

# Clarkus Maximus

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Summary: Tempus is at it again! This time, he's abducted Lois and Clark and left them in ancient Greece. With H.G. Wells nowhere in sight, they must turn to Xena: Warrior Princess for help. But what happens when Clark is captured by gladiator traders?

Disclaimer: I neither own nor make anything. I'm just playing with my toys again. All "Lois and Clark" characters, dialogue, and plot points belong to DC Comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions, and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. All "Xena: Warrior Princess" characters, plot points, and dialogue belong to Renaissance Pictures, Studios USA, and anyone else with a stake in the Xena franchise.

This story takes place after Season 4 of "Lois and Clark" (for which I have omitted the random, unexplained infant at the end of "The Family Hour") and after Season 2 of "Xena". I have taken many liberties with the gladiator fights. I have altered the circumstances of the Hercules episode "The End of the Beginning" - as the Chronos Stone was destroyed at the end of that episode. In this story, the stone was not destroyed but returned to its owner.

I have done my absolute best to try and make both fandoms as accessible as possible for those who might not be fans.

This story contains fight sequences and violence.

SPECIAL THANKS go out to KenJ for all of his awesome helping in creating realistic martial arts moves for Lois, as well as a realistic gladiator battle for Clark. Thanks Ken! You rock!

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Clark Kent finished tying the laces on his beat-up old sneakers, and silently promised himself that he would replace them soon. He was dressed casually in a pair of black basketball shorts and an ash grey tank top. He began to whistle a little tune as he went to the kitchen and retrieved two bottles of water from the refrigerator. In the warm air, condensation beads began to form on the plastic almost immediately. He smiled as he came back into the foyer and saw Lois coming down the steps. She was dressed in a pair of jean shorts and a light pink tank top. Her hair was pulled back into a loose pony tail. He was glad that she was letting it grow out again. He'd personally liked the pageboy cut she'd sported when he first met her. Of course, he also thought that Lois could shave her head bald and still be gorgeous.

"Ready?" he asked.

Lois shoved her house keys into her pocket as Clark handed her a bottle of water.

"Yeah, I guess so," she said, grabbing her sunglasses from the small table nearby. She didn't sound too happy.

"Come on, Lois," Clark said with a smile. "It'll be nice to go for a jog. It's kind of relaxing actually."

Lois smirked at her husband. "Easy for you to say. *You* don't sweat."

"We'll take it easy," he promised her.

He ushered her out of the door, locking it behind them.

It was a beautiful early summer day, and the first day of their week-long vacation that they had taken from the paper. The early

afternoon sun was shining brightly and it wasn't too hot out. Lois took a moment to stretch in front of their house, and then she and Clark trotted off in the direction of Centennial Park.

"I guess I do need to get back into the whole working out thing," she admitted as they jogged. "I've been eating *way* too many Double Fudge Crunch bars lately."

Clark chuckled. "We've both been kinda stressed lately," he offered. "I think Perry was relieved when we asked for some time off to recover from that Department of Public Safety fiasco."

"Yes, but no amount of junk food in the world affects *you*," she said with mock annoyance. "I, however, went through almost a half a case of them in the span of three weeks."

Clark said nothing. The smile on his face spoke for itself.

Soon enough, they entered the park. She followed Clark's lead to the jogging path. They struck out an easy pace as they made their way down the smooth, newly asphalted path. Not too long after though, Lois begged for a rest. Clark bit back a teasing retort and relented, guiding her off the path to the grass. Flopping onto a bench, Lois took a generous swig from her water bottle. Clark patiently waited for her to be ready to continue, taking a sip from his own bottle.

Lois watched as Clark tipped his head back to study a red tailed hawk that was flying nearby. He grinned as the hawk's mate flew into view, following the first to a nest in one of the oak trees. Clark had been the only reporter in Metropolis to chronicle the return of the birds to the city, thanks to the efforts of the Department of Wildlife. His series of articles on the subject had even earned him another Kerth nomination.

Though she smiled at her husband, Lois was a little anxious and she was fidgeting. Tonight could not come fast enough. She was going to prepare the filet mignon that she'd picked up at the supermarket the day before. Mentally, she checked over the list of ingredients, ensuring that she had gotten everything. She'd have to thank Clark's mother for the recipes once more, and let her know how well the meal was received.

A voice from behind them made her jump in fear.

"Well hello there, *my old friends*. Fancy meeting you here."

She stood and turned, not quite believing the voice that she'd heard. "*Tempus?!?*"

The time traveling man from the future smiled malevolently at them. "Boy, you're a quick one."

Clark rose from the bench. "How did you...?"

Tempus grinned. "Oh, I have my ways."

"You were in an institution for the criminally insane!"

"Yes, well, it's a good thing I have this, now isn't it?"

Tempus grinned, holding up a small silver square in his hand. "In case you were wondering, it's a spare time window. I've been holding on to it for a special occasion."

Without warning, Tempus lunged at the two. As he collided with them both, he activated the small device. In a flash of light and color, they were engulfed in the slipstream.

Seconds later, they found themselves at the edge of a forest. Clark and Lois blinked from the experience. Time travel had a way of making one feel just a tad queasy.

Tempus stood a little apart from them as they tried to get their bearings. "Yes, a time window," he continued, as though he'd never stopped speaking in the first place. "One that I've improved upon. No more annoying window to step through. Just press this little button and *whammo!* you and whoever or whatever else you are touching are instantly transported to the time and place selected."

"And exactly where is that?" Clark asked, eyeing the distance between himself and Tempus. If he could tackle him, he might have a shot of getting the device out of his hands. A swift glance to Lois told him that she was thinking along the same lines.

"Ancient Greece," Tempus said with twinkle in his eye and an evil grin on his face. "A time of myth and legend and extreme

violence. A world of petty cruelty. My kind of place, if you ask me.” He glanced at the stolen watch on his wrist. “Sorry, gotta go. I have important things to do! *Have fun!*” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Clark lunged at Tempus but it was too late. Tempus pressed the button on the time window and vanished right before his eyes. Clark blinked in surprise.

“What happened?” Lois asked.

“My super speed,” he said in a dazed whisper. “It’s gone.”

“*What?!*” The horror in Lois’ voice was evident. “Time travel hasn’t affected you before. You still had all of your abilities in Smallville 1966, when Tempus tried to kill you as a baby. Even during that little side trip to 1866, you still had your powers.”

“That’s true, but that was on our plane of existence.

Remember the trip we took on our wedding night? I didn’t have my powers then. Either they were in a different...universe...or because it was earlier incarnations of our souls...either way, I didn’t have my powers.”

“But this isn’t our earlier selves,” Lois protested, thinking about that strange trip. The writer H.G. Wells had taken them on a time traveling adventure in which Lois and Clark had been forced to find a way to stop an ancient curse that had been put on their souls. The curse promised a painful death for Lois from a mysterious illness anytime their souls consummated their love.

“Then I think that we are in a different universe altogether,” Clark concluded. He shook his head and looked at the place where Tempus had stood.

“I’ve been to an alternate dimension before,” Lois reminded him. “The alternate you had his powers.”

“Maybe in this universe...Krypton doesn’t exist. And maybe no Krypton means no powers,” Clark said with a sigh.

“So what do we do?” Lois asked, forcing aside her panic and turning to practical thinking, as she always did in a crisis.

Clark thought for a moment. “Well, I guess we could follow the path and see if we can find a village or a city or something. Try to figure out where we are.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. How do we get home, Clark?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But hey, we’ve been in worse scrapes before. We’ll figure out a way. And besides, H.G. Wells always seems to pop up whenever we’re in a time traveling, universe hopping dilemma.”

Lois didn’t laugh at his joke.

“Sorry,” he said after a moment. “Come on, let’s keep moving. We aren’t going to find a way home by standing around here all day.”

They walked down the packed dirt road side by side. As they walked, Clark discreetly tried each of his powers. Everything was gone. No super hearing, no speed, no flight, nothing. He was miserable. Losing his powers always made him feel empty inside. Half of himself was missing. And then there was the idea that his powers were necessary to protect Lois. If anything ever happened to her and he couldn’t do anything to stop it, he’d never forgive himself. Beside him, Lois was silent. He wasn’t sure he liked that either. A silent Lois was never a good thing.

Clark wasn’t sure how many miles they’d covered when the sun finally began to set. They still had yet to pass by any signs of civilization, aside from the worn, wide foot path that they were following.

“Clark, I don’t know how much further I can walk,” Lois complained. Her feet were killing her.

Clark stopped walking and looked around. “I guess we could find a place close by to camp for the night,” he said slowly. “Like we did on Spencer Spencer’s island.”

Lois slowly nodded as she thought it over. “Think you can find us some food?” she asked him. “Hopefully *not* banana-on-a-stick?” Despite herself, she was smiling a little at the memory of

being marooned on the deserted island with Clark. Or, at least, it had seemed deserted at the time.

Clark grinned. “I’ll try. Come on, let’s find a good spot.”

They turned off the path and entered into the dense forest. Not too far in, they found a wide, swift stream. Clark picked a smooth, flat area for their camp. He instructed Lois to get a fire going. Then, stripping down to his boxers, he waded into the stream. The water was cold and refreshing against his hot skin. He stuck his hands in the water and tried unsuccessfully to catch fish for their dinner.

An hour and half later, he finally gave up.

“Just as well,” he muttered. “It’s not like we’ve got a knife or anything.”

He quickly dressed and joined Lois at the campfire. At least they had that. He shook his head as Lois looked up expectantly at him. He sat and drew his wife into his arms.

“Sorry, honey,” he whispered into her hair as he nuzzled her. “I tried. I guess I need a rod and reel to fish with.”

“Oh Clark, I had this whole dinner planned for tonight. I was going to make it so very special.”

“Special?” he asked. “Lois, honey, every meal I have with you is special.”

Lois shook her head. “No, Clark. I meant really special. I thought we could celebrate tonight.”

“Celebrate?” he repeated. “Oh! Because the Department of Public Safety case is finally over and done with.”

“No,” Lois said again. “I thought we could celebrate...”

She did not get to continue her train of thought. Voices drifted through the trees. They were coming closer. Lois clutched at Clark fearfully, and felt his arms reflexively tighten around her. Lois relaxed only a little when she realized that the two voices were female.

“I’m telling you, I think *The Poseidon Adventure* is a great title for the whole Cecrops adventure,” one of the women was saying. “Or do you like *The Lost Mariner* better?”

“You’re the bard,” the other woman said, not seeming to care much. “But Poseidon wasn’t the only one to curse Cecrops.”

“True,” the first woman said thoughtfully. “*The Lost Mariner* it is then.”

“Come on, there’s a stream over here where we can camp for the night,” the second woman said, changing the subject.

Clark stood as two figures stepped out from the trees. He blinked as he caught sight of the owners of the voices.

The first was a petite, green-eyed, strawberry blonde girl, no more than in her mid-twenties. She wore a knee length brown skirt and a short green top that nearly resembled a sports bra. Her entire midriff was exposed. She carried a staff in her hand - a thick, sturdy piece of wood with a band of deer fur towards the top. It looked better suited for fighting with than as a walking stick.

The other was a tall, raven-haired beauty with piercing blue eyes. Clark guessed that she was older than the blonde, but still in her late twenties. She was dressed in leather that was so dark it was hard to tell if it was black or darkest brown. Aside from the leather...dress...Clark supposed he could call it, she wore knee high boots, gauntlets, matching arm bands, and a heavy breastplate. A sword in its scabbard rested across her back - Clark could see the hilt of the sword sticking up above her right shoulder. An odd, Frisbee-sized metal ring hung from her hip. Even at a distance, Clark got the impression that the object was very, very sharp.

The black haired woman was leading a roan mare. The horse walked placidly along, a couple of saddle bags hanging to either side.

As the women caught sight of Lois and Clark, they immediately grabbed for their weapons. Clark was astonished at how fast the taller woman unsheathed her sword.

"Whoa, wait a second," Clark said, putting his hands out before him, palms out in a gesture of peace. "We're not armed."

The tall woman appraised them silently. Apparently satisfied at what she saw, she put the sword back in its scabbard.

"You're not from around here," she said as she looked over their strange clothing.

"No, we're not," Clark agreed. "We're just...lost. Very, very lost."

"Where are you trying to go?" the strawberry blonde asked. "You're two days north of Calydon and a week from Parnassus."

"Oh God, Clark, we really *are* in Greece, aren't we?" Lois asked, a sudden sinking feeling engulfing her.

The two women before them exchanged a look. Clark ignored them for the moment.

"Yeah, I think we are."

The petite woman took a few steps toward them. "If you don't mind my asking, where did you think you were?"

Clark shrugged, looking for the right words. "It's a long story," he admitted. "But we were...abducted...by an old enemy of ours and dropped off some miles down the road." He jerked with his thumb to indicate the direction they had come from.

"Well, maybe we can help," the woman said. "My name is Gabrielle." She pointed to the woman in leather. "This is Xena."

Clark smiled. "Nice to meet you both. I'm Clark and this is my wife, Lois."

The four shook hands, though Xena and Gabrielle did it oddly, grasping Lois and Clark around their lower forearms, just above their wrists. Clark gestured to their small campfire.

"You're welcome to share," he said.

"Thanks," Gabrielle said brightly. She took the saddle bags from the horse and laid them close to the fire. "Xena, why don't you go find us some dinner and I'll brush down Argo." She took the reins from her friend's hand as she spoke.

"All right," Xena agreed.

She rummaged in one of the bags and pulled out some supplies. In minutes, she had set up some lines in the stream and was beginning to catch fish. Clark offered to help. He loved fishing, and besides, two people doing it were better than one. He stood a little downstream from Xena.

"Clark," Lois said, coming to his side. "What are you doing?"

"Catching us some dinner," he replied.

"No, that's not what I mean. Shouldn't we be finding a way back home?"

Clark sighed. "I've been thinking about it all day. We'd need another time machine to get back."

"You've built one before," she prompted. "When we had to get to Smallville the first time we ran into Tempus."

"Yes," Clark agreed. "But I don't remember how I did it. I know H.G. Wells left me plans for that, but I can't remember anything about them. That whole trip is still a little fuzzy in my mind. I mean, we were never supposed to remember it in the first place." He hesitated a moment. "There's something else," he admitted.

"I'm not going to like this," she said, noting the tone of his voice.

Clark sighed. "While we were on the road...I ran through every one of my powers. They are *all* gone. I'd hoped that maybe only one or two of them had gone...offline. But they are *completely* gone. Look." He bent and pointed to a thin line of dried blood on his left leg. "I scraped my leg on a branch when we were coming through the trees earlier."

Lois turned green as the realization set in. Clark pulled a fish to shore on the makeshift fishing pole.

"When we you going to tell me?" she hissed under her breath.

"Tonight. I just didn't want to upset you further," he said, flushing a little. "Big mistake, I know."

"Excuse me," Gabrielle cut in before Lois could utter a retort. "Did you say time travel? And powers? Are you...some sort of...god?"

"God? Me? Uh, no," Clark stammered, taken aback by the question.

He hadn't realized that the woman was behind them until she had spoken. He glanced over at Xena. She too, was looking at them with new interest.

Gabrielle frowned. "Demi-god? Titan? No wait, the titans are giants." Her frown deepened each time Clark shook his head.

"It's hard to explain," Clark said.

Xena gave him a hard look. "Try us," she challenged him.

"In my own time...I have these...abilities. But not here, it seems."

"But if you aren't a god, then what are you?" Gabrielle asked, confusion on her face.

Clark gave Lois a brief glance. An unspoken message passed between the two of them.

"I'm definitely not a god," he confirmed. "I just...wasn't born on this planet. Because of that, I have, well, powers, for lack of a better word. And the stuff you heard about time travel...we're from the future." He eyed them for a reaction and saw only confusion. "The man that we said abducted us...he took us from our time to here. And, I think, across dimensions. Come over to the fire; I'll try to show you what I mean."

Clark picked up the fish he had caught and followed Xena back to the fire. Gabrielle set to work gutting them and skewering them to cook over the fire. Clark sat on the ground, thinking of how to explain. At length, he took up a stick and drew two parallel lines in the dirt. On the top line, he marked an X on the far right end. On the bottom line, he marked an X on the left.

"This top line is my world," he explained. "This is the flow of time from the beginning of the world forward. The X is the year that Lois and I live in. The bottom line is your world. Both exist separately but together. And the X is how far in the past we are. Tempus took us across the two worlds and into the past." He connected the Xs with a diagonal line. "We need to figure out how to get back to this top X."

Something about time travel tickled in the back of Gabrielle's brain, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Like wisps of smoke, the thoughts keep vanishing each time she tried to grasp them. She said nothing. Sometimes, things had a way of coming back to her if she didn't think too hard about them.

"I think I get it," she said instead. "Xena, we've got to help them."

Xena nodded. "We'll do what we can," she promised.

"Thank you," Clark said gratefully. He gave Lois' hand a reassuring squeeze.

"So...gods?" Lois asked. She laughed a little.

Xena looked at her oddly. "I wouldn't laugh too hard if I were you. Too many of the gods take offense over things like that."

"But they don't exist," Lois said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Yes, they do," Xena said, and Lois sobered as she saw the seriousness on her face. "I've fought more than one of them. Most of them are petty and cruel."

"You're kidding!" Lois said. "You've actually met a god before?"

She was half fascinated, half skeptical. She'd always had an interest in myths when she was younger, but once she had become a reporter, her interest in fantasy had waned and been replaced with a desire for hard facts.

Xena gave Lois an amused smile. "More than one actually. Hades has called on my help before. And I've crossed blades with Ares numerous times. He was my mentor a long time ago."

"Hey! Maybe Ares can help us!" Gabrielle said. "He still owes you for helping him get his godhood back several months

ago.”

“No, Gabrielle. I don’t think he’d help us. We’re already even on that one. I helped him send Sisyphus back to Hades and he finally switched Callisto and I back into our rightful bodies. Besides, tampering with time and space isn’t his area.”

“Maybe Hercules could ask Zeus to help us then?”

Xena thought. “That’s not a bad idea. But I haven’t heard anything in a while of where Hercules is now. Last I heard, he and Iolaus were in Corinth, but that was over a month ago.”

Clark was listening with rapt attention. He had always been a fan of world mythologies, and had many books on the subject from the days he’d spent traveling the world between college and landing his dream job in Metropolis. Ancient Greek and Egyptian myths had always been his favorites. He smiled as he recognized the names. Ares, the god of war. Sisyphus, who was doomed to push a boulder uphill for eternity. Hades, the god of the dead and also the name of the Underworld itself. Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods. Hercules, Zeus’ half mortal son and the strongest man alive.

*Well, strongest man alive in this universe anyway,* he thought to himself wryly.

“You mean, Hercules is real?” he couldn’t help but to ask.

“He’s only a myth in the time that we come from.”

“Oh, he’s real all right,” Xena said with a nod. “He saved me from a very dark path once. He made me see that being an evil warlord wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, and that fighting for the greater good is.”

“Gods! Can you believe that, Clark?” Lois asked incredulously.

Clark chuckled. “Why not? I mean, look at us. We’re living proof that the improbable is possible. You’re married to a space alien, remember?” He winked at her.

Lois laughed a little. “I guess that’s true.”

“Plus, look at all of the other things that we’ve faced. Clones, amnesia, fifth dimensional imps, time travelers, resurrected villains, cyborgs, invisible men...” He ticked off each example on his fingers and let his voice trail off. “Ancient Greek gods wouldn’t surprise me in the least.”

Lois laughed lightly, tension draining from her. “I guess you’re right. Our life *is* pretty strange. Gods...sure, why not?”

Gabrielle checked on the roasting fish and then portioned out the food. Lois and Clark ate hungrily, their only meal having been a couple of egg salad sandwiches in the early afternoon, a couple of hours before they’d left for their jog in the park. Clark noticed that Lois even went back for seconds. As they ate, they swapped stories. Gabrielle was a bard and delighted in telling tales of the adventures she and Xena had been on together.

Lois and Clark told some of their own stories to the two women. It helped to pass the time, and Xena and Gabrielle seemed as curious about their world as Lois and Clark were of the one that they were now in. Idly, Clark wondered how much they could safely say about his alter-ego. But really, who would they tell? Still, he tailored the stories to protect his other identity as much as he could.

All around them, the night grew deeper. Fireflies lazily flew in the gathered darkness under the trees. Lois and Clark began to relax around their newfound friends. No more was said about getting them back to their own time. It was a huge dilemma, and not one that could be solved easily. Eventually, they each lay down for the night to sleep. Xena and Gabrielle offered them a spare set of skins to lay out on the ground beneath them. Lois fell asleep more quickly than she had thought possible, secure in Clark’s reassuring arms.

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A flash of light caught the eye of the ragtag group of men that were huddled around their campfire. A yearling buck was roasting over the fire on a spit. One burly man turned the spit

slowly, but stopped and looked up when the light flashed. As the light receded, the figure of a man stepped forward. The group of rough looking warriors jumped to their feet, brandishing their weapons.

“Hello there,” the man spoke. “Put your weapons down. I’m not here to fight you.”

One of the men rushed forward, sword drawn. There was a flash of light and sound like a crack of thunder. The man stumbled forward, clutching his chest. He sank to his knees and was dead before he hit the ground. His blood soaked into the dirt. The horses neighed and stamped in fright, the whites of their eyes showing.

Tempus held the gun before him. “Anyone else?” he asked.

The group of men stepped back a few paces in fear.

“Good,” Tempus said, holstering the weapon once more.

“Now then, I know who and what you are. I want you to do something for me.”

“Are...are you a god?” the leader of the ruffians asked.

Tempus smiled widely. “Why yes. Yes I am.”

He laughed as he set his plan into motion and instructed the leader on what he wanted him to do.

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The next morning broke warm and clear, the sky above cloudless. After a breakfast that consisted of leftovers from the previous night, they broke camp. They struck a northward path as they walked that afternoon. Xena explained that she was on her way to a Centaur village where she had friends.

They stopped to rest in the mid afternoon. Xena chose a shady spot just off the main road. Lunch consisted of round, flaky loaves of bread and a sharp yellow cheese. Just as they finished, Clark’s ears suddenly pricked up. Even without his super hearing, he could hear the violent rustle of tree branches close by, though there was only a gentle breeze blowing. Xena heard it as well, and was looking intently at the surrounding forest, a slight smile curving her lips, as though she could hear something that no one else could.

Before Clark could say anything, the woman jumped, flipped, grabbed a low hanging branch, and pulled herself into the trees. He blinked in surprise. He’d never seen a move quite like it before. Moments later, Xena jumped back down, followed by a man in a green tunic and black leather pants. Clark’s mouth dropped open as he studied the man before him.

The man looked exactly like Bill Church Jr., down to the unique L-shaped scar on the left side of his chin. The only difference was that this man sported a mustache and goatee. Lois’ look of surprise mirrored his own.

“Autolycus,” Xena said, with the affection of someone greeting an old friend. “Nice of you to drop in.”

“That’s it!” Gabrielle said, snapping her fingers. Seeing Autolycus had finally jarred the memory she had been searching for.

“That’s what?” Autolycus asked, coiling his grappling hook and rope. “And, by the way, good to see you too.” His words dripped with sarcasm over Gabrielle’s lack of a greeting.

“The Chronos Stone!” Excitement rang in Gabrielle’s voice. “You stole the Chronos Stone months ago.”

“Yeah,” Autolycus said, uncertainty in his voice. “Hercules made sure that the museum got it back though. I guess he told you the story. Uh, why?”

“Legend has it that the stone has the ability to send people through space and time. Is that true?”

Autolycus slowly nodded. “Yeah, I tried it out myself. But uh, why again?”

“Because we need you to steal it again for us,” Xena said coolly, picking up on where Gabrielle was going with her train of thought. “Autolycus, meet Lois and Clark. They need the stone to get back home. Lois, Clark, this is Autolycus.”

“The King of Thieves,” he added, “at your service.” He shook hands with Clark in that same odd, forearm grabbing fashion, and then lightly kissed Lois’ hand.

Clark glared at the man’s brazen move, then turned his eyes to Xena.

“Xena, I don’t know about this. Stealing?” Clark said, fidgeting a little. “It kinda goes against everything that I stand for.”

“Clark!” Lois admonished. “I know it’s not ideal, but really, what choice do we have?”

“That doesn’t mean that I like it,” Clark said defensively.

“Sometimes we don’t have a choice in doing what we would *like* to do. Did you have a choice when Mazik made you steal those diamonds for him? No, you didn’t,” she answered for him. “It was either steal the diamonds or have Mazik kill your parents and tell the entire world about who you are.”

“Oh ho ho! A fellow thief?” Autolycus asked.

Clark shot him a sharp look. “No. Where I come from, I put thieves and other criminals in jail.”

“Clark...” Lois’ voice was full of warning.

Clark paused a moment and sighed, collecting his thoughts and calming his emotions. His shoulders slumped in defeat. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I guess I...overreacted. I’m not used to being so helpless. We’d appreciate whatever help you can give us.”

Xena nodded in understanding and then turned to the thief. “Think you could do us this favor?”

Autolycus flashed a smile. “Well now, that depends. What’s in it for me?”

Xena arched one eyebrow, a knowing smile on her lips. “I hear that the security system in King Quallius’ palace museum has been *triple*d.” Her words took on a nearly seductive tone, knowing that Autolycus wouldn’t be able to resist facing the challenge to prove that he was as good a thief as he boasted.

Autolycus thought for a moment and smiled back. “Ah, a challenge then. Okay, I’ll do it!” His eyes sparkled with the lust for a challenge.

“Come on, let’s get moving,” Xena said. She grabbed Argo’s reins and began leading the little group towards the city where Lois and Clark’s best hope to return home lay.

The going was easy. The land rose and fell gently beneath their feet. After a time, the land flattened out once more. They left the path and headed across a wide, open grassy plain. The short grass was springy beneath their steps. Clark marveled at how green the surrounding country was. It was like the world around him was fresh and new compared to the one he lived in. In some ways, it kind of reminded him of some of the areas he’d seen when he’d been in New Zealand. He’d been there for a couple of months before he’d gone on to Australia, where he’d studied the Dreamtime in Aboriginal Mythology.

They talked easily as they walked. For a short time, Autolycus and Xena chatted, catching up with one another. Lois and Clark got the impression that the thief was a close and trusted friend of the warrior woman. Once the two were caught up, the two reporters shared more tales of their various, and often strange, adventures in Metropolis. Gabrielle seemed particularly drawn to the story of how Clark had battled Lord Nor, a ruthless survivor of Krypton’s demise. She gasped when Clark related how he’d left Lois behind on Earth to travel to New Krypton with Zara and Ching, only to have to turn right around when Nor decided to invade Earth. Her eyes had gone wide at Lois’ depiction of the biased trial that Clark had received and his narrow escape from being executed on trumped up charges of treason. Xena had been most attentive as Clark described dueling with Nor in the streets.

In return, Gabrielle was happy to supply them with more tales from her travels with Xena. She was just finishing the story of

how they had teamed up with Hercules and Iolaus to free Prometheus, when they heard the first rumble of hooves behind them. Their little procession halted as they turned to see what was coming.

Amid a cloud of dust, a group of mounted warriors were swiftly approaching. Each had a weapon in his hand.

“Get back!” Xena commanded Lois and Clark. She drew her sword and adopted a defensive stance. Beside her, Gabrielle stood ready, her heavy staff in her hands. Autolycus cracked his knuckles in preparation for the fight.

“Shouldn’t we run?” Lois asked.

Clark gave her a brief, surprised glance. Normally Lois would be the first one to jump into a bad situation head first. Maybe she was finally realizing how foolish that could be.

“No chance of losing them in this terrain,” Xena said. “We stand and fight.”

Clark glanced around at the ground, looking for a weapon. He settled on a long, curved and twisted piece of wood. It had probably fallen from a traveler’s cart, he reasoned. He hefted the weight in his hands and twirled it like a staff. He forced himself to think of it as a *drei* - the Kryptonian staff-like weapon that he’d used when he’d fought Lord Nor more than a year before. He dearly wished there was another length of wood nearby. As much as he didn’t want Lois to have to fight, he would feel better if she had something to defend herself with. Without his powers, he realized that he might not be fast enough, or strong enough, to protect her the way that he wanted to.

“Lois, stay behind me,” he said.

The horsemen approached rapidly. Clark tightened his grip on his makeshift staff.

“Twenty-five,” Xena said, counting the approaching men.

Gabrielle smirked. “Not good odds for them.”

Xena chuckled in response.

Soon, the ragtag group of vicious-looking warriors were upon them. Xena was the first to react. With a flip, she launched herself at the nearest man. Her war cry pierced the air. Before the man could react, she had knocked him from the saddle, and he landed with a thud on the grass. Men leapt from their horses. Xena was instantly off the man she’d knocked to the ground, and turned to face a man with drawn sword. A harsh clang rang out as his blade met her own in mid air. Behind her, another man approached. She kicked backwards quickly and her boot collided with the man’s stomach. He was forced back several steps and doubled over in pain. Not once did Xena lose focus on the man with the sword. She easily parried each thrust, turning the sword aside time and time again. A new thug approached her from behind. Together, he and the other man rushed her from both sides. Xena ducked into a crouch at the last possible second. Above her head, the two men impaled themselves on each other’s swords.

Gabrielle’s staff was a blur. She wielded it with expert precision, knocking out thugs left and right. A quick thrust to the chest of one man with a mace dropped him easily. Another swing of the staff brought another man down as it connected with his skull. A low sweep knocked two others off of their feet. Autolycus fought hand-to-hand with another man beside Gabrielle. His grappling hook shot out of his sleeve. He swung it around himself, using the weighted metal to strike approaching warriors in the head.

Clark was in the fray as well, keeping Lois as close to him as he could. He swung his makeshift staff. One blow connected with a warrior’s jaw and sent the man sprawling. Another swing cracked across the chest of another, sending him stumbling backwards. A few times, the weapons of the men attacking him came dangerously close to his body. The thought was alarming. If only he had his powers, he could have single-handedly ended the fight in seconds. Behind him, Lois was employing her knowledge of self defense moves. Her sneaker connected with the groin of

her current attacker. The man's eyes rolled in his head and he dropped to the ground, uttering moans of pain.

Clark chanced a glance at Xena. Five thugs lay unmoving at her feet. Her sword was covered in blood and clots of gore. Clark's stomach turned and he forced his gaze away. Another man was rushing him, a sword in his hands. Clark reacted quickly, trying to parry, but the warrior was quicker. Pain lanced him as the sword dragged across Clark's right bicep. The wound was shallow but it burned like fire. A line of blood appeared on his torn flesh. Clark raised his staff and deftly struck the man in his head, crumpling his attacker to the ground.

Lois, meanwhile, was being rushed by a man wielding a mace. She took up a defensive stance, her heart in her mouth. The mace rose into the air as the man prepared to bring it down on her. Lois anticipated the motion and swiftly stepped beneath the arc of the downward swing. Her left foot shot forward as she leaned towards the man. She quickly crossed both of her arms at the forearms, making a V above her head. She wasn't a moment too soon, and the man's arm crashed into her forearms. Lois took the advantage of the man's surprise and twisted her hand to grab the thug's arm. Shifting her weight, she pulled him off balance, then delivered a roundhouse kick to his stomach. As the wind rushed from his lungs, he dropped the mace. Lois snatched it up just in time, glad to have a weapon, even if it was heavy and unwieldy in her hands. The man recovered quickly and Lois swung the mace with all of her strength. She caught the thug in his right arm. The fragile bones in his arm snapped and the man screamed. Lois brought the heavy mace around in a second arc, this time low enough to break his legs.

"That's my wife," Clark said with astonished pride. He'd been close enough to see Lois' moves. "Remind me never to get on your bad side." Clark brought his arm back and punched a thug in the face, breaking the man's nose and sending him sprawling in the grass.

"You know that you love it. It's one of the many reasons why I'm the perfect match for you," Lois shot back, amazed that she could banter with Clark even in these circumstances.

She swung the mace at a man who held a broadsword. The weapon crashed into the man's weaker left side, shattering his ribs and collapsing him atop the man whose legs Lois had broken.

Xena delivered a roundhouse kick to the back of another man, sending him flying a few feet into the chest of one of his companions. Using her momentum, she thrust her blade into the gut of another man who was rushing at her with a crude club raised above his head. As she fought, she used her free hand to grasp the metal ring that hung at her hip. Pulling it free, she used it as a second weapon, using the razor sharp edge to slice at her attackers. One man caught the deadly weapon across his throat. He gurgled and died as his blood poured from the gash.

Deftly, Xena hurled the chakram at a thug that was approaching Clark. With an arc, the chakram flew through the air and embedded itself into the man's chest, killing him instantly. Xena easily sidestepped another thug and retrieved her weapon. With a grunt, she pulled the weapon from the dead man's chest. She hurled it again at a group who had managed to separate Lois from Clark. The chakram sliced through the empty air. It struck the first man in the group in his helm, stunning him. It then ricocheted from helm to helm, knocking out Lois' assailants, before arcing back to Xena. She caught the weapon easily.

"Thanks," was all Lois could manage, marveling distractedly that the chakram hadn't seemed to harm Xena, despite the razor edge that it bore.

Xena barely heard Lois as she turned to trade blows with another sword-wielding thug. Sparks flew as metal met metal. Another war cry erupted from Xena's throat as she did battle. She jumped and planted her feet into his chest, using him as a

springboard into a back flip. She landed on the shoulders of another thug, her thighs straddling his head. She brought the hilt of her sword into the back of the man's skull, knocking him out. As he fell, Xena flipped again, landing behind a different warrior. Her sword pierced his stomach as he turned to face her, and exited out the other side of his body.

Such was the confusion of the battle that no one noticed when Clark was struck in the back of his head. He went down hard, his glasses slipping from his face as he hit the ground. Two burly men reached down and carried him off. A horn sounded a retreat, one loud, long, high pitched and off key note. Lois saw the horn-blower and couldn't tell if he was blowing into a shell or a hollowed out piece of bone. Warriors began to flee from the battle, mounting their horses and speeding away. Lois heard shouts about the "she-demon" they had fought.

Almost a dozen dead men lay on the field of battle. A few others were groaning in pain from their wounds. Many of the wounds were severe. Xena eyed the carnage with a cold eye. She paused to wipe the blood from her sword on the tattered cloak of a scrawny little man as she stood above his corpse. She watched the retreating warriors for a long moment.

"Everyone all right?" Xena asked, turning back to her friends. Lois looked around and then panicked when she did not see her husband.

"Clark? Clark!?" She spun from side to side, searching. "Clark?!" Her eyes inspected the whole of the battlefield. After a minute, she caught a glint of something in the grass. She bent to examine it and screamed when she saw it.

Clark's glasses.

"Oh God! No," she whispered. "Clark?" she called out again, hopelessly.

Xena saw the glasses in her hand. She knelt down before a wounded young warrior. As Lois looked on, Xena quickly rammed the index and middle fingers of both of her hands into the man's neck. The man made a strangled gasp, the muscles of his neck tightening and straining.

"Just so you know, I've cut off the flow of blood to your brain," she informed the young man coldly. "You'll be dead in thirty seconds unless I release you."

Fear filled the man's eyes. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you answer my questions."

"I don't know anything," he said.

"We both know that that isn't true. Now, unless you want to meet Hades today, I suggest you stop playing dumb with me. Where did they take my friend?" Her voice was low and deadly.

The man remained silent. Blood started to flow from his nostrils. He seemed to be gagging.

"Twenty seconds," Xena informed him. "Now then. Let's try this again. Where is Clark being taken?" Her voice held the promise of death if he didn't answer.

"The god instructed Spartos and the rest of us to take your friend and the lady," he finally said, his eyes darting briefly to Lois. "The man is being taken to the gladiator traders. The lady was supposed to go to the slave market."

"God? What god?" Lois asked.

"Ares?" Xena asked, spitting the name out like a curse.

The man looked at Lois and said nothing. Xena glared hard at him, a silent threat of further pain in her look.

"If you value your worthless life, you'll answer," she said threateningly. "And believe me, it gets more painful at the end."

"Not Ares. He didn't say his name," the young man finally relented. "He appeared out of thin air last night at our camp. He killed my friend Talos just by pointing at him. Please, that's all I know. I swear on Hades' head, that's all I know."

Xena undid the "pinch" that she'd put on his pressure points. Instantly, color began to return to the man's face and his strained breathing eased. He gulped in a large lungful of air. Xena did not

allow him to get up from the ground.

“What did this god look like?” Xena demanded.

“Short dark hair, strange clothing like I’ve never seen,” the man replied.

“Tempus,” Lois said, her stomach churning.

Xena knocked the young warrior unconscious, frowning as she did so. She turned quickly and gathered a few of the remaining horses that had stayed close by, munching on the grass. The rest she scared off, letting them run where they wished. She passed the reins of a black stallion to Autolycus. To Gabrielle, she handed the reins of a white mare. Lois received the reins of a chestnut gelding.

“Change of plans,” Xena said. “Autolycus, I need you to ride on ahead. Get the Chronos Stone and bring it back to the city of Kratos. Wait for us there. Gabrielle, Lois, and I are going after Clark.” She eyed Autolycus levelly. “Take *only* the stone,” she warned him. “And keep a low profile. Ride hard. Ride fast. If you kill the horse by pushing too hard, buy or steal another one.”

“Why Kratos?” the man asked.

“Because it is the only city with regular ships to Rome.”

“Rome?” Lois sputtered. “We’re going to Rome?”

“Maybe. It depends on if we can catch up with Spartos. He’s got a head start on us. And we’ll have to stop in Kratos for supplies if they set sail before we can catch up.”

Lois paled visibly. Xena gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

“It’s all right. They won’t kill him. Gladiators fetch a lot of money. They won’t dare to damage their goods.” She paused a moment. “Autolycus, on second thought, when you get to Kratos, ask for me at the Soaring Eagle. If Licus says that we’ve gone and it’s been a week or less, board the first ship to Rome and look for us at in the inns or at the gladiator games. Got that?”

“Loud and clear,” the thief replied.

“Do. Not. Get. Caught,” she warned him.

“The King of Thieves never gets caught.”

He winked and then swung himself into his saddle. Xena pressed a purse of coins into his hand.

“In case you need to board that ship,” she said.

“What about you?” he asked.

Xena smiled mischievously. “Don’t worry. I can always make more. Be careful.”

Autolycus gave his stallion a quick nudge with his heels. The horse sprang away at a gallop like a streak of black lightning. Xena watched for a moment as man and beast raced across the land. Then she turned and mounted Argo.

“Come on,” she said. “We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

Gabrielle and Lois swung into their own saddles. Silently, Lois was grateful for the times her Girl Scout troop had visited the Metropolis Stables. Still, she wondered if riding was a good idea. She hadn’t done it in years. Plus, with her current health concern, she really wasn’t sure if she should be riding.

*What other choice do I have?* she thought to herself. *Clark needs me.*

She didn’t have long to think about it. Xena nudged her horse and the mare broke into a swift trot. Lois and Gabrielle let their horses catch up, then rode to either side of the warrior woman. Lois glanced back once to the battlefield. Already she could see swarms of flies closing in on the carnage.

“You’ve fought before?” Xena asked Lois. “I noticed that you knocked a couple of men out. You didn’t fight like a first-timer. That move you made against the warrior with the mace was pretty perfectly executed.”

“Not much,” Lois admitted. “I’ve taken some self-defense classes before and I’ve fought off attackers a couple of times. It kind of comes with my job description. It can get a little dangerous, depending on whom I’m investigating. Still, I haven’t really needed to defend myself much lately. Clark kind of has that

department covered.” She shrugged, as if it was no big deal, even though each time she’d been the one to fight off a mugger or attacker, it had left her shaking at night when she was finally safe at home. “But, where’d you learn to fight like that?” she asked Xena. “It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“My brothers taught me the basics of sword play when I was young. When my younger brother was killed by a ruthless warlord, I gathered an army to destroy all of the enemies of my home village. One thing led to another, and I lost my way for a long time. I became the very thing I was trying to destroy... a bloodthirsty warlord, intent on conquering the world. The Destroyer of Nations, they called me. As a result, I wound up traveling all over the world, picking up moves as I went. And then there was Ares. He took a special interest in me back then, and mentored me.” There was a heavy note of regret in the warrior’s voice and her proud, clear eyes clouded with the memory.

“What happened to your army?” Lois asked. She’d seen no army so far with Xena.

“They turned on me and, with Hercules’ help, I destroyed them. That’s when I gave up being a warlord and started fighting for the side of good. He helped me to transform my life, even though I had tried to kill him. I’ll be forever in his debt.”

“And what was that... thing... that you threw in the fight before? I’ve never seen anything like it either.” Lois gestured to the strange Frisbee-like metal ring hanging at Xena’s hip.

Xena smiled slightly and subconsciously brushed it with her fingertips. “That’s my chakram. It’s my most trusted weapon, as much as I live by the sword. As far as I know, it is the only one of its kind.” A note of pride rang in the woman’s voice.

They lapsed into a companionable silence as they urged the horses faster. Lois was fidgeting in her saddle, straining her eyes ahead, trying to catch a glimpse of the sorely diminished group of thugs who had taken Clark.

The day wore on and they saw nothing. Xena often stopped, dismounting and checking the ground for signs of the path that Spartos and his men had taken. Lois chafed at every delay, even though she knew that they were necessary. Too soon, the sky turned to red and orange as the sun began to set. Xena slowed Argo to a trot and angled the mare towards a thin sliver of a stream alongside a massive, twisted and bent tree. At the tree, she dismounted. Lois and Gabrielle rode up behind her.

“We’ll camp here for the night,” Xena announced as she tethered Argo.

“No, we have to keep going,” Lois protested.

“Lois,” Xena said softly, “I know you’re worried about Clark. But we’re no good to him if we kill our horses and wear ourselves out. We need to conserve our strength.”

“You didn’t seem too worried about Autolycus killing *his* horse,” Lois pointed out, though she had been taken aback by the unexpected tenderness in the warrior woman’s voice.

Xena shook her head. “Autolycus has a lot more ground to cover than we do.”

Lois grudgingly dismounted and tied her gelding to a low branch of the tree as Xena had done with Argo. Xena unsaddled the horses, promising that they would be on the move again at first light. Then she stalked off, leaving Lois and Gabrielle to start the campfire. Less than an hour later, Xena returned with two small gray rabbits. She handed them to Gabrielle.

“You seem to do all the cooking,” Lois observed.

Gabrielle laughed lightly as she skinned them, diced the meat, and began preparing a stew with a few vegetables that she pulled from a saddlebag. “I always do the cooking. Trust me, you don’t want to eat what Xena cooks. She can burn water.”

Lois laughed despite herself. “Well, that makes two of us. At least, that *was* me once upon a time.” Thoughts of Clark’s patient cooking lessons came unbidden to her mind.

The night passed too slowly for Lois' liking. Her dreams were fitful as her mind threw every worst case scenario at her. Clark in chains. Clark being tortured. Clark being forced into the gladiator ring. Clark lying dead in a pool of his own blood. She awoke several times in the night, sweating from the exertion of her nightmares, tearing drying on her cheeks. Each time, she saw either Gabrielle or Xena leaning against the tree, keeping watch in the dark night.

She was glad when morning finally came. After a quick splash of water over her clammy skin, Lois joined Gabrielle and Xena for a fast breakfast. She noted, as she ate, that the horses had been saddled once more. It was not long before they were on the move once more.

Lois barely saw the landscape rushing by her. Her thoughts were only of Clark. Where was he now? Was he hurt? Would they catch up to his captors before they could leave Greece? What if they didn't catch up in time? Would he be thrown directly into the Coliseum to fight? What if Clark died? She fought the tears of panic that were welling up within her.

They paused briefly to rest the horses in the afternoon. Lois felt bad for the animals, though she didn't voice it. They were pushing them pretty hard. Not enough to kill them, but enough that the animals were streaming with sweat. She patted her gelding and rubbed his nose. The horse snorted and nuzzled her with his head.

*If only Clark could see me now*, she thought with a tiny smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. *He'd get a kick out of seeing me with this horse. No matter what else Clark is, he's still a farm boy at heart.*

Soon, they were back in the saddles. As they had on the previous day, they rode until the light was failing. Xena would catch something for dinner and Gabrielle would cook it. They would not let Lois take a turn during the night watches, insisting that she needed to sleep and keep her energy up. Three more days passed in the same manner. Lois' nerves were shot. She barely slept at night. Nightmares plagued her when she did sleep.

As hard as they had been riding, they hadn't managed to close the gap between themselves and Clark's kidnappers. In fact, they seemed to be slipping further behind. The trail that Xena was following grew cold. She abandoned the trail and cut across the land on the fastest route to Kratos. On the second day, they had run into a small band of highway robbers that were harassing a handful of travelers. Xena had stopped and had quickly flattened the bandits, but it had still taken time that Lois was sure they didn't have to spare.

At last, the city of Kratos was before them. High walls of gray stone encircled the sprawling city on all sides. The western most side overlooked the sea. Large gates stood open to the sea and docks in times of peace, but could be closed and fortified in times of trouble. Xena slowed Argo from a swift canter down to a halt only a mile or two from the wide main entrance.

"There it is," Xena said. "The city of Kratos."

"Do you think Clark is somewhere in there?" Lois asked, half fearing the answer.

"Only one way to find out," Xena said with a shrug. She dismounted quickly and rummaged in her saddlebags. "Here, put this on." She handed Lois a long, weather-stained cloak.

"What? Why? It's too hot for something like this!"

"We need to keep a low profile, remember? If, by any chance, those thugs are still in the town, we don't want to tip them off that we're here too. Those clothes of yours stick out like a sore thumb. Even if they don't see us, townspeople tend to talk about things that are out of the ordinary."

Lois sighed, but mentally agreed that Xena's answer made sense. She wrapped the heavy cloak around her shoulders, keeping the hood off of her head. She quickly fastened the garment with the clasp at the neck.

"How do I look?" she asked, forcing a smile.

"Like any other unremarkable villager," Xena said approvingly.

"Won't *you* be recognized?" Lois asked.

Xena shook her head. "I don't often come to this city. Only a handful of people have seen me here before. And Gabrielle has never been here. I'm friends with the innkeeper, but he's not the type to rat us out." She turned to Gabrielle. "How much money do you have on you?"

Gabrielle thought for a moment. "About thirty dinars, give or take."

"Good. After we get to the inn, I want you to take Lois into the market and get her some clothes so that she will blend in."

"What are you going to do?" Lois asked, as Xena remounted her horse.

"I'm going to see what I can find out about Spartos."

Xena nudged Argo into a walk. Lois and Gabrielle followed suit. Steadily, they closed the distance between themselves and the city. In no time at all, they rode under the wide stone arch of the main gate. Lois looked up as they passed beneath it. A sturdy iron portcullis was visible above their heads. On the ramparts above the wall, armed soldiers kept watch.

Lois blinked as they entered the city proper. She hadn't quite known what to expect. She was used to big cities in her world and time. She'd been in every nook and cranny of Metropolis. She'd spent time in New York City and in Los Angeles. She'd visited Chicago once in her college days for a writing conference. She thrived on the unique pulse of each of those cities. The heartbeat of modern city life made her feel alive. So she had been fairly certain that Kratos would be a disappointment.

That disappointment never came.

Her eyes and ears were assaulted as soon as they entered the city. Merchants hawked their wares at passersby, each one shouting the virtues of the fruit or cloth or beads that they were selling. There were no shops, only open-air stalls. Townsfolk dressed in every color milled about. Children dashed between the adults, kicking leather balls from one to another or waving wooden swords in games of warlords and heroes. Lois caught the smells of roasting meats and various work animals. Guards in polished silver armor stood watching the crowd at regular intervals.

As they rode through the city, leaving the marketplace behind, Lois began to see homes and shops. She guessed that the stone houses belonged to the wealthy. The wooden farmsteads outside of the city would belong to the poor. Gradually, the noise of the marketplace was replaced by other sounds. The ringing of metal from a blacksmith as he hammered red hot metal into finely crafted wares. The jaunty tune that the baker was whistling as he placed fresh loaves of bread on the wide windowsill to cool. The shouts and laughs of fishermen on the docks as they hauled in their nets. Lois crinkled her nose at the smell of fish in the salty air.

Xena stopped before a large two-story building. Outside, a wooden sign was hanging. It had been carved to resemble a bird, wings outstretched in flight. The red paint on the sign looked fresh and the edges were trimmed in shining brass. Xena dismounted and two stable boys ran out from the detached stables. Xena handed her reins to the redheaded boy.

Gabrielle tossed Xena the purse of money she was carrying. Xena took a few coins out and gave the purse back.

"Think you can get Lois a new wardrobe with," Xena counted quickly, "fifteen dinars?"

"Hey, I'm good at haggling," Gabrielle smiled. She swung out of the white mare's saddle.

Lois followed suit. The stable boys took their horses as well. Xena tipped the boys a dinar.

"Good," she replied. "I'll meet you back here later on today."

I'll get us rooms for the night and then see what I can find out Spartos and ships leaving for Rome."

As Gabrielle and Lois left Xena behind, Lois finally had the courage to ask the one question that had been bothering her the most the last few days. She spoke as they made their way back through the city towards the marketplace.

"Gabrielle, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Don't take this the wrong way but, uh, how well do you know Autolyclus? Can we trust him to hold up his end of things? I mean, what's to stop him from riding off with the money that Xena gave him? He *is* a thief, after all."

Gabrielle's lips quirked up into a smile. "Autolyclus may be a thief, but he's got a good heart. I've seen him do some noble things. Xena and I trust him with our lives. In fact, he actually *did* save Xena's life once. He risked his own life to save hers."

Lois felt a wave of relief. "Good," she said, letting out a shaky breath.

They spent the rest of the afternoon moving from stall to stall, inspecting the merchants' wares. Eventually, Gabrielle found some long skirts and peasant blouses that would fit Lois and that they could afford. It was getting late when they finally began to make their way back to the inn. Lois, in the meantime, had barely watched Gabrielle as the woman had haggled with the merchants. As discreetly as she could, she kept her eyes on the crowds around them, praying that she would catch a glimpse of Clark or his captors. She had no such luck.

The sun was just beginning to set when they reached the inn. Lois stuck close to Gabrielle's side. Drunken men were sitting around in the common room. Some were eating. Most were talking and laughing loudly. A long, loud belch punctuated the air, followed by more laughter. It made Lois a little uneasy and she had to wonder why for a moment. She'd been in bars before. But the leering men that she had seen at the Metro Club didn't have the same dangerous looks as most of the men she saw before her now. Gabrielle approached the bar and asked for the owner, Licus. He emerged from the kitchen, drying his hands on his clean white apron, and showed them to their rooms on the second floor.

"Any chance of a hot bath?" Lois asked. "I smell like a horse."

"Down the hall to the left," Licus said, smiling.

Lois looked at the man. He was a fat, kindly looking man with gray hair and red cheeks. Instinctively, she felt that he was a good man.

"Thanks," she said.

A little while later, Lois and Gabrielle emerged from the common bathing room. Lois was dressed in a long brown skirt, supple deerskin traveling boots, and a rose colored, lightweight peasant blouse. She had to admit, the clothing was more comfortable than it looked. But she still preferred her shorts and tank top.

They made their way back down to the common room for dinner. To Lois' surprise, Xena was already at a table, and a serving girl was placing down platters of roasted venison, potatoes, carrots, and tankards of water. Lois was starving and dove into her plate of food without hesitation. She liked venison - it reminded her of the times she'd visited her cousin in the mountains when she was young. He was twelve years her senior and was an avid hunter. Venison was often served at his house as a result.

Xena barely glanced at her plate as she ate. Her eyes were constantly watching the crowd of people around them. She seemed to appraise every man in the place. Lois almost hated to break the woman's concentration with her questions. But she had to know what Xena had discovered that afternoon.

"So, what did you find out?" Lois asked, unable to contain

the question any longer.

Xena sighed as she tore her eyes from a group of merchants who were throwing daggers at a target on the wall. She shook her head slightly. "Spartos set sail for Rome a few days ago. He had a small group of prisoners with him. Five, maybe six men in chains."

"How can that be?" Gabrielle asked. "We rode pretty hard. How could he have gotten here that fast?"

Xena shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe he rode through the nights. Maybe he had help from this Tempus guy."

"When do we sail?" Lois asked, her face white with terror for Clark, though she held a note of determination in her voice. Her nightmares were coming true.

"I'm still working on that. The best we can hope for is the day after tomorrow. There's a ship headed for Rome at dawn. It's a trade ship, but any ship's captain can be persuaded to take passengers for the right price. I'm going to talk to him in the morning."

"But in two days, Clark could be hurt or worse!" Lois' voice was creeping into a high pitched panic.

"He'll be okay," Xena assured her gently. "It's the earliest ship I could find. And I'm going to need tonight and tomorrow to gather supplies."

"Supplies?"

Xena nodded. "I need to make some money to bribe the captain with. Passage to Rome doesn't come cheaply. And we are all going to need disguises."

"Disguises?"

Xena nodded once more. "Spartos was overheard boasting that his prisoners will probably be fighting shortly after they arrive in Rome. Julius Caesar is having some sort of festival. The gladiator games are always a part of his celebrations."

"That doesn't explain why we need disguises," Lois prodded, chewing the last bite of her venison.

Xena locked eyes with her. "Caesar and I have a history. I met him about ten years ago when my army and I sacked a village. As I got to know him, I thought we could join forces to take over the world. But he had other plans. He captured my ship, stole my treasure to finance his war campaigns, and crucified all of us. I would have died if it hadn't been for an escaped slave girl named M'Lila. Ever since then, I've been the thorn in his side - the one enemy who got away. If Caesar recognizes me, we lose our chance to get Clark out of Rome alive."

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Clark slowly and painfully slipped back into consciousness. His head throbbed. His stomach roiled and he felt like throwing up. He tried to open his eyes, but it was too much, too soon. Instead, he settled on leaving his eyes shut, reaching out with his other senses. The unmistakable stench of horses and unwashed, sweaty bodies surrounded him. He knew that he was lying over the back of one of the horses. The beast was moving at a swift gallop beneath him. His head and feet dangled over the horse's flanks. Clark gently tried to move his hands and feet, moving as slowly and discreetly as he could. He didn't want to attract attention to the fact that he was awake.

His hands and feet were bound. He guessed that he must have been tied to the horse as well. Surely he would have slipped from the horse's back if he wasn't secured to the animal. Around him, he could hear the thundering of hooves and the raucous laughter of the men who had captured him. They shouted merrily to each other. Clark caught tattered bits of their conversations. Most were discussing how many women they would buy the affections of once they received payment. One voice was very close by. Clark guessed that he was tied behind one of the men, like a piece of luggage.

He finally cracked one eye open, wincing against a fresh explosion of white-hot pain in his head. All he could see was a

green blur. He closed his eye again; lying on his stomach as he was, he could see nothing but the ground rushing beneath the horse's hooves. Still, he knew that it had to be late afternoon, by the way the sunlight hit the grass and the long shadows that he'd glimpsed. He slipped back into an uneasy sleep.

Hours later, he was callously thrown to the hard ground. His shoulder connected painfully with a half-buried tree root. His eyes flew open as a grunt of pain escaped from his lips. The man who had tossed him to the ground laughed and tied him to a stunted tree, the way he would have tethered a horse. Clark's hands and feet remained bound. Another man, with a scar running diagonally across his face, threw a few strips of dried meat at Clark. They landed on the grass before him, and he was forced to brush dirt from the food before he could eat. A little while later, the same man threw a nearly empty water skin at him. Clark drank slowly, savoring the warm liquid as it eased his parched and aching throat.

The sound of more horses approaching perked up Clark's ears. Within minutes, a new group of thugs burst through the trees and undergrowth. A few of the horses had bodies slung over their backs. The leaders of each group greeted each other as the horses were relieved of their burdens.

"You've done well, Minos," said the leader of the thugs who'd captured Clark.

"Only one, Spartos?" replied the man in question, gesturing towards Clark. "You're losing your touch."

Spartos shrugged. "I was ordered by the gods themselves to take this one."

Minos laughed harshly. "Nice try, big brother."

"It's true," Spartos pressed. "A god appeared in our camp and instructed me to take this one to the traders."

*A god? Clark wondered. Could he mean Tempus? Or did some ancient god take offense to our being thrust into this universe? No, it has to be Tempus. He's got something planned for Lois and myself. I just wish I knew what it was. I wonder who these traders are that Spartos mentioned.*

"And which god was it? Strife? Ares?" Minos's voice was dripping with disbelief.

Spartos shook his head. "He didn't say his name. But he killed Talos by shooting fire from his hands."

*Fire from his hands? A gun! That has to be Tempus!* Clark nearly spat at the thought.

All around Clark, the men settled down for the night after unloading their horses. Clark could see bedrolls being spread around the meager fires. He took the opportunity to look around the camp. Five other men were tied to trees around the perimeter. None were close enough to talk to. He leaned his head back against the sturdy trunk of his own tree and closed his eyes. His head still ached dully, but at least he no longer felt like there was a dagger stabbing at his brain.

*Lois, he thought to himself. I don't see her here. Maybe she got away. But what do these men want from me? And how I am going to get out of this one?*

He tried to think of a way out of his situation, but the fact was, without his powers, he didn't really think he had a chance. He struggled against his bonds. They were of a sturdy, thick rope and tied tightly with expert knots. He squirmed a little as he tried to break the rope, but he couldn't do it. He tried rubbing it against a rock on the ground between his legs, but the rope refused to cut and the rock was far too rounded for that purpose anyway. He didn't dare try to undo the rope binding his feet. One of the men was patrolling the small camp, passing by him every few minutes. Clark decided to bide his time and look for a better opportunity to escape. He closed his eyes once more and fell into a troubled sleep.

He felt as if he'd barely just closed his eyes when the men broke camp. The world was dark and grey in the early predawn

hours. Clark imagined that they couldn't have stopped for more than four or five hours. But the thugs who had captured him seemed not to feel any weariness. Clark was untied from the tree and slung roughly over the back of a horse, as he'd been before. He tried to sleep again, but sleep remained elusive this time. All he could think about was what his fate would be and what had happened to Lois. He prayed that she was safe with Xena. But what if she was hurt? Dread weighed heavily on his heart. He wondered, too, where Tempus was. Was he still hanging around waiting to see whatever was going to happen next? Or had he simply abandoned them in this time and place, as H.G. Wells had abandoned Tempus in Smallville 1866 on their first time traveling adventure?

Morning finally dawned, hot and clear. The band of thugs rested for an hour or two in the midmorning, stopping close to a stream to water the horses. Clark was let off of the horse for a short time. He found himself close enough to one of the other captives this time. Keeping his eyes on the thugs, Spartos in particular, Clark whispered to the other man, if man was the right word. The kid barely looked eighteen, but was well built. Clark wondered what sort of life the boy had been living before he was captured.

"Hey," Clark whispered.

The kid turned a nervous eye in Clark's direction.

"W-what do you want?"

"What's your name?" Clark thought it best to try and gain the boy's trust before going for the hard questions.

"Ren," the boy replied.

"Ren," Clark said, trying out the name. "I'm Clark." He was forced to stop as a couple of the thugs walked by. When they were gone again, Clark continued, speaking softly and moving his lips as little as possible. "Where are you from?"

"Antiquitus," the boy said nervously. "It's a little village, just north of where Cirra used to be. I was a blacksmith's apprentice."

Clark managed a small smile for Ren. "I can see that."

"They captured me when I went to spend the day with my betrothed," Ren said sadly. "We were going to have a picnic in the hills just outside of the village. I hope Daphne is all right. We were to be married this fall, right after the harvest." A tear formed in Ren's eye.

"Do you know what these men want with us?" Clark asked gently.

Ren nodded. "I overheard Minos talking. We're being taken to Rome to be sold as gladiators."

"Fantastic," Clark dryly muttered to himself. "Makes sense with Tempus' lust for violence." To Ren, he simply said, "Gladiators huh?"

Ren nodded again. "They expect to sell us to the gladiator owners. There is a lot of money to be made in fighting men in the arenas. So I've heard." His voice was resigned to his fate and tainted with fear and despair.

"We'll find a way out of this," Clark vowed.

In his heart though, he wasn't quite sure that he was telling the truth.

Still, with Lois remaining free, he could imagine her on his trail. And when Lois wanted something, she was sure to find a way to get it and destroy any obstacles that stood in her path. Bulldozers had nothing on Lois when she was on a mission. It gave Clark some hope yet. But, did he really want her to risk her life for him? These weren't ordinary thugs like she'd faced in Metropolis, the times that she'd saved his life before. These men were far more dangerous, far more deadly. These men possessed a violence that the villains in Metropolis could only dream about. Stubbornly, Clark pushed the thought from his mind.

Both men went silent again as a couple of the thugs approached. Once again, they were bundled onto the backs of the horses. The thugs mounted up and the animals sprang away.

Clark let his mind wander as he was borne ever further from Lois, but always his mind wandered to her. *Was* she on his trail? Did she know what Spartos had planned for him? If she *did* follow him, would she be able to free him? Could he free himself? If he did, how was he ever going to find Lois in this unfamiliar country?

Another two days passed in the same manner. At night, the group rested for a few short hours to eat and sleep. Clark and the others were kept bound and tied to trees. They were always guarded. Before dawn, the men would tie their captives back onto the horses. Twice during the day, they would rest for at least an hour, but never more than two. The thugs would eat and rest their horses. Clark and the others were given food only when they stopped to camp at night.

It was nothing short of one, long, continuous nightmare for Clark. Never before had he faced such fear, not even when he'd been locked in a Kryptonite cage in Lex Luthor's wine cellar. At least then, he'd been sure that Lois was safe, even though he'd dreaded the fact that she was about to marry Luthor.

By the end of those two days, his nerves were shot. All he could do was to worry about his fate and Lois'. He did not have any further chances to speak with Ren, or any of the other captives, for that matter. Whenever he was not being watched, he tried to break his bonds and plan his escape, but he remained unsuccessful.

Late at night, they passed into a large city. Kratos, Clark heard one of the men call it. They were brought straight through the city to the docks. There, Minos and Spartos argued with a couple of sailors. Clark and the other men were taken off the horses. Each man had an armed thug guarding him, with a weapon in hand. One of the sailors rushed off and came back with a thin, mean looking man with an eye patch over his right eye. Clark strained his hearing to listen.

"Captain Daimos," Minos greeted the man.

"Minos. Spartos." The captain of the ship acknowledged them. "Back again so soon?" He laughed - a high, wheezing sound that ended with a phlegm-filled cough. "I take it that you want the usual passage?"

"Aye, to Rome and back again."

Daimos eyed the six captives for a long moment. Then he nodded. "We sail at first light."

"No," Spartos said. "We leave *now*. Our orders come from the gods themselves."

Daimos considered and nodded. "It'll cost you extra." Then, raising his voice, he added, "Load the prisoners and make ready to set sail!"

Around him, barefooted sailors rushed to their posts. A few approached the captives and prodded them along the docks, up the gangplank, onto the ship, and into a room below decks. Half of the room contained a large metal cell. Their rope bindings were taken off and replaced with sturdy manacles and chains that ran down to heavy metal rings embedded into the floor. There was nothing in the cell except for a warped wooden bucket that would serve as their chamber pot. There was no bench, only the hard wooden floor. Clark and the others stood, chained in place, as the door was locked. They were left alone, for the time being.

Clark sighed and sat. Ren, chained beside him, did the same. Clark carefully tested each link in his chain, as well as the metal ring in the floor. Speaking in barely a whisper, he had the others test theirs. The chains, though covered in a fine layer of rust, were still as strong the day they'd been forged. Again, Clark wished despairingly for even a tenth of his former strength. He would have been able to snap the metal like dry twigs. He clenched his jaw in frustration.

He leaned his head back against the wall and tried to listen to the sounds coming from the ship's deck. He could just hear the thumping of heavy boots as they crossed the deck above them.

He frowned. There were only a few booted feet on deck. He thought for sure that Minos and Spartos would be on the ship. And Daimos had been wearing boots. Perhaps the rest of the thugs were being left behind?

After a time, he heard the creaking of the ship as it began to move. The vessel gently swayed back and forth as the sailors took their positions behind massive oars. Clark could imagine it all in his mind. He'd watched enough movies to picture the long rows of men pushing and pulling at the oars as the ship set out to sea. From his position to the side of a small barred window, he could just barely hear the singing of the men as the oars splashed violently in the waves. It sounded like a song of praise to Poseidon.

His hopes of escape died in his heart. True, Lois was still free, but what chance did she really have now of finding him?

He didn't have time to ponder it. Minos unlocked the cell door, threw in a tray of food and water, and relocked the door before striding from the room. The famished men grabbed for whatever they could. Clark felt lucky to grab a loaf of stale bread, an apple, and a skin of water. He ate quickly, his hunger getting the best of him. He wondered idly about his hunger. Did the lack of his powers mean that the sun no longer recharged him, forcing his body to require food for fuel instead? Surely the sunlight was no longer healing his wounds. It wasn't the first time that he'd experienced the phenomenon, but never before had he experienced such a ravenous hunger.

He learned a little bit about the men who shared his fate. Two of the men, thin, mean looking fellows with beady, rat-like eyes had been mercenaries. They'd been taken unaware late one night as they had slept. They had fought back, killing four of Minos' men before they were overpowered. One brawny man had been a retired veteran from Troy. He bragged about having fought side-by-side with Achilles himself. He boasted that he would kill any gladiator that he might face in the arena. The last man had been a simple farmer. His wife and son had died in childbirth. Without them to return home to, the man seemed resigned and indifferent to the possibility of death in the arena.

Days and nights melded into one. Only the meager shafts of light coming through the tiny window marked the separation of time. Clark thought they must have been traveling for a week, maybe more. He was growing thinner by the day on the paltry food rations, his Kryptonian metabolism burning off far more calories than he was taking in. Still, he took only enough food to survive on, opting, instead, to let the other men eat. A beard had sprung up on his cheeks and chin and his unwashed body itched.

It was funny, in a way, he mused darkly to himself. When he was a child, he'd loved movies with gladiators in them. He'd occasionally even played at being gladiators with a couple of his friends; Mark and Brian in particular. He had fond memories of waving branches like swords and having mock battles with those childhood friends. Now he was actually living the life of one and he wanted nothing more than to find a way out of it.

The bumping and jostling of the ship broke Clark from his thoughts. He stood and tried to see what was happening. His angle was bad though, and he could see nothing. He motioned for Ren to stand.

"What's happening?" he whispered to Ren.

The young man strained his neck to peer out of the window.

"I think we're docking," he replied. "Yes, I can see the tops of buildings in the distance. We must have reached Rome."

For twenty long minutes, the sailors carefully maneuvered the ship into its place at the docks. The thumping of feet above them marked the work that the sailors were doing on deck, unloading the wares that the ship had carried. Clark could hear barrels of olives and casks of wine being rolled across the broad deck. At length, Minos and Spartos came to lead Clark and the others out of their cell. Their hands were bound behind their backs and

heavy metal collars were fitted around their necks. Each collar was linked to another, forcing the men into a straight line, with Clark at the head of the procession. Clark attempted to fight back, but a blow to his stomach ended his escape attempt almost before it had begun. Spartos yanked on the chain attached to Clark's collar and dragged him and the others from the ship.

Once off the ship, the captives were paraded through the densely packed streets of Rome until they came within a block or two of the Coliseum. Clark and the others were led into a wide, airy building. Sunlight streamed in through a dozen open windows. Men stood around, watching as slaves and gladiators were sold on the raised dais at the back of the room. Most of the onlookers were sipping wine from goblets. A few were smoking pipes, their heads wreathed in smoke. All of the men were leering at the young redhead on the dais as the auctioneer took their bids.

Minos strode ahead of Spartos and the captives. Clark saw him speaking into the ear of a giant wall of a man. The man nodded and gestured. Minos waved Spartos over to a back room. Clark and the others were towed along. Once they reached the back room, each man was unchained from the line and brought to the dais, starting with the last man in the line.

All too soon, it was Clark's turn. He was to be the last sale of the day. Spartos dragged him on stage by the chain and collar around his neck. Clark fixed his eyes on the gathered buyers with a hard stare. Proudly, he kept his chin up. Clark barely heard what the auctioneer was saying about him; he was too busy assessing the crowd before him. Most of the buyers were richly dressed men, though a few wealthy women were in the crowd. Servants and slaves attended to their masters, eyes downcast. Some of the buyers had new acquisitions. Clark saw the collars and leashes that held those men and women until they could be broken and made submissive.

"Let's start the bidding at twenty dinars," the auctioneer stated, showing no signs of the weariness that he must have been feeling from hours at the auction block. Clark's attention snapped abruptly back to the man. "I see twenty...thirty...forty-five...do I hear fifty? Fifty dinars! Going once, twice, sold to Tersius! Enjoy your new gladiator, my friend."

Clark was mildly offended by the low price he had brought in. He'd heard the bids on the others. Each of the mercenaries had gone for well over a hundred dinars. Most of the women, who were being sold as slaves, had also gone for more than Clark had. He shook his head to dispel the thought as he was led off of the stage and handed off to Tersius.

Tersius was a fat, hard faced man dressed in rich robes of navy blue, shot with silver vines along the edges of the fabric. Rings adorned each of his fingers, some with blood red rubies, others with sparkling sapphires, and one with a deep green emerald. Clark disliked the man immediately.

Tersius paid for Clark and handed the chain to his servant. Clark noticed that the man had also bought Ren. For that, Clark was glad. He liked the younger man and intended on protecting him as best he could. With a stiff tug, Clark and Ren were led out of the building and out of town. They arrived at a walled off camp just outside of the city limits. Clark and Ren were brought inside of a stone building, down some steps, and locked in a cell together. Similar cells lined the room, each one holding one or more gladiators. All were heavily muscled, scarred, and violent looking.

Beside Clark, Ren trembled in fear. Clark slid the stoic mask of Superman onto his face as the rest of the men in the room eyed the two new arrivals from their cells. He hoped that the unyielding look convinced the men that he was not to be trifled with. After a long moment, the other captives seemed to lose interest, and Clark turned to Ren, clasping the younger man's shoulder in a gesture of comfort.

"I promise," Clark said, only loudly enough for Ren's ears,

"I'll do what I can to protect you."

Ren seemed to relax a little, even managing a weak smile for Clark.

Hours later, food was brought to all of the gladiators. It was at least a little better than the food that Clark had experienced under Spartos' control. A thick venison stew was dished out to the men, along with mugs of cool water. Clark noticed that some of the men received plates of meat and loaves of bread along with their meal.

*They must be Tersius' prized fighters,* Clark thought, disgustedly.

Sleep came uneasily to Clark that night. He was more afraid now than he had been on the entire strange journey thus far. Tomorrow, he knew, his gladiator training would begin. His stomach was twisted into knots with that knowledge. Clark glanced at Ren. The kid was sound asleep on one of the hard benches, stretched to his full length, snoring lightly.

Clark stood in the darkened cell and looked through the tiny, barred window. The window was high - Clark had to stand on his bench to peer out. The window was placed just above ground level.

His narrow, shared cell overlooked the wide courtyard where he was sure that the training took place. It reminded him a little of a prison yard, only this one swept around in a smooth circle, mimicking the conditions of the Coliseum. A few racks with weapons stood at intervals around the perimeter. In the moonlight, the yard took on a ghostly appearance.

*Please hurry, Lois,* he pleaded silently.

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Lois threw up violently over the side of the ship that was bearing her inexorably towards Rome. Her stomach empty, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Once again, she tried all of the tricks she knew to combat seasickness. She tried staring at the horizon, hoping that she could force herself to forget about the incessant rocking of the ship. She even tried pressing the small pressure points in her wrists as Xena had instructed her to do. Nothing seemed to work, although the pressure point technique was working wonders for Gabrielle.

Her sea sickness was really starting to irritate her. She'd been on ships before. When she was in college, she'd taken a Caribbean cruise with some friends on spring break. And Lex had taken her on dinner cruises on his private yacht on a couple of different occasions. Never once had she felt ill from the motion of the ships. But, she had to admit, she'd never been on seas quiet so rough before. The Metropolis Harbor was pretty tame, and the cruise ship had been so large that it had compensated for the waves in the Caribbean. And, she remembered with a shudder, she'd never been on a ship when she'd been so heartsick before. Her worry over Clark was more than enough to twist her stomach into sick knots and leave her all but sleepless at night.

"Hey," Xena said, coming to Lois' side and placing a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Lois lied.

Xena arched one skeptical eyebrow. "Uh huh."

"Okay," Lois relented under Xena's unwavering gaze. "So I've been better. It's just...I'm just so worried about Clark. He's...not used to being so...powerless."

"We'll get him back. I swear it. If I have to pull down all of Rome brick by brick, I'll get Clark back."

"I know."

Having seen Xena in action, Lois believed that Xena *could* take on all of Rome if she wanted to.

Xena gazed into the distance, squinting against the slanting shafts of sunlight. She pointed, and Lois followed with her eyes. A mass of ugly black clouds hung in the air, marring the golden late afternoon sky.

"Looks like a storm is brewing. With any luck, it'll change

direction. But be prepared for a rough night.”

Lois paled. “Wonderful,” she squeaked. “I think I’ll go below decks for a while and lie down.”

“Good idea,” Xena nodded.

Lois turned and went back to the small cabin she shared with Xena and Gabrielle. Two hammocks swung lazily with the rocking of the ship, each one above a regular, stationary cot. Lois shut the door behind her and took to pacing, though the tiny cabin didn’t offer much room to do so. Just five decent steps from the door to the back wall and back again. Lois knew the steps by heart. She’d paced every day since boarding the vessel. The third step squeaked at every pass, the floorboard loose and slightly warped.

Still, the ship was clean and the crew was respectful, although Lois suspected that the crew’s cordial attitude had more to do with Xena’s reputation than anything else. In the days that she had been traveling with Xena and Gabrielle, the strawberry blonde bard had told many stories about the tall, blue-eyed warrior woman. How many men Xena had killed. How many wars she had started in the old days. How many others she had stopped after starting over with a new life. How many times she had defied, fought, and won against the gods. How many other times she had helped the gods.

With a loud sigh, Lois thought back over all that had happened since Clark had been kidnapped. The desperate ride to Kratos. The strange sights and smells of the city. The two long days that they had been stuck in the city while she helped Gabrielle and Xena as they worked to procure the items that they would need once they arrived in Rome, as well as passage on one of the ships.

Lois hadn’t seen much of Xena in those couple days in Kratos. The warrior woman had been busy, rising with the sun and not returning until they met for dinner. After dinner the first night in Kratos, Xena had disappeared. Lois hadn’t seen her again until the following night. Lois had asked in passing about where she had been spending her time, but Xena hadn’t been forthcoming with much information. Part of the time, Lois knew that Xena was speaking with various ship captains, haggling for the lowest passage fare that she could get. And Lois knew that the passage hadn’t been cheap.

Lois’ natural and professional curiosity had gotten the best of her, and on the last night in Kratos, she had hung around in the common room of the inn after dinner. Gabrielle had gone to bed after the meal, as they would be boarding the ship that Xena had chosen at dawn the following day. Xena, however, had stayed behind in the common room. Lois had faded into the background of the room while Xena’s back was turned. After settling the tab with Licus, the innkeeper, Xena had sat down with a group of men. Someone had produced a deck of cards. Coins had glittered in the candlelight, clinking together as they were tossed into a heap in the center of the long table. Lois had watched in fascination as a game of poker had started, though it was slightly different from the poker that she knew. The cards, for example, didn’t have the standard designations of spade, club, diamond and heart. She did catch the words “hero,” “warlord,” “peasant,” and “slave,” and assumed them to be the various suits. Full houses were called “full boats.” But other than a few other tiny variations, it seemed to be the same game that she had played so many times with Clark, Perry, and Jimmy after-hours at The Daily Planet.

*So that’s how Xena is making money to pay for everything,* Lois had realized.

She had shrugged at the realization. How Xena gathered the dinars that she needed in order to save Clark wasn’t Lois’ concern. She was just glad that the woman wasn’t using more controversial methods -not that she believed Xena to be the type to sell her body, nor was the woman a sword for hire. Lois had

stayed and watched for a long time. Xena was very good - knowing exactly how to bluff and keeping an unreadable, expressionless look on her face. It had reminded her a little of the mask that Clark adopted each time he slipped into the role of Superman.

Lois had watched Xena’s eyes as they swept over her opponents, sizing them up, carefully calculating every minute detail that might be a player’s “tell.” By the time Lois had gone to the second floor to her room, Xena’s pile of coins had more than tripled in size.

Lois and Gabrielle had been set to another task during those two days in Kratos. Gabrielle had had a list of items that Xena needed. Lois wasn’t much of a haggler, at least, not in this unfamiliar world, so she had stood back while Gabrielle spoke with the shopkeepers and street merchants. For Lois, Gabrielle had purchased a rich looking wine-colored dress shot with gold thread that made little sunbursts around the edges of the fabric. For Gabrielle, they had decided on a pale blue dress with silver scrollwork around the waist. Both had matching veils at Lois’ instance. She had a gut feeling that Tempus would be present in Rome to watch the fights, and she didn’t want to give him the chance to recognize her.

For Xena, they had purchased new armor - a breastplate, gauntlets, greaves and helm. All were polished to a bright golden shine. Lois had felt a moment of pride when Gabrielle had trusted her to be the one to choose the armor. Lois had been struck by how beautiful the armor was, despite the grisly purpose it served. The helm, in particular, was a work of art - it had been forged to resemble the head of a snarling tigress. Only Xena’s eyes and mouth would be seen once she wore that helm. There would be no way that Caesar could possibly recognize her in that helm.

Lois snapped back to the present as the ship rolled to one side in the waves, knocking her into the back wall of the cabin. Her right shoulder connected with the wall; she rubbed the shoulder absently as she gave up pacing and sat down on the bed. The seas were definitely getting rougher. A faint rumble of thunder boomed in the skies beyond the thick walls of the ship’s hull. Lois lay down, squeezing her eyes shut and trying to breathe deep, calming breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth. She forced out all other thoughts from her head, concentrating only on her breathing. Exhaustion finally took her, and for the first time since she’d been thrust into the nightmare she was now living, she slept deeply and dreamlessly.

She awoke late the next morning. Stretching as she stood, she looked around. She was alone in the cabin, though the rumpled blankets on the other cot and hammock said that Xena and Gabrielle had been in the room at some point during the night. Lois stretched again, hearing and feeling the muscles in her neck and shoulders popping. Crossing to the small table by the door, she splashed water from a basin onto her face and neck. The water was cold and helped to bring her into full wakefulness. She hastily ran a comb through her tangled hair and then made her way back onto the deck. Mercifully, the ship was not rocking nearly as badly as it had been every day since they had stepped foot onto it.

*How long have we been on this ship?* Lois thought miserably. *A week? Ten days? No, not quite that long. Close to a week maybe. Ugh, I can’t wait to step foot onto solid ground again. I swear, I’ll never leave the ground again...unless, of course, Clark takes me flying.*

She mounted the steps up out from below deck and onto the main deck. Barefooted and bare-chested sailors rushed from place to place. Some were securing the lines that ran to the mast; Lois could see the white material puffed to capacity with the steady wind. Others were mopping down the wooden deck. Still others were climbing the rigging and shouting directions to the man at the wheel. Most of the men were singing a bawdy tale of a

sea captain who was seduced by a mermaid.

Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the salty sea air, grateful that for once, her stomach wasn't doing back flips. She took a moment to savor the feeling, wondering if eating something would spoil her stomach's good mood. After a long pause, she opened her eyes again and saw Xena and Gabrielle leaning against the port side railing, talking seriously in low voices. Xena was emphasizing her points with sharp hand gestures. Lois walked over to join them.

Xena smiled when she saw Lois approaching. "Lois. I take it you slept well?"

Lois nodded. "Like a rock."

"Good thing, too," Xena said dryly. "The gods were really mixing it up with last night's storm."

Silently, Lois was thankful for the sheer exhaustion that had allowed her to miss such a storm.

"Xena and I were just discussing our plans once we reach Rome," Gabrielle explained.

"When will that be?"

"In a couple of hours," Xena replied, pointing to the horizon. "See that out there?"

Lois drew a hand over her brow to shade her eyes from the bright sunlight. She could just make out the hazy silhouette of land in the distance. She nodded.

"I see it," she said.

"That's Rome."

"Okay. So... I guess the next question is, what do we do when we get there?" Lois said. "What's the plan?"

"First, we find an inn. I'll talk to some of the locals and see what I can find out. The gladiator market is pretty public.

Someone has to know something about any recent auctions. With any luck, I might find someone that will remember Clark. I might even get lucky enough to find out who has him."

"Okay," Lois said again, nodding thoughtfully. "And once we have that information, then what? We go to whoever has him and offer to buy him back?"

Xena shook her head. "No gladiator trader worth his salt would willingly part with a new acquisition. Not for money anyway. However, there are other methods of persuasion." The look on Xena's face made it clear to Lois that she would not hesitate to fight and kill whoever had Clark, if the need arose. "But, I don't think it will come to that. The word around Kratos was that Caesar's festival was starting soon. Probably within the next day or two. I can't guarantee that Clark won't be forced into the arena right away."

"Without training?" Lois nearly shrieked, once again edging towards panic.

A few sailors stopped what they were doing and looked in Lois' direction at her outburst. After a moment, they shrugged and took up their tasks once more. A new song started, this one about a saucy tavern wench and her drunken suitors.

Xena shrugged. "It's always a possibility. It depends on the owner and the offers made to him. It makes no difference to the spectators, so long as they get the bloodshed that they crave." She spat out the words disgustedly, then softened. "I'm sorry."

"Real tactful, Xena," Gabrielle said sarcastically.

Lois couldn't answer. She gripped the railing to steady herself.

"Lois, it's going to be all right," Xena said, locking eyes with her. "Gabrielle and I are prepared for that possibility."

"Easy for you to say," Lois argued. "It's not your husband out there!"

Xena fixed her with a level gaze, putting both of her hands on Lois' shoulders. "Lois, why do you think I had you and Gabrielle find us disguises?"

"You said it yourself. You can't risk being seen by Caesar."

Xena nodded. "The only time there is danger of that is at the

games. I plan on fighting in the arena if Clark is forced into battle. You and Gabrielle are going to ensure that that happens."

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Sunlight streamed into Clark's cell. He groaned, throwing an arm over his eyes, trying to block out the light. For once, he was less than thrilled to see the life-giving orb. Morning meant another day in the practice arena in Tersius' compound. He'd been in the dismal compound for three or four days now; he was starting to lose track of time once more, the days and nights blurring into a continuous stream of despair. From sunup to sundown, he and the others were forced to train out in the walled off courtyard. They were only given a break for an hour in the afternoon to eat. The noon meals usually consisted of a soup and bread, with perhaps a strip or two of dried meat. Dinners were more substantial, consisting of thick stews and a chunk of bread. One of the nights, they had even been given small wedges of sharp yellow cheese.

Clark was grateful for every bite of food. For a normal man, the food would have been just enough to keep them healthy and energized. But the story was different for Clark. Between his high metabolism and the sheer exertion of training, he still nearly collapsed each night. He knew his body was weakening. He'd need at least twice the amount of food to come close to equaling the calories he was burning each day. But so far, he was still strong enough to keep going, and that meant that his life was spared each day.

"All right you dogs! Everyone up!" The prison guard's voice was heard even before the man came down the steps into the stone prison room.

Clark groaned again and pushed himself up off of the hard wooden bench that served as his bed. His sore muscles protested at the movement and he ruefully wished that he had his flight, so that he could levitate above the bench to take some of the pressure off of his abused body. He ran a hand through his hair as he sat, waiting for the guards to open his cell.

After a moment, Giron, the head guard, came into view. Five other guards trailed after him. The six men were all well armed, well armored, and efficient killers. Clark had seen one of the prisoners make a desperate attempt at escape the day before - or had it been the day before that? The man had taken a thrown dagger to the back before he'd made it to the first step leading out of the sunken prison. He'd been dead before he'd hit the floor. That had made up Clark's mind for him. There was no way that he was going to try his own luck against the brutes.

He sighed as he waited for one of the guards to come to his cell door, inspecting some of the slowly healing cuts and bruises that he bore, in order to pass the time. The young, black-haired guard was the one to appear at his door this morning.

"Up," the man commanded as he unlocked the door.

Ren and Clark stood obediently.

"Arms up," the guard instructed.

Clark and Ren did as they were told. Like men under arrest, they exited the prison with their arms above their heads, joining the other gladiators on the way out. Guards walked to all sides of the group, weapons drawn and ready.

Clark blinked as they stepped out into the bright morning sunlight. Without being prompted to, he made his way to the racks with armor. The prized fighters were provided with their own well made sets of armor. Throm, the best fighter in the compound, had armor of gold and silver metal, embossed with the raised images of the animals he'd fought in the arena and killed. Three bears, four pumas, a pair of tigers, a cheetah, and a lion with a magnificent mane decorated his breastplate, with room to spare in anticipation of more fights to come. Flames adorned his gauntlets and greaves and his helm was wrought to resemble a wolf head.

For the newcomers, there were only ill-fitting and dented

helms and breastplates.

Clark chose one of each and quickly slipped into them. He secured the chin strap on his helm, ensuring that it fit his head as closely as possible. He tried to choose the same pieces of armor each day, but it just wasn't possible.

He moved down to the racks of weapons. Giron handed him a sword and a spear. Clark belted the sword and scabbard onto his waist. He had always admired swords from afar, but using one to fight with didn't sit well with him. He was all too aware of the lethal possibilities, both to himself and to others. He had vowed to himself that he would only draw his sword if no other option was available to him. The spear was no less vile, to his eyes. He tried to use it more like a staff, trying to keep the sharp tip away from his opponents. After all, they were only sparring and Clark didn't want to hurt anyone. Still, he wondered what his reaction would be if he were to be put in the arena to fight for real. Part of him argued that he would refuse to make the kill. The other part of him argued that he would do just about anything to stay alive - not for his own sake, but for Lois'.

His staunch refusal to draw blood in the courtyard each day had earned him more than one beating, and even a few lashes with a whip. Stubbornly, he had continued to hold fast to his decision.

Clark twirled the spear around a few times, getting a feel for the weapon. He tried to think of it as a *drei*, just as he had with the piece of wood when he and the others had first been attacked by Spartos. It was a little harder for him to do; he only had one non-sharp end of the spear to work with, instead of two non-sharp ends. He faced off against Ren, his usual sparring partner. Ren was similarity outfitted with weapons.

Clark waited for the younger man to make the first move. He'd learned that much from Ching when he'd been learning to duel in order to fight Lord Nor. Silently, he was thankful for the training that the Kryptonian lieutenant had given him. Ren eyed him for a moment, used to Clark's refusal to make the first move. After a moment, Ren struck, aiming for Clark's left shoulder. Clark easily parried the blow, using the same momentum to strike back. A resounding crack rang out as the wooden shafts made contact. Clark side-stepped as he struck, swinging the spear around as he moved. He landed a blow across Ren's back, though he reined in his strength and used only enough force to fool the watchful eyes of Tersius' guards.

So the morning progressed. Clark had the upper hand for most of the morning, since he'd had that small bit of training with Ching. His nearly flawless memory ran through each of the nine hundred and eighty basic moves that he'd been forced to learn. He couldn't use all of the moves, of course, but the ones that he could use gave him a distinct advantage. That wasn't to say that it was easy. Ren kept him on his toes and Clark's muscles ached with the effort of trying to stay one step ahead of the younger man. Both of them, like all of the gladiators in the yard, were slick with sweat.

After lunch, the gladiators were given an unexpected reprieve. A centurion, dressed in the red and silver of his office, arrived at the compound, mounted on a massive tan warhorse. The guards quickly opened the main gates to allow the centurion to pass into the compound. Giron saluted the visitor, then turned on his heel to alert Tersius that his presence was requested. The rest of the guards encircled the gladiators, weapons drawn and ready, lest one of them make an attempt on the visitor's life. Unconcerned, the centurion dismounted.

After a few long minutes, Tersius emerged from his villa. As always, he was dressed richly and the gems on his fingers glinted in the sunlight. With a smile carefully affixed to his face, the gladiator owner crossed the dirt yard to the middle, where the centurion stood. They saluted one another - the right hand fisted and brought to one swift thump against the middle of the chest,

then extended out before them toward the recipient of the salute. The centurion lifted his helm from his head and cradled it in his left arm.

"Brutus, my old friend! To what do I owe the pleasure?" Tersius asked as he recognized the man. His smile changed from a carefully crafted one to a genuine one.

"Tersius," Brutus greeted him. "Good to see you again, my friend. I come at Caesar's behest. He wishes for you to bring some of your gladiators to the games this week."

Tersius' eyes lit up. "An invitation from Caesar himself," he said with delight.

Brutus nodded. "You will, of course, be well compensated." "Who does the great Caesar wish to see fight?"

"Throm will fight a pair of leopards. He is to be the last fight on the last day - the star attraction, as usual. He also wants Mercurion, Paxius, and Exion. They fight in three days. And one more thing."

"Oh?" There was interest on Tersius' face.

"Word has it that you have some new acquisitions."

Tersius nodded. "I am flattered that the great Caesar pays attention to my humble business dealings."

Brutus chuckled. "Bring them before me."

Tersius snapped his fingers together. Guards grabbed Clark and Ren by both of their arms and dragged them forward to stand before the centurion. Brutus eyed them silently. His gaze lingered on Clark. It was all that Clark could do to stand defiantly, his head held high, his unreadable Superman mask on his face. His heart, however, was pounding in his chest in dread.

"What is your name?" Brutus demanded.

"Clark."

Brutus nodded. "Caesar asked for you by name." He swung his gaze to Tersius. "He'll be announced as Clarkus. The people like names that sound more familiar to them. Not that it matters much. He'll be dead before tomorrow night." Brutus looked Ren over briefly. "Bring this one too. Caesar wishes to start the games off tomorrow with amateur fights. It's been a long time since the people have been treated to such easy bloodshed. You will, of course, be compensated when they are killed."

Tersius nodded easily. "I paid fifty dinars for Clarkus. And eighty-five for the other."

Brutus nodded and made a note in a scroll that he retrieved from his saddle bag. Replacing it, he nodded. "Standard compensation on that one." He pointed at Ren. "For Clarkus, however..." he shrugged.

"What?" Tersius demanded, one skeptical brow raised.

Brutus smiled. "Caesar will pay you ten times what you paid for him once he is dead."

"Ten times?" Excitement was barely concealed in Tersius' voice. His eyes were alight with joy as he thought of his good fortune. Clark could tell that the man was already mentally counting his money.

The centurion shrugged again. "It seems that the gods themselves have demanded that this one die."

Brutus replaced his helm onto his head and mounted his steed once more. The two men saluted each other once more. Then, with a gentle kick to the animal's ribs and a sharp click of his tongue, the centurion turned the warhorse and galloped off. Tersius watched as the man rode out of the gates and the guards secured them once more. In the next moment, the gladiator owner was gone, back into his villa and out of the hot sun.

"Back to work!" Giron shouted.

Guards and prisoners alike hastily got back to their posts. Giron approached Clark and Ren.

"You," he said to Ren, "you're to fight with Exion for the rest of the day. You won't survive tomorrow, but we can at least give the people a good show. Exion!" The summoned gladiator approached immediately. "Make sure you don't kill him."

“Yes, sir,” Exion said. Ren trailed miserably behind the more experienced gladiator.

“And you,” Giron said, turning to Clark. “You will be with Mercurion for the rest of the day.” He turned his head to the large, ebony skinned man. “I don’t care how badly you beat him today. Just make sure that you don’t cripple him before tomorrow.” Mercurion nodded and turned. “Oh, and don’t make his wounds obvious,” Giron warned him.

Clark followed Mercurion across the yard to the weapons rack. The man picked up two heavy fighting staves and tossed one to Clark. Clark instinctively caught it, hefted its weight and gave it an experimental twirl. The choice in weapons pleased Clark. Sure, the staves could be just as deadly as any blade, if wielded in the proper way, but at least Clark didn’t have to worry about any sharp edges.

Mercurion made the first move. For a large man, he moved with surprising agility and speed. His stave crashed into Clark’s breastplate. Clark was momentarily winded, unable to move. Before he could recover, Mercurion was in motion again, bringing his stave in a swooping arc. The heavy piece of wood cracked into the back of Clark’s knee. There was an audible pop as the joint took the abuse. Clark grunted in pain as he fell forward. Using his forward motion, Clark jammed the end of his own stave into the gladiator’s booted right foot, bearing down with all of the weight and force that he could muster. Mercurion grunted in annoyance. Clark marveled that the move hadn’t seemed to really affect the man.

Before Clark knew what had happened, Mercurion arced his stave around. Clark heard the stave crack as it collided with his back. In the next instant, Clark’s back bloomed into a stinging fire of pain. His vision swam before him and the air was once more knocked from his lungs. He tried to cry out in pain but was incapable of uttering a sound.

For the rest of that afternoon, Clark was the recipient of Mercurion’s pent-up rage. Livid purple-yellow bruises had sprouted up over most of his body. His chest and back were in agony. His injured knee all but hobbled him. Blood trickled from one corner of his mouth; he wiped it away with the back of one hand.

Finally, mercifully, the sun began to go down.

Instead of being led back to their cells for their evening meal, the gladiators were chained with ankle and wrist manacles, then ushered into a smaller building adjacent to the prison. Clark could scarcely believe what the building held as he crossed the threshold.

Two large, steaming circular baths stood at either end of the room. The veteran fighters stripped out of their dirty, sweaty garments, tossing them on benches as they moved. Nude and unashamed, they descended the steps into the bath on the right. From another doorway in the back of the room, women entered, their garments so sheer that it was as if they wore nothing at all. The women slipped out of their garments and joined the gladiators, two of the amber haired ones immediately moving to join Throm.

Clark felt his face flush and he quickly averted his eyes. And yet, he wasn’t surprised by what he’d seen. The gladiators in the tub to the right were Tersius’ big money makers. They were afforded certain comforts - better food to sate their hunger and women to sate their lust.

Clark self-consciously undressed and slipped into the tub on the left when directed to. He kept his back to where the veteran fighters were. He focused only on scrubbing away the layers of dirt, grime, and dried blood that covered his aching body. He savored the feel of the hot water on his tired and throbbing muscles. The thrill of a hot bath was short lived, however. Giron gave a signal and the prisoners were forced out of the baths.

Once the men were dressed, they were led back to their cells

and let out of their restraints. Food was brought to them, the prisoners that were to fight the next day receiving better meals than those who would not be taken to the arena. Clark’s eyes widened and his heart was grateful as he eyed his plate. Thick slices of venison, three small red potatoes, half of a loaf of bread, a thin soup, and a mug of cold water. It seemed a veritable feast. He ate with renewed strength.

By the time he finished, however, he wasn’t feeling right. He felt somehow weaker and more disoriented. A headache grew - a stabbing pain that felt as if it was right behind his eyes. He felt nauseous. A cold sweat broke out on his brow and he shivered despite the summer heat.

Worried lines creased Ren’s brow. He called for the guards to help Clark, but his pleas were only laughed at or ignored completely.

With an effort, Clark laid on his bench in a nearly fetal position, too sick to keep his eyes open.

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“So what did you find out?” Gabrielle asked as Xena slipped back into the room in the inn that she and Lois were sharing. The place was called The Lion’s Mane and was a neatly kept place a few blocks from the docks, though poorly furnished.

“The gladiator games are starting tomorrow,” Xena sighed as she sat on the edge of Gabrielle’s narrow bed.

“Starting?” Lois echoed. “What does that mean?”

“I overheard some centurions talking while I was out. Caesar’s festival is going on for seven days.”

“Let me guess,” Lois sighed unhappily. “Every day has fights scheduled.”

“You catch on fast,” Xena said, with a hint of amused approval.

Lois had undergone a change since they had finally disembarked the ship. The panic that she’d been prone to had vanished. A cold determination had settled over her. This close to finding Clark, Mad Dog Lane had taken control. She was still worried about her husband, but confidence had grown in her. She truly believed that Xena would be able to save him.

“So who has him?” Gabrielle asked.

“I don’t know,” Xena admitted, guilt and frustration in her voice. She shook her head, annoyed with the lack of information that she’d gotten. “No one is talking. And, let’s face it, the folks in this part of the city wouldn’t be likely to know anything anyway. No one living in this section has the means to buy slaves, so they wouldn’t bother with the auction house. The gladiator traders, however, are very wealthy. They don’t live in this part of the city, and it’s getting too late to track down where their villas and compounds are.”

“What about the auction house?” Lois asked. “We could find it and slip inside to...”

Xena raised a hand to cut Lois off. “I already checked there. The place was empty. Everyone’s preparing for the festival.”

“What about records?” Lois asked, her investigative instincts taking over. She itched to be doing something proactive.

Xena shook her head. “I broke into the owner’s office. Whoever that person is must keep the records with him. The office was empty except for old ledgers from years past.”

Lois frowned. “No leads at all?”

Xena shook her head once more. “We’ll have to go through with our original plan. You remember what we rehearsed?”

Lois nodded. “I just hope they buy it.”

“That’s why Gabrielle is going to do most of the talking. It’s her strong point and I know that she can pull the act off.”

“Hey!” Lois protested. “I’ve pulled off my fair share of cover stories before. Including passing myself off as a man to break into an all-male club.”

“I’m sure you have,” Xena said gently. “But this world isn’t like yours. These people won’t hesitate to kill you if any

suspicious are raised. Plus, Gabrielle and I have used this ruse before. She knows the drill.”

“All right,” Lois relented. “I trust your judgment.”

“Good. Now get some sleep. The games start early and we have to be there even earlier.” Xena rose and opened the door.

“But how do we know that Clark will even be there tomorrow?” Lois voiced her concern before she even realized that she was speaking.

Xena turned, her hand still on the doorknob. “The centurions I eavesdropped on were talking about tomorrow’s games. Caesar is kicking things off with amateur fights. With what you’ve told me about this Tempus guy, I’d bet good dinars that he’s found a way to ensure that Clark will fight in the arena tomorrow.” With that, the warrior princess was out the door, closing it softly behind her.

Lois found sleep to be elusive for a long time that night. Anticipation about what the next day would bring fueled her thoughts and robbed her of sleep. Would Clark really be there tomorrow? Would their plan to free him work? What if they failed? What if Xena couldn’t get to Clark on time? Would Tempus be there? If he was, would he spot her and raise the alarm?

Finally, around midnight, exhaustion overtook her and she slept. The sleep was not restful though. Lois was once more plagued by nightmares. She awoke once in early pre-dawn hours, tears wetting her cheeks, her entire body shaking with fright. Tattered remnants of her nightmare fluttered and snapped at the edges of her mind. She’d dreamt of a shredded and bloodied Superman cape. She could see Tempus gloating above it while lightning flickered in the cloudy gray sky above and thunder cracked loudly in the distance. As Tempus laughed over his victory, it began to rain and he pushed his booted foot down on the ruined cape, pressing it further and further into the muddy ground.

When morning finally came, Lois’ stomach was twisted in anxiety. Part of her wondered if her nightmare had come strictly from her own distraught mind or if Morpheus, the god of dreams, had decided to torment her during the night. With an effort, she pushed aside the thought and forced herself to try and forget the vivid nightmare. She ate a hurried breakfast, which she did not taste at all, then dressed in the wine-colored dress that Gabrielle had purchased for her in Kratos. Gabrielle helped her with the veil. In a polished bronze mirror, Lois took in her appearance, and noted with satisfaction that the thin material managed to obscure most of her facial features. Tempus would need to be right on top of her to recognize her.

*Better than putting on a pair of glasses*, she thought ruefully to herself. A small, sad smile touched her lips as she thought of Clark.

She and Gabrielle met with Xena in the stable that stood next to the inn. The warrior woman was unrecognizable in the new armor that they’d purchased as a disguise. Her dark leathers had been replaced with deep red ones, bringing to mind the red of the centurion uniforms. Her golden armor was polished and brilliantly reflected the sunlight. The snarling tigress helm obscured her features, allowing only her piercing blue eyes and her mouth to be seen. Her sword was sheathed and slung across her back, the hilt sticking up above her right shoulder, as she usually wore the weapon. A long knife hung at her left hip. A breast dagger was hidden beneath the shining breastplate that she wore. She did not wear her chakram. The unique weapon was known far and wide. Though Caesar had never seen it himself, Xena was sure that he had at least heard of it. To carry the weapon would be to blow their carefully constructed plans.

*A beautiful picture of violence*, Lois thought to herself, as she silently appraised Xena. The thought surprised her.

They mounted the horses and made their way through the

streets, following the steady stream of people headed to the Coliseum. It was still very early, but the gladiator fights were taken seriously. Everyone wanted to get a good seat, as close to the action and blood as possible. Lois and Gabrielle rode in a side-saddle fashion, as they were posing as women of wealth. It would be unseemly for them to straddle the saddle between their thighs. Xena, however, rode in a regular fashion, as she was acting as a slave and gladiator.

They halted as they approached a side entrance. Two centurions stood guard. Most of the gladiator owners were well known to the guards. They simply nodded to one another as the chained fighters were shuffled through the arch and into the arena. Those who were not known to the guards were stopped and questioned. Names were checked off on a piece of parchment.

The older of the two centurions put up a hand to halt Lois, Xena, and Gabrielle as they approached. His uniform suggested that he was a captain of the guards.

“Whoa there,” he commanded. “You are not known to us. State your names and business.”

“My name is Mimosa,” Gabrielle said, in as haughty a voice as she could muster. “And this is my sister...” she faltered a moment, grasping for a name.

“Sangria,” Lois supplied, mentally smiling at how easily she’d come up with the name.

“We have travelled far in hopes of entering our gladiator into the games here in Rome. The great Caesar is known throughout the world as having the finest of fights here in this arena.”

“These fights are by invitation only,” the man said. “You may watch the fights, if you wish. But no one fights unless it is by Caesar’s command. And Caesar has not requested that your warrior fight today.”

“Then *ask* for permission for our gladiator to fight,” Gabrielle pressed, before the guard could turn them away. “I assure you that she will not disappoint.”

The centurion eyed Xena with speculation. “Why? What’s so special about this fighter?”

“Well,” Gabrielle said, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial tone, “it has been my understanding that Caesar has always wished for an *Amazon* to fight in his arena.”

Lois was impressed at how easily the lies dripped from Gabrielle’s tongue. Xena was not, nor had she ever been, one of the Amazons.

The centurion looked at Xena with renewed interest. “And by what name does your gladiator go by?”

“We just call her Blade,” Lois said, her tone conveying that their slave was unworthy of a true name. She gave a long, drawn out sigh. “Come, Mimosa,” she said in a bored tone. “If there is no interest in having Blade fight in this arena, we will find a more worthy setting.”

Gabrielle nodded and made ready to turn her horse around.

“No, wait, please,” the centurion asked, suddenly unwilling to let them leave. He was picturing the praise he would receive if Caesar chose to have the woman fight. Gabrielle stilled her horse once more.

He sent the younger guard running with the news that an Amazon gladiator was being offered to fight in the games. Long minutes passed. The horses stomped and snorted impatiently. Lois felt a tiny trickle of sweat roll down her back, though the day was cloudy and a cool, refreshing breeze was blowing. She wondered, suddenly, if Xena was hot in her armor. She shot a discreet glance at the woman, but Xena was sitting motionless on Argo.

Finally, the young guard returned, panting and red faced from his run. “The great Caesar...wishes...for the...Amazon...to fight.” He choked out the words in heavy, halting gasps.

The older guard moved to one side and motioned for the three

women to ride on through. Once inside, they dismounted and liveries took their horses to a corral. Xena followed the groups of gladiators to where they would sit on the sidelines, awaiting their turn. Each warrior was locked in a cage while they waited. Lois and Gabrielle turned another way and made their way into the stands. They purposefully chose seats as close to one of the exits as possible. Lois looked on with disgust as the spectators placed bets with wandering officials of the arena.

Soon enough, trumpets blared. The crashing sea of voices surrounding Lois came to a lull and then subsided into utter silence. The men taking the bets stopped in place. Old women put down their knitting. Lois looked towards the balcony at the far end of the arena. She had to turn her head slightly to the left in order to see it clearly, since they were not directly across the way from it. She could see a tall, handsome young man in rich white and crimson robes step out onto the balcony. A circlet of golden laurel leaves encircled his head. He raised his hands, palms out towards the gathered crowd.

“Citizens of Rome,” he began, his strong, rich voice carrying easily over the arena.

“That’s Caesar,” Gabrielle whispered into Lois’ ear.

“Really?” Lois mouthed silently. The man looked far too young to be the world’s most powerful leader. In fact, he was probably a couple of years younger than Clark was.

Gabrielle nodded.

“I bid you welcome to this auspicious event,” Caesar continued. “Now is a time to rejoice in the prosperity of Rome. The gods have indeed smiled on this fair city of ours, and on our righteous warriors who battle in foreign lands to extend our power. As you know, for three long years we have battled in the provinces of Gaul. And now, two of the three provinces belong to us! It will not be long now before the third province falls!”

There was a burst of excited cheers in the gathered crowd. Lois’ eyes skimmed the massed people. There didn’t seem to be a free seat in the entire place. Lois moved her eyes back to the balcony. There was a flash of silver in the darkened archway behind Caesar’s throne. She leaned in to whisper to Gabrielle.

“I think Tempus is here.”

Gabrielle nodded so slightly that Lois nearly missed it. “I saw the flash.”

On the balcony, Caesar paused, his eyes roving over the entire Coliseum. He smiled a self-satisfied grin.

“Let the games begin!”

A centurion entered into the arena to the blare of trumpets. “Our first fight today pits two amateur fighters against one another. Ren the Young and Tydus the Violent!” He exited as soon as the announcement was made.

The two fighters were forced onto the field at sword point. Lois watched in horror as the two men were handed weapons. Tydus rushed at Ren, beginning the fight. The fight took longer than Lois had expected. Ren took a bad gash across his head, the red blood flowing into his eyes and dripping into the dirt of the arena. The crowd went wild as the bloodshed began. Tydus rushed him again, and Ren reflexively raised his hands to protect himself. Tydus was impaled on the short sword that Ren had been given to fight with.

Ren dropped his sword, horrified, then promptly passed out from his wound. The crowd screamed in pleasure. Two guards hooked Ren under his armpits and dragged him from the arena. Lois watched as the man was brought to a healer, who roughly bound the gash on the fighter’s head. Ren was then locked back into his cage, still unconscious. Tydus’ body was dragged off the field, much to the delight of the onlookers.

The same centurion reentered the field. “Our next fight pits Alar the Cruel against Clarkus Maximus!” He turned on his heel and strode from the arena floor.

Lois gasped and her heart leapt into her throat. She clutched

Gabrielle’s hand. Mad Dog Lane had vanished once more, leaving only a frightened Lois behind. She chanced a glance at the balcony where Caesar sat, presiding over the fights. His attention was focused on the two men entering the field. Behind him, with a smug smile on his face, stood Tempus.

From her cage, Xena watched as Clark was forced to take to the field. She redoubled her efforts in trying to break out of it. Every eye was fixed on the arena floor. No one noticed as she worked her dagger into the metal lock, working the inner mechanisms.

Clark was handed a net and a trident as he stepped into the arena. He was wearing black leathers, over which he wore a dull silver breastplate, gauntlets, and greaves. The armor was less ill-fitting than what he’d been forced to wear at Tersius’ compound. Even so, the breastplate fit too tightly across his pectorals and too loosely across his stomach. A dull silver helm with long cheek guards and a heavy nose guard completed his ensemble.

Alar wielded a large battle axe, and his left arm was protected by an armored sleeve. Clark tightened his grip on the trident and clutched it defensively before him. He wasn’t sure that he was comfortable with the unfamiliar weapon. Alar eyed him and grinned a smile that was missing several teeth. Clark eyed his opponent intently. The man he faced was easily twice as broad as he was and well outweighed him. His arms and legs looked more like tree trunks than human limbs. Scars crisscrossed his bulging biceps. Clark planted his feet and took a defensive stance, just as Ching had taught him. Briefly, he wondered if Ching’s instructions would be helpful against such mismatched weapons.

Alar lunged at Clark with speed and agility that belied his hulking form. He swung the broad axe above his head and down before him. Clark brought his trident up, catching the axe between the tines. Alar twisted his wrists to allow the axe to continue its motion. Clark, however, used the momentum against Alar, forcing the axe head to become buried in the floor of the arena. While Alar paused to pull the axe free, Clark used the base of the trident shaft to strike Alar in the chest, causing the large man to stumble back a few steps. Taking advantage, Clark repeated the motion, jamming his trident shaft into the man’s midsection, but the heavy breastplate stopped the weapon from doing much damage. Alar quickly regained his footing and Clark had to jump back as Alar swung the axe at his chest. The blade missed him by a hairsbreadth.

Clark swung his net in a low arc, catching Alar in his legs. The huge man stumbled forward a step, then regained his balance as he escaped the net’s embrace. Clark sidestepped as Alar swung the axe at Clark’s own knees. He swung his trident, the solid wood of the shaft connecting with a thud against Alar’s unprotected right shoulder. Alar’s lips curled up in a snarl. Clark twisted the trident in his hands, bringing the sharp tines up. He knew that if he could disable Alar’s right arm, he might have a chance. Perhaps Alar wasn’t as adept at fighting with his encumbered left arm. Alar raised the axe once more, cleaving the air between the men. But Alar’s aim was off in his rage and the injuries that Clark had inflicted with the trident. The blade sunk harmlessly into the dirt. Clark didn’t stop moving. He brought his trident across Alar’s back, earning another snarl of pain and rage.

Sweat poured from Clark. Weakness and dizziness were threatening to overtake him. He recognized the symptoms as matching what he had felt the night before in his cell. He was certain that he wasn’t sick, though he had limited experience in being ill. And the symptoms did not match what he usually felt when there was Kryptonite around. His vision was moving in and out of sharpness. At times, Alar seemed to split into two distinct people. Clark gritted his teeth and forced himself to continue fighting, knowing that if he stopped for a second, it would be the last thing that he would ever do.

Alar was moving again, his axe above his head. He brought

the weapon down in a swift stroke. Clark barely had time to raise his trident. This time, however, Clark was only able to deflect the blow, failing to catch the axe in the tines. Clark nearly dropped the trident in surprise as he jumped backwards. His astonishment lasted only for a split second. A determined glint flickered in Clark's eye. In a flash, he brought the haft of the trident into Alar's unprotected shoulder, earning a grunt of pain from the hardened gladiator. Clark's eyes widened as he realized that he was, in fact, causing damage to the man's right arm. Clark used the man's momentary loss of concentration to his advantage. Mustering his strength, Clark brought the solid wood of the trident's shaft into the right side of Alar's neck.

A look of shock passed over Alar's features. The battle axe slipped from his hands. Clark swiftly bent down to grab the axe and toss it aside. But Alar recovered too quickly and reached the axe first. Clark's mind raced. He wanted to subdue his opponent without bloodshed, if at all possible. He thought that if he could ensnare Alar with the net or disarm him by entangling the axe in the tines of the trident again, he could win without killing or maiming the gladiator.

A severe wave of dizziness crashed over his body even as his thoughts raced. For just a second, Clark faltered. Alar took advantage. With a swift, swooping kick, Alar brought his foot across the back of Clark's knees. Clark was unable to stop himself from collapsing onto his hands and knees in the dirt. Alar laughed cruelly, then kicked aside the trident that Clark had dropped. Alar raised his axe, ready to strike the blow that would sever Clark's head from his body.

Clark closed his eyes, awaiting the blow that would end his life. His head swam and he couldn't move against the shaky lightheadedness that had overtaken him. He felt frozen to the spot, as if his limbs no longer wished to obey his commands. He pictured Lois in his mind's eye, determined that, one way or another, she would be the last thing he would see before he died.

The blow he was expecting never came.

A hand came into his view as he hesitantly opened his eyes. He followed the hand with his eyes, up to the arm to which it was attached. From the arm, his eyes traveled to the body, neck, and finally face of the hand's owner. A snarling tigress face greeted him, though the eyes looked strangely familiar.

"It's me, Clark." The words were so low that he nearly missed them over the confused murmurs of the spectators in the stands.

"Xena?" he asked, the final pieces of memory locking into place.

Xena gave a minuscule smile and winked. Clark took her hand and she helped him to his feet. Clark glanced around, noting Alar's sprawled-out body.

"Is he dead?" Clark asked, half fearing the answer.

"No. But when he wakes up, he'll have a headache so bad that he'll wish that he was." There was a note of satisfaction in her voice. "Stay close. Things are about to get ugly."

"I'll try."

"I want them both dead!" Caesar roared at his warriors, his voice shaking with rage. "Ten thousand dinars to the centurion who brings me their heads!"

A dozen armed warriors burst into the arena. Xena took a defensive stance, poised to strike at a moment's notice.

"Come on boys," she beckoned the warriors towards her. "Come and get me!"

Her sword was before her, the sunlight glinting from the sharp blade. The first of the men reached Xena. His blade met hers in a shower of sparks. She forced him back a step, then landed a swift kick to his midsection. The man crumpled to the ground with a grunt. A second kick to his head knocked him out completely. Two more reached Xena. She stamped her foot down on the tip of the fallen warrior's sword, flipping it up into her

outstretched hand. She brought both swords up and deftly parried the blows that were aimed at her. She slashed at both of the men, dealing matching gashes to their shoulders. She thrust her blades behind her, impaling the two men who had been rushing at her back. They fell to the ground, blood gushing from their guts and forming twin pools of sticky crimson on the ground. They were dead before their heads hit the dirt.

The warriors with the wounded shoulders were up once more. Xena jumped straight up, flipped, and landed a heavy booting foot into their chests. The men flew backwards a couple of feet, landing painfully on their backs. In an instant, Xena was on them, her blades piercing their hearts.

From across the arena, one of the warriors hurled a spear at her. Xena tossed the extra sword at a centurion. It struck home in his throat. In the same fluid motion, Xena easily caught the spear, flipped it, and sent it hurtling back across the arena floor. The barbed end caught the man in his right shoulder. He was pinned against the wall. Another spear went flying towards Xena. It landed a foot from her, the end buried into the dirt. Xena ignored the spear for the time being.

Another warrior rushed Xena from behind. She brought her right fist up sharply. The man's nose broke as he collided with her hand. Before he could fall, she grabbed him by the collar and flipped him over her shoulder to the ground before her. With the hilt of her sword, she knocked the man out cold. She grabbed another man by his arm. Again using the hilt of her sword, she struck the limb. There was a dry crack as the bone broke. A swift kick to the centurion's leg broke those bones as well.

Another warrior rushed at Xena. She pulled her long knife, ducked into a roll, and jammed it into his thigh. Screaming, the man went down. A punch to his head ensured that he would not be rising again for quite some time. Xena pulled the knife from the man's leg and sent it flying at another man. The knife embedded itself into the middle of the man's forehead, piercing his brain and killing him instantly.

Clark, meanwhile, had managed to wrest another trident from one of the warriors. He swung it at the man he'd taken it from. The trident cracked across the man's head, sending him into unconsciousness. Clark panted with the effort and used the trident to lean on. His earlier wooziness came crashing back as his overall energy reserve depleted.

"Are you all right?" Xena asked, barely glancing in Clark's direction.

"Not really," he admitted as he brought the shaft of the trident sharply up into one of the centurion's groins.

"Well, just hang in as best as you can," Xena offered, as she brought her elbow into the chest of her current attacker.

"Like I have a choice?" Clark asked wryly. He stuck the trident out to the side, clothes-lining a centurion in his throat.

Centurions now closed in on all sides. Xena edged closer to Clark, so that her back was against his back. The spear that had embedded into the ground earlier was right before Xena.

"When I tell you to, duck," she instructed Clark.

"What?"

"Now!"

Clark threw himself to the ground as Xena threw down her sword, point first into the dirt, and lunged for the spear. She caught the shaft as she propelled herself forward, then used the spear to swing her body around in a circle. She let out a war cry as her feet lifted off of the ground and connected with each of the men who had encircled her and Clark. Centurions went flying in every direction. After a moment, she let go of the spear, flipping twice as she landed on her feet by her fallen sword. She snatched the weapon up again as a fresh wave of centurions took to the arena.

"Is this the best you can do?" she taunted the centurions.

Clark forced his weakening, disoriented body up off of the

ground. He glanced at Xena, noting the feral grin that she wore. Her eyes sparkled with battle lust and she was actually laughing as she beckoned the new warriors forward. Clark realized with a start that Xena was *enjoying* the fight; she'd been laughing for a lot of the fight. She was completely within her element, doing what she did best. Clark wasn't sure whether he should be grateful for that fact or if it should make his blood run cold.

Quickly, Clark put his back to Xena's. He helped to knock out a few more warriors before another dizzy spell took him to his knees. Once more, his vision went in and out of focus. He retched violently in the dirt and a cold sweat broke out over his body. Behind him, he could hear the sounds of fighting; the harsh clangs as metal met metal, the sharp thuds of falling bodies, grunts of pain, screams of death, and Xena's grim laughter.

Long minutes passed as Clark fought to master himself. At last, the dizziness passed and he forced himself to stand. He looked around once he was back on his feet. At least a dozen centurions lay dead, their bodies sprawled in every direction. Another twenty or so lay about in various states of consciousness and with a variety of wounds. Clark had no doubt that some of those wounded soldiers would be dead by that night. The spectators in the stands had never ceased their ruckus. Clark could hear cheers mingled with boos.

"Enough!"

The voice rang out over the arena, silencing most of the crowd. Clark's head snapped up to the balcony. He would know that voice anywhere.

"Tempus," he growled.

"Archers!" Caesar cried, in a desperate attempt to appease the time traveler masquerading as a god.

All around the front of the arena, archers took their places and fitted arrows to their bows. Clark could hear the creaking of the bows as they were drawn. The first arrows were released with a twang. Xena dropped, rolled, and grabbed at one of the dead centurion's shields. She brought the heavy shield up just in time to deflect the arrows. Some skipped harmlessly off of the thick metal. The rest embedded themselves into the shield and surrounding dirt.

Clark cried out in pain.

Xena had deflected all of the bolts except for one.

That bolt had pierced Clark's ill-fitting armor where his right shoulder met his chest.

Xena turned towards the source of that arrow. Tempus stood on the balcony next to Caesar, fitting another bolt into a crossbow.

He took aim even as Xena's eyes searched him out. Xena's hand shot to her breastplate, pulling out the dagger that lay hidden beneath the metal. She brought her arm back, then snapped it forward as Tempus squeezed down on the trigger of the crossbow. Tempus saw what was coming even as Xena drew her arm back in preparation to let fly the dagger. He dropped his bow and touched his time window. In a flash of light, he was gone. An instant later, the dagger struck the wall that he had been standing against. It was buried to the hilt from the force of Xena's throw.

The arrow that Tempus had let fly came screaming at Clark's chest.

Xena reached out a hand and deftly caught the bolt, seconds before it could pierce Clark's chest and heart. Clark let out a sigh of relief, then swayed on his feet and went down on his knees, as pain and illness crashed in on him.

Xena gave a sharp whistle. A moment later, Argo burst into the arena from one of the access tunnels. Xena mounted in a flash, then bent and grabbed Clark under his armpits, hauling him up to sit before her on the horse's back. She had a moment of difficulty due to his dense molecular structure, which made him heavier than he appeared to be. Luckily, Clark was able to help

her, though he sagged forward as soon as he was seated in the saddle. Gently, Xena pulled him backwards so that his back rested against her chest, then threaded her arms around his body to hold him steady and to grab the reins. She loosed a war cry as she spurred the mare into a dead gallop.

Panic broke out in the stands. Spectators screamed and fell over one another as they tried to make their way to the exits. Surely the crazed gladiator woman would come for them next.

Lois and Gabrielle were swept up in a current of bodies. Lois did note, with immense satisfaction, that the swell of panicked spectators was making it all but impossible for the rest of the centurions to get out of the arena. For the first time, she felt as if they were in the clear. Still, she could not stop thinking about the arrow that Clark had taken in his shoulder. And, there was his strange behavior on the field. They had been sitting close enough to the front for Lois to see that Clark was weak and unsteady, and not from exertion in the fight. Her heart thudding in her chest like a blacksmith's hammer in a forge, she allowed Gabrielle to grab her wrist and pull her through the crowd to their horses.

Not long after, they were free from the fleeing crowd and making their way back down the streets to the inn. They forced themselves to keep the horses to a trot, so as not to draw attention to themselves. It seemed to take forever to reach the inn, at least to Lois.

As soon as she dismounted and let a stable boy take the chestnut gelding, Lois was racing up the stairs to their rooms. She burst in through the door, breathless. Gabrielle was moments behind her.

Lois nearly cried as she took in the sight of Clark. He was laying on one of the beds, his eyes closed. He was covered in sweat, dirt, and blood. He'd taken a few hits from the centurions. One long, bleeding gash ran nearly the entire length of his left arm. Three others marred his right arm. His skin was ashen. He'd lost some weight too. Lois guessed that fifteen or twenty pounds must have slipped from his body in the time they had been apart. Dark circles ringed his chocolate brown eyes, which snapped open at her strangled gasp.

Clark managed a weak smile for Lois. It wasn't his usual thousand-watt smile, but, to Lois, it still lit up the room.

"Lois," he said, joy dueling against the pain in his voice.

"Gabrielle, get a fire going," Xena instructed, as she tore strips of cloth.

Gabrielle bent in front of the small hearth in the room and began to get a fire going. Without being asked, she stuck a poker into the flames, once the fire grew to a sizable blaze. She poured water from a dented, silver ewer that was in dire need of polishing into a wide bowl.

Xena gently worked the armor from Clark's body, undoing the buckles and straps that held the breastplate in place. Clark winced as she broke the red feathered end of the arrow off. He winced again as she removed the piece of armor completely, sliding it up over broken shaft. She took a small knife and cut away the thin leather jerkin and cloth tunic that he wore beneath his armor. Lois nearly cried as she saw the yellow-purple skin of his chest as the clothing came away. It was as if his entire chest was one big bruise.

"What did they do to you?" Lois whispered in horror.

"The arrow has gone almost completely through you," Xena said gently to Clark, overriding Lois. "I'll need to push the arrowhead out through your back. It's the easiest way. Ready?"

Clark drew a deep breath and gave one sharp nod.

"Get the poker," Xena said over her shoulder to Gabrielle, as she helped Clark to sit up in the bed. "Hold him steady," she told Lois.

Lois stepped to Clark's side and helped him to remain sitting. Xena gripped what was left of the arrow's shaft. With a grunt of effort, she pushed it all the way through Clark's shoulder, until

the barbed point poked out of his back. Xena snapped the arrowhead off, and Clark winced. Xena then grabbed the arrow from the front and began to pull the rest of the shaft free of his body. Lois paled as she watched the scene play out. Clark grunted in pain, refusing to allow himself to scream, though tears flowed from the corners of his eyes. At last, the wooden shaft came free of his body and his blood began to flow faster. Gabrielle handed Xena the poker, and the warrior woman used it to cauterize the wound. As the scorching metal touched his flesh, Clark *did* scream out.

Lois stepped back as Xena eased Clark back so that he could lie down once more. She watched as Xena took the bowl of cool water and dipped a rag into it. With infinite tenderness, she cleaned the wound and surrounding skin. Satisfied, she gently used one of the strips of cloth to bandage the wound. She did the same for the wound on his arm.

Clark marveled at the way Xena handled his wounds. He could scarcely believe how gentle her touch had been after he'd seen those very same hands maim and kill with such ease.

"How did you know what to do?" Lois asked. "You never said anything about being a doctor."

"I'm not a healer in the usual sense of the word, no," Xena agreed as she tied the bandage on Clark's arm. "But I have many skills. I've spent a lot of time healing on the battlefield. It comes with the territory when you've lived the life that I have. Now, Clark, tell me about these other symptoms you're having."

"It all started last night after they fed me," Clark said, his voice still thick with residual pain. "I feel weak, disoriented, my vision keeps going blurry, cold sweats, headaches, nausea..." his voice trailed off. "I felt a little better this morning when I woke up, but it came back after they gave me some water to drink."

Xena frowned and alarm grew in Lois. "What's wrong?" Lois asked.

Xena sighed and her voice took on a hard edge. "Whoever had Clark wanted to make sure that he lost today. He's been poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Lois repeated, her voice small and shaky.

Xena gave her a distracted half-smile. "Don't worry. I can make the antidote." She reached for a scrap of parchment and one of Gabrielle's quills. Hastily, she jotted down the things that she needed, then handed it to Gabrielle. "Hurry," she instructed her friend. "The poison's been in his system far too long as it is. By all rights, his organs should have started shutting down hours ago. But since they haven't, the antidote will work."

Lois immediately thought of Clark's increased Kryptonian metabolism and wondered if his body had been burning off the poison faster than it could harm him. It seemed to be a logical conclusion.

"No problem," the strawberry blonde assured her. "Be back before you know it."

She grabbed her staff and a shoulder bag with her money purse.

"Good." Xena rose and followed Gabrielle out of the room. "I'm going to get changed. Caesar's men will be looking for the woman in the tiger armor. Lois, put that small pot of water on to boil."

Lois did as Xena bade, then changed back into the peasant garb that had been purchased for her, though she really wished that she could get back into her normal clothing. Once she finished, she sat down on Clark's bed and took one of his large hands in her much smaller ones. His eyes were closed again, and beads of cold sweat stood out on his brow. She gently wiped them away with a clean rag dipped in a fresh bowl of cool water. She kissed his forehead and lips lightly.

"Please," she whispered, knowing that he was still awake. "Please, fight this, Clark. Hang on for me. I need you." She fell silent a moment, then began to speak again. "I wanted to tell

you...I was going to tell you the night that Tempus ambushed us in the park...I saw my doctor the day before that. Clark, Dr. Klein was wrong."

Clark opened his eyes, though his vision was out of focus again. The exertion of the fight had weakened his body and allowed the poison to do greater damage to him than it otherwise would have.

"Wrong?" he murmured, not comprehending.

Lois nodded, though Clark could barely make out the movement with his fuzzy vision. "We can have...*we are having*...a baby. We're about three or four weeks along. Or were, before Tempus kidnapped us."

Clark managed another smile for Lois, this one stronger than the first. It still wasn't the earth-shattering smile that was unique to him, but this one, at least, had a renewed sense of energy to it.

"That's..." Clark shook his head, at a loss for words, his grin stretching from ear to ear. "Incredible," he finally settled on, though the word wasn't even close to the elation that he felt. He wished that his voice was stronger to convey just how happy he was. A contented laugh escaped from his lips. "I can't believe it. A child." He rewarded her with another grin. "You are amazing. But why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"You were helping with that oil fire in Detroit, remember? Besides, I had this whole dinner thing planned. I was going to tell you then."

"Right," he said, remembering. "I got in late from that fire and you were already asleep. I'm sorry about that."

"It's not your fault," Lois assured him, squeezing his hand gently. "You did what you needed to do. I wanted to tell you after we got dumped here by Tempus, but things got a little crazy."

Clark nodded slightly. "Like my second abduction in as many days."

Lois laughed a little, glad to hear Clark's tongue-in-cheek humor emerging once more. "A minor detail," she teased him with a shrug and a smile.

"I love you, Lois." His eyes unerringly found hers, though he still could not focus properly.

"I love you too, Clark."

She bent her neck and kissed him fully, passionately on the lips. He returned the kiss eagerly, as though her lips poured new strength and life into his failing body. When they broke, Clark laughed a little.

"What?" Lois asked.

"Nothing. It's just...I can't wait to see the look on Dr. Klein's face when we tell him that he was wrong. He was so upset when he gave me those results last year. For once, he'll be thrilled to find out that he made a mistake." He thought for a moment. "We're going to have to tell him everything, you know. I think he should be the doctor that we use. No one knows more about whatever Kryptonian genetics that this child might inherit than him."

She smiled at him, squeezed his hand once more, and guided it to her still-small stomach. "I know. And you're right. He's the only one I'd trust to monitor the growth and health of our son or daughter."

A couple of minutes later, Xena came back into the room. She was dressed once more in her dark leathers and usual armor. She wore her sword slung across her back as always.

"How are you feeling?" the warrior woman asked Clark.

"Weak," Clark admitted.

Xena gave him half-smile as Gabrielle came back. She had a small pouch with her, which she drew out of her shoulder bag.

"Here," Gabrielle said. "That's everything."

"Thanks," Xena said as she took the pouch.

Lois watched as Xena took the boiling water from the hearth. Her fascination grew as the woman examined various leaves and dry powders. Xena took a few of the leaves, bruised them, and

inhaled the scent that they gave off. Satisfied, she crushed them and threw them into the hot water. Carefully, she mixed the rest of the ingredients into the water, then let the mixture steep for a bit. When the antidote had been sitting for about ten minutes, she poured it into a wooden tankard.

“Think you can drink this?” she asked Clark as she helped ease him into a sitting position. Lois propped some pillows up behind his back.

Clark nodded and Xena passed him the mug. He took it in both of his hands and drank. It tasted like a bitter herbal tea, but it was not altogether unpleasant. He suspected that some of the things that Xena had put into it were just to improve the taste. He drank the entire mug down swiftly. Then he lay back heavily against the pillows.

“Clark, I know you aren’t feeling well. But I need to ask you some questions,” Xena said gently.

Clark nodded. “Okay.”

“Who did this to you?”

“His name is Tersius,” Clark replied. The thought of the gladiator owner brought back a sudden memory to him and he groaned. “Oh no! Ren!”

“Ren?” Gabrielle asked. “You mean that young kid that fought before you did?”

Clark nodded. “I swore that I’d get him free and back home.”

“Do you remember where Tersius’ compound is?” Xena asked.

Clark thought for a minute, retracing the path that he’d been forced to march that morning. “It’s northwest of the city. It took us about an hour, I guess, to get to the arena today. I remember that it had a high stone wall and green pennants.”

“What image was on the pennants?” Xena prodded, still maintaining a gentle tone.

Clark closed his eyes and pictured the compound in his mind. “A running wild boar, done in black.”

“Gabrielle, stay here with Lois and Clark,” Xena instructed, picking up her chakram and placing it back on her hip.

“Where are you going?” Gabrielle asked, though her voice said that she already knew, or at least guessed.

“I’m going to pay a visit to Tersius,” Xena said, a gleam in her eye. “And I’m going to help Clark keep his promise. Change his bandages in a couple of hours, okay? And get him something substantial to eat. He should be able to keep some stew down easily enough.”

With that, Xena turned and left. She went straight down to the stable, saddled Argo, and was soon riding through the city. She headed northwest, avoiding the gazes of the centurions who patrolled the streets, looking for the crazed Amazon gladiator. Still, she breathed a sigh of relief when she finally broke free of the city limits and into the surrounding countryside. She stopped in a strand of thick bushes about a quarter of a mile from Tersius’ compound. It was exactly as Clark had described, the pennants atop the wall snapping loudly in the stiff wind that had kicked up. She tied off Argo’s reins and let the mare graze on the grass.

Quickly and quietly as a stalking cat, Xena made her way to the wall surrounding the compound. The outer side of the wall was less than smooth, and she easily found hand and footholds to climb. In no time at all, she had reached the top, slipped over, and flipped as she jumped to the ground. She landed behind the two guards who stood before the entrance to Tersius’ private villa. She grabbed them by their necks and forced their skulls to crack together, knocking them instantly unconscious. She took their helmets and slipped into the villa.

She found Tersius in his private study, counting his gold and muttering to himself about the dinars he should have received for Clark’s death. The door made no sound as she opened it up just enough to slink into the room. Xena came up behind Tersius, her sword already in hand. She brought her arm around the gladiator

owner’s neck and pressed the blade to his vulnerable throat.

“Don’t scream and I’ll let you live,” Xena hissed in his ear.

“How did you get in here? I had guards posted!” His voice was urgent but low.

Xena used her free hand to drop the two helms on the table before him. “Oh, they’re lying around somewhere.”

“What do you want from me?” Fear colored Tersius’ words as he eyed the helms.

“I want you to get out of the gladiator business,” Xena said, stepping around before the man, her sword ever at his throat. “If I ever hear even a whispered rumor that you are still buying men and having them fight in the arena, I swear on the head of any god you name that I *will* return and kill you. That goes for slave labor as well. Do you understand?”

Realization dawned on Tersius’ face. He attempted to stand but Xena pressed the sword ever so slightly deeper into his flesh, forcing him back down into his high backed wooden chair.

“You’re the warrior from today, aren’t you?”

“Yes. My name is Xena.” She watched as the man’s face paled. “I take it that you know exactly who I am and what I am capable of. Now, I asked you if you understood me.”

“What else would you have me do?” he asked miserably.

Xena narrowed her eyes in anger. “I don’t care if you start peddling manure to the local farmers. If you *ever* purchase or fight another person, I *will* make good on my promise to come after you. Got it?”

Tersius nodded, a slow, careful movement so as not to bring his skin into contact with the sword blade any more than necessary.

“Good.” The word came out cold and deadly. “Now, I’m going to free the gladiators in your prison and the slaves in your house. Try to recapture them and you’ll be spending eternity in little pieces.”

She pulled her blade away from his neck and used the hilt to knock him out. She turned and ran back through the villa, stopping only to free the household slaves. She directed them to wait at the main gate, and then dashed across the courtyard. The gladiators were all locked in their cells, in anticipation of the next day’s fights. Xena made a beeline for the prison. After a brief fight with the guards, she acquired the keys that hung from Giron’s belt. Methodically, she began unlocking the cell doors. The men within looked at her without understanding.

“Who are you?” Throm asked, looking up at her from where he sat on his bench.

“My name is Xena. I’m here to set you free.”

None of the men moved, debating whether or not this was some trick of Tersius’.

“Go,” she urged them. “You’re free.”

At that, some of the men seemed to regain their vigor. Hope flooded their faces and they quickly vacated the dank, dark prison. Some, like Throm, had been broken so long ago that they seemed incapable of grasping the idea of freedom. Xena didn’t concern herself with those men. She couldn’t afford to spare the time. She located Ren and grabbed him by the arm.

“Come on,” she said, pulling him along after her, up the stairs and out into the open. “Move,” she hissed when he hesitated. “We don’t have much time!” That last part was said loudly enough for all to hear.

That seemed to break the spell. The men who had been lagging behind suddenly snapped out of their disbelief and began to follow Xena out of the prison.

Xena and the gladiators reached the courtyard and made for the heavy gate at the entrance where the rest of the slaves waited. Throm, the biggest and strongest of the gladiators, had finally come to his senses and joined the group of escapees. He lifted the heavy cross bar from the doors and pulled them open. As a unit, they made their way beneath the arch of the wall, through the

open doors, and out into freedom.

“Thank you, friend,” Mercurion, the dark skinned gladiator, said to Xena. “Twelve years I have been held prisoner. For Throm, it has been fifteen years. How can we repay you?”

“Just go home. Go back to your families. Make the best of your freedom. And if you need to fight, then fight against injustices like the gladiator trade.”

The men saluted her, some in the Roman fashion, some in the strange ways of their various homelands. Xena saluted them back, then pulled Ren after her to where Argo waited. Reaching the mare, Xena quickly untied the reins and mounted, helping Ren to mount up behind her.

“Where are we going?” he asked, his voice quivering just a little.

“I promised Clark that I would get you out of here. I’m taking you back to the docks and putting you on the first ship back to Greece.”

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Lois sat on edge of Clark’s bed, watching her husband’s peaceful sleep. The stress of the day and the poison in his body had robbed him of what little strength he had left. He’d fallen asleep almost as soon as Xena had left them. Lois was grateful for the blissful silence in the room. Even Gabrielle was gone - she was on the hunt for more clean bandages for Clark’s wounds.

Outside of the shuttered windows, evening was drawing on as the last golden rays of sunset faded in the west. Lois threw another log onto the small blaze in the hearth, for light more than for heat, as the day was still warm. She also lit several beeswax candles around the room. She looked again at Clark, noting his even breathing and the way that the flickering orange glow of the flames softened his features, even as they made her own shadow dance upon the walls.

She wondered if she should go down to the common room and get Clark something to eat. He dearly needed food, but Lois was neither willing to wake him nor to leave his side.

There was a flash of light in the room. Lois looked up, tearing her eyes from Clark’s face. When the light receded, Tempus stood before her. Clark awoke with a start, seeming to sense the danger. Tempus pulled his firearm out, leveling it at Lois’ chest.

“You really are irritating, you know that?” he sneered. “And I’m getting tired of this game. Every time I have the perfect plan, you two have to ruin it. Not this time though.”

Lois eased herself in front of Clark, trying to protect him as best she could. She wondered if she should try to rush Tempus and wrest the gun from him.

“No, no, Lois,” Tempus said, flicking the gun’s safety off as he spoke. “I plan on killing you first. You and that half breed *abomination* that you are carrying within you. Oh yes, I know all about it. One of the perks of being from a Utopian future where everyone learns the history of Lois and Clark in school. I want to see the look of pain in Superman’s eyes when his world crumbles. It’s just more fun that way.”

Clark struggled to get out of his bed. The antidote that Xena had given him was working, though slowly. His vision was no longer blurry and his head no longer ached. But he was still weak and his limbs still felt heavy.

“You are history...*ancient* history,” Tempus grinned. “And so is Utopia.”

His finger began to squeeze down the trigger. Lois leapt at him in a blind effort to knock the gun from his hands. She reached him and jerked his arm upwards. The bullet that was meant for her struck a crossbeam in the room’s ceiling. Tempus grabbed Lois around her throat and roared in rage. As his grip on her tightened, she heard a solid *thwack!* and saw Tempus’ eyes roll back into his head. He loosened his grip and stumbled forward a step, dropping the gun. There was a crunch of plastic

beneath his feet. Then he slumped to the floor.

Gabrielle stood behind him, her staff still raised.

“I’ve been wanting to do that since you first told me about him,” Gabrielle said, a grin on her face. “Hope you don’t mind.”

Lois grinned right back at her. “Not at all.” She rubbed her neck where she could still feel the pressure of Tempus’ fingers on her skin. She tried not to be too revolted by his touch.

Gabrielle crossed the room to where their saddle bags were piled. She rummaged through the one that Xena used and pulled out a length of sturdy rope.

“This should be enough,” she said, eyeing first the rope, and then Tempus. “Here, give me a hand, Lois.” Gabrielle looked at Clark. “You need to lie down.”

Lois knelt next to the time traveler, taking the gun away from his reach. She put it on the tiny square of a bedside table. Turning back to her old enemy, she helped Gabrielle to secure Tempus’ hands behind his back. Gabrielle took the dagger that Xena had used to cut away Clark’s armor and sliced the rope, then used the remainder to bind Tempus’ feet. Once he was secured, Lois helped to prop him against a wall, then searched until she found the time window that he kept on himself. The crunch of plastic that Lois had heard had been the time window. It lay shattered in a thousand tiny pieces on the scuffed wooden floor.

“The time window!” Lois said to Clark. “He must have dropped it and stepped on it. It’s broken.”

“Then let’s hope Autoleucus was able to get the Chronos Stone,” Xena’s voice said from the doorway.

“Xena!” Gabrielle cried. “What took you so long?”

Xena closed the door behind her without answering. She settled into a chair, poured a tankard of water for herself, and took a long drink. Finally, she began to speak.

“I gave Tersius some career advice. Then I set all of his gladiators free. I would have been back sooner, but I promised Clark that I’d get Ren out of Rome. He’s boarding a ship bound for Greece as we speak.”

“And what about us?” Lois asked. “Shouldn’t we be on that ship too?”

“The captain I spoke with had a full ship. It was all I could do to get Ren onboard. I’ve got another ship lined up for tomorrow afternoon.”

“But what if the centurions find us before then?” Lois argued.

“Then I’ll give them the same punishment that I gave their friends in the arena today.” She turned to Clark. “What about you? Feeling any better?”

“A little,” Clark said. “I think the antidote is working. I just wish it would work faster.”

Xena let out a small laugh. “Impatient, huh?”

“You have no idea of the speed he’s used to,” Lois said quietly, but with a wink at Clark.

Xena glanced over at Tempus. The man was starting to come to, groggy moans escaping him.

“Nice work on him, by the way.” Xena nodded in his direction.

Tempus pulled himself to complete alertness. He began to struggle against his bonds, but they held tight. His lips peeled back, baring his teeth in an almost feral snarl.

“This isn’t over, Superman,” he growled. He eyed the broken time window and laughed. “There’s no escape this time. And, oh gee, Herb isn’t here to save you either.” He chuckled a bit, pleased with himself.

“We’ll just see about that, now won’t we?” Clark said calmly, arching his brows in Tempus’ direction.

But Tempus wasn’t through taunting Clark. “Tell me, Superman, how does it feel knowing that you’ll never see your world again? To know that you’ll never feel those powers of yours coursing through your body again? And please, oh please, tell me how it feels knowing that a *woman* had to save your life

today, *Superman*.”

“You’re forgetting your history,” Clark replied levelly. “This isn’t the first time that my life has been in a woman’s hands. Lois has saved my life on several occasions. So, to answer your question, I have no problem with Xena saving my life today. Because, unlike you, Tempus, I’m not threatened by strong women. I embrace the idea.” Tempus opened his mouth to speak, but Clark cut him off with a sharp look. “You’ve been threatened by Lois all along, much more than by me. It’s not through me that Utopia will come about. My ideals might be a part of Utopia’s foundation, but it’s through Lois that it will become a reality - through the children that she will bear.”

Tempus was about to retort when there was a sound of hurried footsteps outside of the door, followed by frantic knocking. Xena unsheathed her sword and held it defensively before her as she threw open the door.

“Whoa! It’s me, Xena! Is this how you greet all your friends?”

A smile broke over Xena’s face and she eased the sword back into her scabbard. “Autolycus! What in Zeus’ name are you doing here? I didn’t expect to see you this early.”

She ushered him into the room and shut the door behind him.

Autolycus smiled triumphantly and pulled a cone-shaped green crystal on a golden base out from beneath the fabric of his tunic. It seemed to glow with some inner light. Clark automatically shrank away. The stone had the same glow and hue as Kryptonite, though, of course, this stone was not the radioactive rock of his home planet. Clark laughed a little at himself as he registered the fact that this stone was not going to kill him. He was glad that no one seemed to have noticed his momentary discomfort in the stone’s presence.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? I make house calls,” Autolycus said with a smirk, in answer to Xena’s question.

“The Chronos Stone!” Gabrielle breathed in awe.

“Nice work,” Xena said approvingly.

“A simple matter. After all, I *am* the King of Thieves.” He dragged his left index finger along his moustache as he spoke the title that he proudly bore. “In fact, I was disappointed with the lack of a challenge in retrieving it. Tripled security indeed! Anyway, I thought it would be easier to use it to find you rather than you trying to figure out where I’d be. Or at least, a lot faster. I tried Kratos first, but, well, obviously you weren’t there. So I came to Rome. I must have checked six inns tonight looking for you. It wasn’t easy. This place is crawling with centurions.”

“Smart thinking,” Xena nodded, smiling. “I owe you one.”

“Actually, you owe me more than one,” Autolycus retorted with a grin.

“Just put it on my tab,” Xena said, good-natured sarcasm dripping from her words. “So how does this thing work exactly?”

“It’s quite simple, really. You kind of just think about where and when you want to go,” Autolycus said with a shrug. “Touch the stone while doing so, and off you go.”

“I don’t believe this,” Tempus complained.

Xena arched one eyebrow skeptically at Autolycus. She turned to Lois and Clark.

“Grab your things.”

Lois quickly retrieved their few possessions from the saddle bags - really just her clothing, house keys (still in her pocket where she had left them), and Clark’s glasses. Those she gave to her husband, then helped him out of his bed, letting him lean on her for support. He looked at her apologetically as he did so. As he stood there, he grabbed Tempus’ firearm from the side table where Lois had placed it.

“Give the stone to Lois,” Xena instructed Autolycus.

The thief handed over the stone. Lois accepted it, albeit with a little apprehension. She didn’t want to accidentally use it before they were ready.

“And what about him?” Xena asked, nodding in Tempus’ direction once more. “I *could* make an exception to my stance against gladiator traders if you wanted.”

“Ah, poetic justice,” Tempus said, daring Clark to accept Xena’s offer.

“No. Get him to his feet,” Clark said. “He’s coming with us and back to prison where he belongs.”

“How noble of you,” Tempus spat.

“Okay, everyone grab hold of each other,” Autolycus instructed. He put a hand on Xena’s shoulder. “We need to be linked for the stone to take us all.”

Clark still leaned on Lois to stand. Xena grabbed a hold of Tempus, her fist closed around the collar of his shirt. Lois glanced around, making sure that everyone was touching somehow. When she was satisfied, she concentrated on the house that she and Clark owned and on the day that they had been kidnapped. Worry tinged the edges of her thoughts like a dark haze. What if it didn’t work? She closed her eyes and concentrated as hard as she could, until she could smell the strong aroma of freshly brewed coffee in their coffee maker. She imagined feeling the sunlight streaming in through their living room windows, forced herself to hear the faint ticking of the desk clock. A firm picture in mind, she touched the pointed tip of the Chronos Stone lightly with her fingers.

She felt, rather than saw, the walls of the inn falling away from her and the rest of the group. A tingling sensation raced along her body like a painless electric jolt. The sensation was brief, and after a moment, Lois felt brave enough to crack open one eye. She gasped and snapped both eyes open.

She was standing in the doorway between her living room and foyer. It was exactly as Lois had seen it in her mind’s eye, the late afternoon sunlight filtering in through the large windows.

Against her, Clark swayed, the time travel drawing too much strength from him.

“Xena, help me get Clark into the sunlight,” Lois said, handing Autolycus the Chronos Stone.

Xena pushed Tempus into Gabrielle’s waiting hands. Coming to Lois’ other side, she looped Clark’s arm about her shoulder and hooked her own arm about his waist. Together, they helped Clark into the living room and settled him onto the couch, directly in the middle of a sunny patch. Clark closed his eyes as he basked in the light, a smile touching his lips as he felt the yellow sun of his own universe restoring his health and powers.

“What does sunlight have to do with anything?” Gabrielle asked, coming into the room behind them, and forcing Tempus along.

“Watch,” Lois said, a genuine smile touching her lips and eyes. She removed the bandages from his wounds, exposing them to the open air and sunlight.

“You shouldn’t...” Gabrielle began, but Lois cut her off.

“Trust me,” Lois said softly.

Xena, Gabrielle, and Autolycus watched as the bruises on Clark’s bare chest began to heal and fade. The gashes on his body vanished as the skin knit itself back together. His shoulder wound closed, leaving no trace behind. The look of pain and weakness that he’d borne was replaced by strength and vitality. His skin regained a healthy, rosy color, instead of the sickly ashen hue it had been moments prior.

“By the gods,” Gabrielle breathed incredulously.

Lois only nodded, her smile wide and genuine. She did not take her eyes from Clark.

“This isn’t fair,” Tempus grumbled.

Xena silenced him with a swift punch to his gut. Tempus coughed as the wind was knocked from him.

“No one asked for your opinion,” she said coldly.

After a few minutes, Clark’s eyes opened. Lois saw with relief that he truly was himself once more. He grinned widely at

her and Lois was glad to see that it was his old, familiar, heartwarming smile. Tempus frowned and gulped.

“Wait here,” he said to Xena, Gabrielle, and Autolycus. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Gabrielle asked.

Clark glanced at Tempus. “I’m bringing him back to the Metropolis Institution for the Criminally Insane, where he belongs.” There was renewed strength in his voice.

With that, he began to spin faster than the eye could follow. When he stopped, he was dressed in his super disguise. Autolycus raised his brows at the blue spandex suit and red cape. Clark chuckled at the reaction, then strode from the room. Fifteen seconds later he reappeared, the scruffy beard that he’d been sporting totally gone from his face. With no effort at all, Clark crumpled the gun that he had let fall on the couch cushions. He grabbed Tempus and marched the time traveler over to the window, then flew swiftly out of sight.

“Holy Hera,” Autolycus muttered, his jaw hanging slack in shock. He went to the window and craned his neck to search the sky.

“Sweet mother of Zeus,” Gabrielle said at the same time.

“Are you *sure* he isn’t a god?” she joked weakly to Lois.

Lois couldn’t help but to let loose a small laugh. “Positive.”

A few minutes later, a sonic boom rang out in the air above the Kents’ house. A second after, Clark came down the stairs from the bedroom, dressed in a pair of khaki cargo shorts and a black muscle shirt.

“Tempus is safely back in prison,” he announced, his eyes locked onto Lois’. “But get this. I ran into Detective Henderson. One of the other inmates killed a couple of the guards right around the time that Tempus broke out. That was only six hours ago. You and I were only gone for about four, maybe five hours. It’s still the same day that Tempus kidnapped us.”

“I was thinking about that day when I used the stone,” Lois said, eyeing the green rock in Autolycus’ hand with renewed awe.

“Well, it worked,” Clark grinned. He turned to Xena. “I don’t know how to begin to thank you. I wish I could pay you back somehow. Would you stay for dinner, at the very least? I know it isn’t much.”

Xena shook her head. “No, but thanks for the offer. We’d better get going. Caesar’s centurions are still looking for us. I’d hate to find out that they did something to Argo to try and draw me out.”

Clark nodded in understanding. “I can’t thank you enough for everything that you did for me...for keeping Lois safe and for saving my life in the arena.”

“Don’t mention it,” Xena said with a smile. She leaned in and hugged Clark. “Take care of yourself.”

“Gabrielle, thanks for everything.” He hugged her as well. “You’re a good friend.”

“No problem,” she assured him.

“Autolycus,” Clark said, extending a hand to the thief. “You truly *are* the King of Thieves. Thanks for all of your help. We may have different views on things, but, well, you’ve earned my respect and gratitude.”

“You’re welcome,” Autolycus said, grasping Clark about the forearm as they shook on their friendship. “And don’t worry about the stone. I’ll give it back. Thing’s more trouble than it’s worth, believe me.”

Lois embraced Xena tightly. “Thank you for saving my husband,” she said, swallowing around the lump that had formed in her throat. She said the same to Gabrielle as she hugged her.

Autolycus took her hand and kissed it lightly. This time, Clark did not glower at the bold move.

“Autolycus, thanks for getting the stone for us. We’d have never have gotten home if not for you. Thank you.” Lois hugged the thief tightly.

Xena took the Chronos Stone from Autolycus’ hands. Gabrielle and Autolycus put a hand on each of her shoulders. Xena focused on the time and place she wanted to be transported to. In a flash, the three were gone, leaving Lois and Clark alone once more.

“So,” Clark said, gazing at his wife. “What now?”

Lois laughed and eyed her husband mischievously. “First, I’m going to get out of these ridiculous clothes and take a nice, hot shower. And then, you and I are going to enjoy our vacation for a change.”

Clark beamed a smile at her. “I like the way you think.”

With a graceful motion, he swept her off of her feet and carried her up the stairs to their bedroom.

THE END

Disclaimer: No fandoms were irrevocably damaged during the production of this fan fiction. However, the gladiator trade was irreparably harmed, although, just days after the completion of this story, Tersius’s Discount Manure became an overnight success. The Chronos Stone was stretched to new limits, but placed safely back into storage for possible future forays. The author wishes to acknowledge that a long and healthy tradition of hysterical Xenaverse names and amusing disclaimers was upheld during the writing process.