mist from his sigh obscured him for a moment. "Your best friend is really Clark Kent. Superman is—"

"Don't lie to me!" Heat rushed to her face as her mind began cross-referencing some of the more intimate conversations they'd had. "Oh, God! I said so many things to you...in front of you...about you! You must have been struggling to keep a straight face the whole time!" She covered her eyes, suddenly wishing the ground would swallow her up.

"Lois, no!" His hands rested on her shoulders. "I was never, ever laughing at you."

She glared up at him again. "Then when were you going to tell me the truth?!"

He released her shoulders and looked away, silence answering for him.

Lois gasped. "You were never going to tell me."

"I..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I hoped to, someday. I just wanted..." He trailed off again.

"Wanted what?" She folded her arms, waiting for his reply. It didn't come. The wind rustled the trees, its piercing

chill vying against the heat of her anger. "Wanted to see how far I would go with my crush on Superman?"

"No!" His gaze snapped back to her. "No, if anything, that's the exact—you know what? Never mind." He shook his head, and a deep sigh bloomed white in front of him. "It doesn't even matter anymore."

"What did you want, *Clark*?" Lois stepped towards him, the mist of her breath spiraling away in the wind as she seethed. "What were you waiting for before you could tell me who you really are?"

His eyes narrowed at her. "I said forget it!"

Silence fell. Lois waited, her shivering growing more intense with each second that passed. She blew on her hands, and her teeth began to chatter. "Fine! Whatever your reasons were, you're here now. Let's just go back to the others."

He blinked at her, making no movement to scoop her into his arms or any such thing.

"Hello?" She frowned, waving towards the forest and the horizon beyond. "The others? You are going to take me back, right?"

He scratched his neck again, looking everywhere but at her. "I'm not sure," he finally mumbled.

"WHAT?!" Lois stared. She couldn't possibly have heard him correctly: obviously the wind was playing tricks.

He met her eyes. "Lois, this secret...If the wrong people knew, my parents would be in danger. Our lives could all be over. I can't risk anyone finding out."

She glared at him. "So, what—you think I'm going to start yapping about it to everyone?"

His gaze fell, and his reply was barely audible. "It's a possibility."

Lois gaped at him. When he did nothing to retract or qualify that statement, she threw her hands into the air. "Well, gee! Thanks a lot!"

He shrugged. "Even if you can resist the story, we're struggling with survival right now. Knowing that I'm Superman might become an issue of life or death." As if to illustrate his point, he swept his gaze over her again and the chill vanished.

Lois refused to acknowledge the warmth now flooding through her. "If I can resist the story," she mimicked. "Wow, you really know how to flatter a woman!"

His eyes narrowed, arms crossing in front of him. Even with the glasses, he suddenly looked more like Superman than like her mild-mannered partner. "Superman can't even

help a little old lady cross the street without it making page six. Are you going to pretend that printing his true identity wouldn't be an easy Pulitzer?"

If her glare could have ignited him, he would have been a cinder. "Do you think I've never buried a story in my life?!"

He blinked at her in genuine surprise. "You still can't tell anyone. None of the others. Not even the people close to you."

Her snort puffed white in front of her. "I do understand the concept of a secret." It wasn't as though she were that close to anyone, anyway...

"You can't tell Lex." His gaze hardened again.

Lois rolled her eyes and rubbed her upper arms as the cold seeped into her skin again. "What, are you afraid that Lex—"

"Yes."

She blinked, not expecting his abrupt answer. Her mouth snapped shut.

"Yes," he repeated. "I'm afraid that Lex would try to blackmail me, or worse, and I don't trust the people around him to keep the information from him." His expression saddened. "Especially someone who's dating him, for that matter."

Lois sputtered. "You—I—you—!" She stamped for warmth. "What is it with you and Lex, anyway?! You act like he's responsible for half the crime in Metropolis!" Clark opened his mouth, but she cut him off. "No! Don't you dare! Just because you have this weird jealousy—" She broke off, her finger still poking him in the chest. Superman's chest. But, if Clark was Superman, then why would he be...

"I'm not jealous of Lex," he said quietly, giving voice to her realization.

"No," she breathed, "you're not." She looked into his eyes, and it felt as though she were seeing him for the first time. Superman had his own fame, did his own good for the city, and if he wanted wealth, he could easily have that too. None of the petty reasons she'd imagined for Clark's hatred of Lex could possibly apply. Cold dread wrapped its tendrils around her heart. She swallowed. "What exactly do you have against Lex?"

He sighed and shook his head. "A lot of things, but nothing I can prove. I already told you half of it; what's the difference between Clark Kent telling you about Lex's plan to 'seize the high ground' or Superman telling you about Lex's conviction that people would die if Superman didn't leave Metropolis?"

Lois stared at him in growing horror. Her partner had, indeed, tried from his first days at the Planet to call her attention to suspicious coincidences surrounding Metropolis's greatest philanthropist. She had seen everything from a rookie reporter hoping to land the next great scandal, to a blue-collar guy wanting to take the upper class down a peg; but she'd been absolutely blind to the truth. The heat of her anger drained away, leaving only a cold clamminess behind. "I mean, if I had known—"

His eyes narrowed at her. "You know me. And you didn't believe me. And you're dating him."

A hot tear traced down Lois's cheek, freezing by the time it reached her chin. "Just go," she whispered.

"Lois—"

"Go!" She turned back towards the cave and its curious gawkers, now aware that nothing waited for her in the other direction. Her career as an investigator was a joke, Lex was a fake, and Superman...she bit back a sob. "I'll just...stay here. They have food and a fire, so maybe I'll just marry a cave-version of Ralph and live here for the rest of my life."

"Lois..." After a long moment, she heard his deep sigh and the crunch of approaching footsteps on the packed snow. "No. You can't just stay here forever. Your life is back in Metropolis."

A snuffle escaped, and she shook her head. "I'm staying. You can tell the others that I got eaten by one of the giant bears, or the saber-tooth tigers, or the terror birds."

"The terror birds are in South America."

The sob stuck in her throat, and she turned around to see if he was joking. He looked serious. Lois scrubbed at her cheek and stared at him. "...I made that last one up..."

He adjusted his glasses and shrugged, looking absolutely Clarkish. "Well, they're real. Dr. Carroll was telling me and Jimmy about them yesterday, along with bone-crushing dogs."

Lois nodded. "Right. Of course. Terror and Bone-Crushing and Fatalis and Horibilis and Clark I *hate* Luthortopia!"

His hands came up to her shoulders, and before she knew it, she was crying into his broad chest while his arms encircled her. Clark's arms. Superman's arms.

"I want to go home." Her words fought past the sobs only to be muffled against his shirt.

A strong hand rubbed her back. "I know."

Her own arms wrapped tightly around his waist, clinging desperately to him. "I don't want to marry Ralph."

“Nobody wants that, Lois.”

“Do you really think I’m going to go running to Lex with your secret?” She pulled back, daring to look up into his eyes. Superman’s eyes. Clark’s eyes.

He met her gaze. “...No. No, I don’t believe you will.” He pulled her close again, though she felt his shoulders sag. “You’re still my best friend, Lois, and I still have your back.”

“And I’ve got yours.” She sniffled. “So, any ideas how we can explain where we’ve been all this time?”

* * *

Kal- El was having the weirdest day of his entire life. Considering that his life so far had included strange powers and Jor-El’s talking egg and learning the complicated ways of his wife’s people, that was saying a lot. The woman wasn’t his Mad Wolf; that much was abundantly clear, and his wife had finally forgiven him for the error after seeing the other Kryptonian. While the couple had argued in their strange tongue, Mad Wolf had looked frequently between the other Kryptonian and himself, then finally squeezed his hand and told him he was excused. Afterwards, the couple had approached him and made it clear with their gestures that they wanted him to accompany them back to their land.

For some reason, Clark-Kent wanted him to carry the woman, and he also wanted to hold onto Kal-El’s arm as they flew. As they reached the tiny tribe in the land across the water, Kal-El realized why: Clark-Kent didn’t want the others to know about his powers. Considering the fear and rejection Kal-El had faced among his own people when he came of age, it was a very understandable position, and his heart broke for the man.

The tribe must have fallen upon disastrous times; a small wonder, given the harsh place in which they’d settled. Kal-El saw no children or elderly among the group that ran out to meet them when he landed: only five of the tribe’s hunters, one still a smooth-faced youth around Gopher’s age, and a single woman other than the one he carried. All were clad in the strange furs of creatures he had never encountered, and yet they all stared at *him* in shock and astonishment.

He set his two passengers down and looked around for their chief. It didn’t take long: one man clearly stood out from the others, still bearing the marks of great wealth and power despite the tribe’s currently harrowed condition. Kal-El placed a hand over his chest and approached their leader, dipping his head in respect. “Kal-El.”

More chatter rippled through the small crowd. The wealthy man’s eyes widened, and he copied Kal-El’s motion. “Eustace Diggory.”

* * *

Lois smiled a little at the flummoxed expression on the plump scientist’s face as the strange visitor introduced himself. The prehistoric Superman’s gaze soon landed on the discarded lion skin still lying in front of the nearby ash-heap, and his eyes lit up in recognition. He snatched it up and slung it around his shoulders once more, the “cape” completing the iconic look of Superman in any universe, and Dr. Diggory’s eyes bulged further.

Dr. Diggory shook his head and grinned. “So, it *was* a Eurasian lion! This explains everything.”

The remaining scientists goggled, inching closer to stare at Kal-El. Lois glanced at Lex and noticed that his lip had curled in disgust. Her own stomach roiled at the visible reminder of everything she’d failed to see.

Jimmy practically vibrated with excitement. “Kal-El? Isn’t that Superman’s real name? You guys were actually rescued by Superman?!”

Clark looked over to Lois, clearly waiting to hear her response.

Lois managed not to show the hurt at his obvious doubts. She smiled at Jimmy. “Yes, we really were! Apparently this universe has a Superman too, and he’s just as nice as the one back home.”

Dr. Lewis stared at the fur-clad figure. “This raises so many questions...”

Dr. Carroll pulled up the hood of his parka and crossed his arms. “Well, I hope he fed you, because the breakfast rations were already handed out while you were gone.”

Without taking his eyes off of Kal-El, Dr. Lewis elbowed his colleague in the ribs.

“Ugh! Fine!” Dr. Carroll sighed and fished a can of peaches from the depths of his pocket and pulled the tab. “This was supposed to be divided between three people, not two, so make sure you leave some for dinner.”

Kal- El suddenly straightened, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air. He whirled to face Dr. Carroll, his eyes widening as his gaze landed on the peaches. In two quick strides, he stood in front of the scientist and pointed to the can with an inquiring look.

Dr. Carroll pulled it closer to his body, one hand covering the lid. “No, you can’t have this. It’s ours.”

The caveman’s head tilted. He removed the lion pelt from his shoulders and held it out to Dr. Carroll.

Dr. Carroll shook his head. “Sorry, Buddy, it’s not for sale.”

An unreadable expression crossed Kal-El's face, and then with a crack of thunder, he vanished.

Dr. Diggory stared at the place where he had been. "Have we insulted him?"

Clark looked up into the sky. "I don't think so..."

Within seconds, a dot appeared on the horizon, growing at a rapid pace.

Jimmy stood close behind Clark, his head craning upward. "Is that a bird?"

Lois snorted. "It better not be a terror bird."

Dr. Lewis shook his head. "No, they're mostly flightless."

Dr. Carroll squinted up, still clinging to the can of peaches. "Well, it's definitely not a plane."

Dr. Plummer's eyes widened as the unidentified object flew close enough to have a distinct silhouette. "It's...a mammoth?!"

A massive, furry carcass landed a short distance away, causing the nearest trees to shake. Kal-El dropped lightly to the ground after it, walked up to Dr. Carroll, and pointed to the can of peaches again.

The scientist's jaw hung open, and a few seconds passed before he pushed the can into Kal-El's hands. "Uh, sure! Peaches for giant, dead mammoth. Here you go. Would you like it gift-wrapped?"

"Wait!" Dr. Plummer stepped towards them, waving her hands. "We don't have a lot of fruit; what about the risk of scurvy?"

Dr. Lewis blinked at her. "Jill, do you really care if your emaciated corpse has all of its teeth? Just let him have the peaches!"

Kal-El smiled, cradling the can in his hands as if it were more valuable than gold, and took off once more into the sky.

Jimmy grinned up at Lex. "So, Luthortopia has its own Superman! Is that cool or what?"

Lex stared wordlessly at the massive beast. His gaze drifted to the long trunk trailing along the ground, and he gave it a swift kick.

"I'm going to get my camera!" Jimmy tightened his blanket around his shoulders and ran back to the tent he shared with Clark and Dr. Carroll.

"A mammoth..." Dr. Lewis grinned and shook his head. "The rescue team will need to help us carry the leftovers!"

Lois watched the others rejoice, half-listening as they discussed butchery and skinning and the possible uses of tusks and bones. Dr. Diggory slipped an arm around Dr. Plummer. Jimmy's camera clicked several times, while Lex continued to look completely stupefied. She found Clark staring at her intently, though she couldn't read his expression at all. Maybe he was just trying to warm her up again; after all, what were friends for?

She turned towards the horizon Cave-Superman had disappeared into. Cave-Clark. Kal-El. Whoever he was, he was long gone, now. No doubt, he was already back with his wife, feeding her the peaches and telling her all about the weirdos living over the sea. A part of Lois felt jealous of the other woman: no doubt her life was much less complicated, with her mate and her baby and her small tribe of hunter-gatherers.

But then again, Lois Lane thrived on complicated. She would find her own happiness, even if it ended up looking nothing like her dreams. Lois squared her shoulders, ready to face cold reality.

THE END

Next in Series: [The Mammoth in the Room](#)