

# Taking One for the Team - A Challenge Vignette

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Rated: G

Submitted: May 2011

Summary: To go undercover in a new religious organization, Lois will have to be initiated by having her long locks shorn in a questionable style. Will getting the story be worth the sacrifice?

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Lois idly tucked the errant strand of long hair behind one ear as she tried to concentrate on the information that was displayed on her computer screen. After wearing her hair in shorter styles for a time she'd decided that she wanted to grow it out again, if only for the variety. It was now back to the length it had been when she had made the decision to cut it the first time.

She knew that Clark liked her hair shorter, but had supported her determination to go for a change just like he always did. He never imposed his own likes and dislikes onto her. In personal matters he always deferred to her choice. *If it made her happy then it made him happy* was his mantra.

She reached up, having to tuck another errant lock behind her ear, as an annoyed frown stretched her lips. Maybe it was time to think about cutting it again.

"Kent! In my office."

Perry's bellow rang through the bullpen causing everyone to glance up at the Daily Planet's editor in chief. Perry stepped back into his office, his message having been delivered. Lois looked quickly over to Clark's desk in time to see him shrug and get up from his chair. Without a second thought, Lois got up also and followed him into Perry's office.

The Chief raised a brow as his best reporting duo entered his office. "Ah, Lois, if I remember correctly, and I could be wrong since I'm getting old and probably bordering on senile... but I thought I asked Kent to come into my office. Is your name Kent?"

Lois gave her boss a smug smile and held her left hand up, wiggling her third finger. "Actually, it is." She laughed at his grimace. "Come on, Perry, you know that Clark will have to tell me everything said in here as soon as he leaves anyway. Might as well save the time and trouble."

Perry just shook his head and waved the two of them to the chairs in front of his desk. "Okay, here's the deal. How familiar are you with that new religious organization, the Soldiers of the Savior?"

Clark shrugged. "Just what I've seen on the news. They've only been around for a few months. Spend most of their time on street corners passing out pamphlets and preaching brotherhood. They seem harmless enough."

Lois shook her head. "I don't know. I began doing a little background investigating on them when they first appeared, but had to shelve it when Clark and I got a line on the rebirth of Intergang. I never got a chance to get back to it." Lois bit her lip and tapped her finger on the desk as she tried to remember some of what she had uncovered. "I couldn't come up with anything concrete, but some of the parts just didn't seem to add up to the public whole."

Perry nodded and pointed at Lois. "Bingo. An old source of mine lives down where this group has their sanctuary, as they call it. He told me that there are some funny things going on at that place. A lot of late night activity, with trucks moving in and out at

the strangest times."

Clark spread his hands in question. "So, why doesn't your friend go to the police?"

Perry answered Clark's gesture. "With what? Late night traffic? The group has broken no laws that anyone has seen. The police don't have any reason to roust them. It's not as if they're disturbing the peace, or anything. They are just acting out of character, and as someone who used to be plugged into the street, it just smelled funny to him. So he called me."

"So, you want us to investigate this group?" Lois piped in.

Perry leaned back into his chair. "Actually, I can't afford to send both of you in on this so I want Clark to go undercover and infiltrate the group. See what he can..."

"No! Ah, that's not a good idea." Lois had suddenly become panicky hearing Perry outline his plan and watching Clark nod in agreement. "I mean, I've already done some initial research. I have a better feeling for this organization. I should be the one to go undercover."

Perry shook his head. "Now Lois, honey, I can't ask you to..."

"No, I want to," she quickly interrupted.

"How dangerous is this?" Clark asked, looking at Perry, then at Lois. She silenced him with a glare.

Perry looked confused. "Lois, you realize that you'll have to..."

"I know." She cut him off again. "It doesn't matter. I'm best suited for this story. I'll keep you updated on my progress." She stood up and headed for the door. "Come on, Clark." She exited Perry's office.

Clark appeared shell-shocked. "What was that all about?"

Perry shrugged expansively. "How should I know? She's your wife."

Clark caught up with his frenetic wife at her desk. She was busy at her computer keyboard. "What was with that performance in Perry's office?"

She didn't glance up at her concerned husband. "It's simple. You can't infiltrate the Soldiers of the Savior."

Clark sat down on the corner of her desk. "And why is that?"

She typed in a couple of more characters. "Ah-hah. There, the Soldiers of the Savior web site. Tell me, what do you notice, physically, about our little group of missionaries?"

Clark studied the picture that Lois had brought up on her screen. "They look pretty typical of this type of group. They are all wearing sandals and plain robes. Obviously to denote their rejection of material wealth."

Lois nodded. "And?"

Clark frowned for a second then the light came on. "Oh, I see, they all seem to be wearing the same haircut."

Lois patted him on the hand. "That's right. In my earlier research I found out that all new initiates, men and women alike, undergo that ceremonial haircut prior to admission to the group." Lois glanced up at her husband. "It would be a little hard for a man who needs heat vision and a mirror to cut his hair to infiltrate a group with that requirement."

Clark frowned as he studied the picture more closely. "It appears as if the members have adopted an old monk's tonsure as their signatory look." Lois bit her lip and nodded. He reached over and ran his fingers through her long silken locks. "Are you okay with this? You don't have to do this. We can ask Perry to assign someone else."

Lois looked up at her husband and saw the uncertainty on his face. "I'm fine. This could be a very important story. I don't think we can trust it to someone else."

"But..."

Lois shook her head. "Do you remember when I was first agonizing over whether to cut my hair? Do you remember what you said?" Clark nodded as Lois just went on. "You said that it

didn't matter to you how I wore my hair. You would still love me whether it was down to my waist or if I was shaved bald."

"I remember."

"Well, I guess you're going to get a chance to prove it."

Clark leaned down and captured her lips with his. She could tell he didn't want there to be any doubt in her mind how he felt.

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Lois stood in a short line of new hopefuls. It had only taken her three days to convince the 'elders' of the movement that she had potential as member of their cause. She had kept her hair tied back and wore heavy rimmed glasses just in case someone might recognize her as Lois Lane.

She had approached the Soldiers of the Savior at one of their rallies, indicating that she believed in their mission and would like to join their ranks. She gave them a fake name and a back story that seemed perfect for a group like that. She claimed to have no living family and had just recently come into town. She was broke with no job, no prospects and no place to stay. In other words, one of the invisible people that no one would be missing.

They had put her through the paces of being a menial servant to the other members of the group. It was to teach her humility she was told. Lois subverted herself to the task and was properly subservient and compliant. But she also let her native intelligence show through. Thinking they had found a bright, quick study, who they could bend to their will, she had been recommended for initiation in a remarkably short time.

Lois had been glad for that because she didn't know how much longer she could continue to swallow her bile while dealing with these people. It was obvious to her that the Soldiers of the Savior was as bogus an operation as was Costmart's fronting for Intergang. True, there were many gullible innocents who actually thought that they were missionaries for peace and brotherhood. But there was a definite hierarchy in the organization, and she could feel the sleaziness of many of the leaders whenever she came in contact with them.

She knew that there was something rotten going on, but she hadn't been able to get close enough to get into those areas where she was sure the proof would be kept. She had no illusions that becoming an initiated member would bring her into the confidence of those who actually ran whatever it was that this group was into, but it would allow her much more freedom of movement. And she hoped that would be enough to allow her the opportunity to seek out and discover the information she would need to blow this operation sky high.

She knew that Clark was keeping a watch on her as much as he could from a distance, but she hadn't had any chance to make any contact with him. All the potential initiates were housed in the same room so she was never left alone, nor would there have been any chance to sneak out since it seemed someone was always awake. But now the time had come. She, along with two other fellows were to go through their initiation ceremonies this evening and she would be granted the status of soldier. That meant much more freedom of movement, and that's what she'd been waiting for.

"Wendy?"

She moved forward at the false name she had given them was called. They were on a small stage-like platform that was flanked on three sides by rows of chairs. It was certainly their meeting hall. She knelt in front of the man who had called out her name. There were no formal titles in the group but this man was the obvious leader. Everyone else deferred to him.

His voice was deep, and surprisingly warm. "Lost child, do you renounce the sins of materialism and vow to embrace the tenets of peace and universal brotherhood."

Lois affected a slight quaver to her voice. "I do."

He reached out and undid the loose bun that Lois had placed her long hair into. It fell loosely about her head. "Hair is vanity.

Let this ceremonial cut proclaim your acceptance of a life dedicated to the service of higher ideals and spiritual values."

Lois had to stifle a gasp of surprise when she felt something being placed on her head. She couldn't believe it! They were actually going to use a bowl as a guide to cut off her hair, and not a particularly large bowl at that. She could feel the hard rim of the bowl pressing against the upper part of her ear.

She heard more than felt the snick of the shears as the long hair on the sides and the back of her head was scissored off just below the rim of the bowl. She bit her lip as she watched the long severed tresses falling to the floor in front of her. As bad as it might look now, she knew that worse was yet to come.

A few moments later, the bowl was removed from her head and she felt the man's large hand grasp the back of her neck in a firm grip. She suppressed a shudder as she heard the buzz of an electric clipper being snapped on.

The humming sound of the device changed to a much deeper growl as the blades were pressed to the top of her skull and began to chew through the dark locks up there. The leader made pass after pass with the hungry clippers while Lois worked hard to hold onto the vacuous smile she noted most of the members seemed to possess. Finally the man thumbed off the electric clippers and set them aside. He pulled Lois to her feet.

"Soldiers may I present to you, Wendy, the newest recruit to our ever growing ranks of missionary servants of peace and brotherhood."

A young woman came up and led Lois off the stage amidst loud applause and cheers. She was just relieved that the ordeal was over, and thankful that there were very few mirrors in the place.

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Lois lay on the small cot in the tiny room which she shared with one other young woman named Kay. She was clearly only twenty something but had been with the group ever since they first showed up in Metropolis. It was obvious that this woman bought into the public image whole-heartedly.

In their earlier talks Lois became convinced that Kay was not 'in the know'. If this had been the nineteen sixties the young woman would have been one of the flower children. All peace and love, and without a logical brain cell in her head. Lois had suffered through a couple of hours of inane conversation until she felt she could claim that she was tired and needed to get to sleep.

Lois had closed her eyes and listened. Her insides were churning with impatience, but she knew she had to wait. She had to wait until her roommate had fallen asleep, and for most everyone else to also. Not that she didn't expect there to be people up at all hours. Those who had something to hide, generally provided a means to guard whatever that was. Lois just didn't want to have to avoid any more folks than she had to.

After listening to the steady, even breathing of Kay for several hours, Lois finally felt that it would be safe to sneak out of the room. Being careful not to bump into anything, which wasn't much of a problem since there wasn't much of anything to bump into, she silently opened the door and let herself out into the corridor. Lois paused, holding her breath, to listen for any signs of activity around her. There were none.

In the few days that she'd spent there she had figured out which areas of the building seemed to be off limits to the regular members. Areas where only the higher ups would ever be seen going. Lois headed for those.

She made her way unseen to a rear stairwell and carefully climbed to the top floor of the place. The door to the floor was locked. Lois reached down and peeled a piece of flesh-colored tape off the back of her ankle. Stuck to that tape were a miniature set of lock picks. She quickly made short work of the old key lock and let herself into the hallway. She was now on the top floor. The restricted floor.

Again she listened as she crept silently through the corridors. She was surprised by the apparent lack of activity she was coming across. Sure, it was probably two or three o'clock in the morning, but she thought that, like the pursuit of truth, evil never slept either.

Coming around a corner she was finally rewarded with a light seeping out from under a not quite closed door. Looking all around her before moving, she gradually made her way up to the door. Placing her exposed ear up to the door she could hear the sounds of someone in the room shifting around in a chair and muttering.

She couldn't make out any words but the tone of his mutterings was one of irritation or frustration. Suddenly she heard the definite sound of the chair being pushed back and the dissatisfied grunt of 'that's enough for tonight' coming from the room. She hurried back to the corner she had come from and watched the doorway.

In a few moments she saw the light go out and the door open fully. The man who had served as her barber earlier in the evening stepped out and shut the door behind him. Bending over, he locked the door, then moved off down the hall in the opposite direction.

Lois waited a few moments, until she was sure that he was gone before she moved back toward the doorway. This lock too she made short work of. Smiling to herself she acknowledged that she was getting better and better at this breaking and entering stuff.

Letting herself into the room, she closed the door behind her and risked turning on the light just long enough to see the lay of the room. She then switched off the overhead light and moved over to the outside wall where she had seen the desk was. Locating the desk lamp and finding the switch only took a few moments. She waited a couple of minutes for her eyes to get used to the dim illumination provided by the small desk lamp. Then she began her quest.

The desk drawers yielded nothing of any interest. Mostly just office supplies like staples, rubber bands, envelopes and the like. A couple of file folders were in a bottom drawer but they appeared to be legitimate tax and lease records on the property.

Lois then turned her attention to a large file cabinet in the corner. It was locked, of course. And it was quite sturdy. No way she would be able to just force it open with a letter opener like she had been able to do with some of the cheaper cabinets she had come across over the years.

Once again she had to take out her lock picks. This was a bit more difficult, though, than just an ordinary door lock. The smaller key entry proved to be a bit daunting and she was unfamiliar with the way such locks were constructed so she was working entirely by feel. It took several frustrating minutes before she finally heard the satisfying click that signified success.

She pulled open a drawer and randomly pulled a file out. It contained a memo on Costmart stationary. Intergang! Lois had hit the jackpot. She quickly scanned the memo, then reached in and pulled out more files. Everything she read pointed to the fact that the Soldiers of the Savior were nothing more than another arm of Intergang. Drugs, illegal betting, smuggling, the whole smear.

Lois was so engrossed in what she was reading that she never realized she had company until she heard him speak. "What are you doing here?"

Startled, Lois turned around, files still in hand, to face the man who she had watched leave this room only minutes before.

"I don't know who you are, but it's really unfortunate that you have seen those." He reached into his pants pocket, having shed the robe long before, and pulled out a small revolver. "I'll have to ask you to come with me."

Lois stared at him for a few seconds and then glanced toward the ceiling. "Superman?"

The man didn't have time to look confused by Lois' reaction before a loud crashing sound filled the room. Suddenly there was a new skylight in the old building and a familiar figure in red and blue was standing in front of Lois. Superman quickly snatched the gun out of the leader's hand, crushed the pistol and dropped it to the floor.

Superman turned to Lois. "Are you okay?"

Lois' hand went involuntarily to her shorn hair. "You're kidding, right? Give it a few weeks and I'll be okay...I guess." Lois gave him a wry smile and pointed behind him.

He turned to see the man trying to sneak away. "Not so fast, buddy." Superman grabbed the man and using length of cord from the window blinds tied the fellow to the chair.

He turned back to Lois. "What do you have there?"

Lois smiled at the superhero. "It seems that the Soldiers of the Savior are nothing but another front for Intergang. I don't suppose you have a cell phone on you so I can call Henderson do you?"

Superman smiled back at her. "How about using their phone?" he said, pointing to the phone sitting on the corner of the desk.

"Works for me." Lois moved over, and grinning at Superman, began to dial.

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"Come on, Lois, it's not that bad." Clark came up behind his wife who wouldn't come out of the bathroom. She'd been staring at her reflection for quite some time.

She was biting her lip as she stared at the strange looking woman who stared back at her in the mirror. "Yes it is... Omigod, I look just like my father!"

"Lo-is." Clark tried to put his arms around her, but she pulled away.

"Okay," she said as she fingered the fringe of dark hair that surrounded her head. "I suppose I can get by in public by wearing hats, berets, and scarfs, it will just seem like a real short style. But what about at home? I'm not going to want to be wearing those then." She looked up at her husband, a tear threatening to sneak out of the corner of her eye. "How are you going to stand to look at me? I look freaky."

"Lois you do not look freaky." He reached out his arms again. "Come here."

Reluctantly she came to him. He enfolded her in his arms and leaned in to kiss her. Their lips met and everything else was forgotten. The mutual affirmation of their affection for each other lasted for several minutes. As soon as one of them broke off the kiss, the other would initiate another.

Finally Clark pulled back and captured Lois' eyes with his own. "I told you that it wouldn't matter to me. I love you because of who you are, not what you may look like at the moment." He slid his hand along the short fringe that encircled her head. "This is only a temporary aberration. It will soon just be another story to tell in the long list of the Adventures of Lois Lane - Investigative Reporter." He wiped the lone tear away with his thumb and went in again for another quick kiss.

Breaking again, for a breath Lois frowned as she stared at each other and she noticed that Clark's smile was getting wider and then began to turn into a grin. "What? What's so funny?"

Clark tried to cover his grin and shrugged apologetically. "Well, now that you mention it...you do look a lot like your father."

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THE END