

# The Trouble With Time Traveling

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Summary: Those who don't know history are bound to mess up...

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Author's Note: This is in response to Kerth Challenge #8, which asked what would happen if Tempus showed up earlier than he did in the episode "Tempus: Fugitive."

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Tempus smirked to himself as he stepped through the time window. He didn't have much time; his absence would be noticed soon. Those damn meddling Peace Keepers could all go choke to death on their own righteousness for all he cared. In fact, he wished they *would*. And Herb right along with them. Tempus frowned. In the beginning, Herb had been an interesting, if not boring and morally uptight, companion. Tempus had indulged some of the man's more annoying quirks, like his rule to merely *observe* the past and *never* meddle with it. But as time had progressed, Herb's moral compass had become insufferable; almost as unbearable as the peaceful boringness of Utopia. Which was why Tempus had opted to take this little field trip on his own. Unauthorized. For a bit more...hands on fun.

Oh and what fun plans he had! If all went well, Utopia would be nothing more than a child's unattainable day-dream by the time he was done here. But how long would that take? He frowned. An hour? Less? Did it really matter? So long as he accomplished his goal, time didn't mean anything.

He hadn't had time to do much planning. The trouble with time travel was that it was complicated. Sometimes, you could plan the exact moment and place of arrival – time windows could do it with amazing accuracy, if one knew what they were doing. And sometimes, time traveling put you only in the general vicinity of where you actually wanted to be. Herb's clunky, sled-like time machine was a prime example of that. Plus, the damn thing ran on gold, of all things.

"Smart man, no common sense," Tempus muttered under his breath.

The man could make a machine to travel through time and space, yet he hadn't been capable of making it run on a more readily accessible resource? Like water or sunlight or dirt or something?

In any case, once Tempus had swiped the time window, he hadn't had much time to spend on the details. He'd remembered vague bits of his Metropolis History classes and had hastily chosen his destination. He was directly behind Arnie's Arms and Ammo, a seedy gun shop in the thick of Hobbs Bay, which even the local police avoided if they could. Arnie's boasted the highest amount of murders to take place right outside the front door in the entire city, regardless of the time of day. Tempus smiled. It had always sounded right up his alley, a place where he could feel comfortable and at home. Now he was *finally* getting his chance to see it in its heyday.

He quickened his step and emerged from the tight alleyway separating Arnie's from the adult video store next to it. He wished he had time to check it out as well. Utopian citizens were such prudes, and such places had long since fallen out of favor. As he stepped out onto the sidewalk, he glanced around. He was *definitely* out of place in the Utopian garb he was wearing, but no one paid him any mind. In fact, not many people were out at all. A few teenagers in saggy pants, two cars speeding down the street in what appeared to be a drag race, and a knot of three people on the corner – one passing money over in exchange for a small bag of white powder. Nothing worth noting. Nothing that posed a threat to Tempus – or his plans.

He nonchalantly entered the store, throwing one last, quick glance over his shoulder to ensure that no one was paying attention to the stranger in their midst. No one was. He strolled right up to the short, portly, balding, pale man at the counter. The middle-aged man's eyes were half-lidded, as if he was ready to curl up in a corner and take a nap. Or perhaps he'd been one of the dealer's earlier customers that day. Who could say? He blinked sleepily at Tempus.

"Yo," the man greeted him, a bit gruffly but not threateningly.

"Uh, yes. Yo," Tempus awkwardly returned. "I need a gun."

"You've come to the right place, my dude," the man said, definitely sounding like he had taken some sort of substance. His words were ever so slightly slurred and slow in coming. "Zack," his nametag read. "What can I get for you?"

Tempus mulled the question over in his mind. The problem with being born into a perfect society with no crime and no access to such primitive weapons as these was that he had no idea what kind of gun would be best for his purposes. He'd discreetly tried to study up on the guns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but information was limited and he didn't want to draw attention to himself. It seemed the Peace Keepers of his time kept their eyes on everyone and knew who was looking to start problems. Not that there were many. Tempus was a bit of an anomaly that way – a fact he prided himself on.

"I'm not exactly sure," he admitted slowly, his eyes making a leisurely sweep of the various guns, knives, ammunition boxes, and even some bows and crossbows for the city's hunting enthusiasts that lined the walls, filled the shelves, and glinted beneath the lights of the glass display cases. He stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned a hip against the display case that doubled as a counter in front of him. He felt like a king surveying his armory. "Something small. Discreet. Powerful enough to...defend myself with. Some kind of handgun. Easily concealable."

Zack nodded in understanding, and swept a hand to his right.

"Ch'a," he said in some kind of primitive sound of agreement.

"Right this way. I think I have *exactly* what you need."

Tempus followed, crossing the ten feet to where a small arsenal of handguns lay nestled on faded, ratty-looking red velvet within the glass case. He breathed in sharply, feeling very much at home in this pauper's palace of firearms. If it wasn't for Superman, he felt like he could stay in this past world forever.

"You've got your basic Ruger, your Glock, Browning Hi Power..." Zack said, opening the case with a small silver key from a ring he carried on his belt. He pointed to each one in question. "Springfield, Smith and Wesson Shield, Beretta..." he droned on with surprising attention and expertise.

Tempus barely heard him. The names were little more than a foreign language to him. A language he longed to learn, but not now. He didn't have the time. He scanned the weapons at a glance and pointed to the one that he liked the look of the most.

"That one," he declared. "Let me see that one."

"The Glock. Nice choice. Super classic," Zack said with a nod of approval. "Got one myself at home. Have to, in this neighborhood. Between the crime and my ex-girlfriend, it's a risk not to carry, you know?"

Tempus nodded absently, slightly revolted by the idea of this slobby man having a girlfriend of any kind – ex or otherwise – as he reached for the gun. But before he could touch it, he stopped himself. Then he jutted his jaw in the direction of the Glock. “Show me how it works,” he said instead.

“Simple really. You load it like this,” Zack said, rummaging around for some ammunition and demonstrating the proper loading procedure. “Nice and easy. Safety is here,” he said, pointing to the safety lock, without disengaging it. “Point, shoot, and say goodbye to your problems.” He unloaded the gun and pushed it toward Tempus. “Give it a whirl. See how it feels in your hand, my man.”

Tempus obligingly took the gun and a tingling sensation of pure adrenaline shot through his body. It felt so good, so *right* to be holding this small, sleek, deadly machine. It felt like an extension of his own body, in a way. He wondered how it had been that he’d spent his whole life without one in his possession.

“Nice,” he murmured softly, admiringly. “Very nice.”

Zack grinned. “Ch’a, I knew you’d love it,” he commented, and Tempus could see him practically salivating at the idea of a sale. “Want me to ring it up for you?” he asked.

“Just one moment,” Tempus replied, with a dismissive wave of his free hand, still eyeing the powerful machine in his hand. “I just want to make sure I know how to work this.”

“Right,” Zack said with a single nod. “Of course.”

He watched as Tempus repeated the steps to load the weapon. Then, before Zack could ask him to unload once more, Tempus disengaged the safety, took aim at the center of the man’s forehead, and fired at point blank range. The grimy white wall behind Zack’s head instantly gained a new red and pink patina as the back of the man’s head erupted into a splattering mist of blood and bits of brain matter.

“Don’t worry, I don’t need a bag,” Tempus quipped as the lifeless body tipped backward and slumped to the floor.

Zack’s staring eyes showed only the barest hint of surprise, as he’d realized a heartbeat too late what was happening. Tempus snorted in disgust. The greasy little man hadn’t even had the decency to look scared of his executioner. No matter. He wasn’t here to kill insignificant, drugged-out, sketchy arms dealers. He had much, much bigger game to hunt.

Tempus put the Glock’s safety back on and slipped the weapon – still loaded – into the waistband of his pants, the way he’d once seen a man do in an old movie. Funny, how Utopia still kept the movies of the distant past. Society had moved on from the “senseless” violence of the films of yesteryear but had shied away from censoring them. Old films might be difficult to get a hold of, but that was simply from a lack of demand, not from any sort of government decree that they be banished to the past.

He moved the gun to the back of his pants, hiding the distinctive shape beneath the silver vest he wore. He thought for a moment about taking an extra box or two of ammunition but ultimately decided not to. While he’d love to bring the Glock back with him to the future, he didn’t think he could get away with it. And one gun against the entire Utopian planet wouldn’t do much good, even with an unlimited supply of bullets. One dead Peace Keeper or government official and Superman’s meddling descendants would be on him like ants on sugar.

No. He would never accomplish his goal by bringing one woefully underpowered weapon into the future. His only chance was to kill Utopia before it could start. And there was only one simple way to do that: by taking out the woman whose accursed womb had brought forth Superman’s half-breed mongrel offspring.

“Oh Lois,” he crooned to himself as he smiled maniacally. He left the shop and went back out into the bright afternoon. “I’m coming for you.”

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It took him less than a minute to get where he wanted to go. His stolen time window allowed him to move quickly over great distances. He only hoped he’d gotten the location correct. His Lane History was a little rusty – he’d slept through most of his classes – but he was fairly certain that Lois would be in this location in just a few minutes’ time. He wished he’d had more time to double and triple check his information, but time had been of the essence. He’d seen this rare opportunity and taken it, knowing that to hesitate meant to fail.

He usually hated waiting; he was more than ready to rid the world of the Mother of Utopia. But in this case, he found that having a few minutes to spare had its advantages – namely, it gave him time to find the perfect hiding place to bide his time. Although the meddling Lane woman didn’t know who he was, he knew his atypical – for the mid-nineteen-nineties, at any rate – garb would immediately clue her in that something was amiss. She might be galactically stupid enough not to notice that her best friend and work partner was Superman, but she would take one look at the time traveler’s clothing and her hackles would rise. She might even manage to escape his trap if that happened. Tempus simply would not risk that. He had a mission and he was bound and determined to see it through.

He wedged himself into a narrow alley between the filthy bricks of two massive buildings. The fit was snug – he could lean against one building and reach out and almost touch the one opposite him – but he was almost completely concealed from view, so long as he kept to the heavy shadows of the late afternoon. More importantly, he could watch the back doors of his target building easily, with an unobstructed view.

He leaned back against the rough brick wall and ran the scenario over in his mind. How he would wait for Lois to get into the proper position. How he would carefully aim at her heart. Not her head. The head was too small of a target – her damned, huge ego aside. He could easily miss and she would live. Whereas the chest...even if he didn’t strike her directly in the heart – and oh how he wanted to rip apart that accursed organ which had led her to love the alien superhero! – he still had a good chance of hitting something vital. The lungs, the guts, something. *Anything*. He imagined himself pulling the trigger and watching as her lifeblood soaked her clothing, just the same as the gun dealer’s had painted the wall of his little shop in tones of crimson.

Tempus eased the Glock out of his waistband, took the safety off, and admired it for a moment while he waited. He waffled between feeling a grim sense of dead-calm and a nervous twisting of his stomach as he shot glances between the gun and the doors of the building. He wasn’t worried about making the kill. He’d already lost his blood innocence. Killing didn’t scare him at all. He wasn’t repulsed by it. He’d found that he loved it. No, his unease wasn’t born out of the task at hand. Rather, each second felt like an eternity pressing down on him. He felt as though at any minute, those pesky Peace Keepers would figure out his plan somehow and show up to ruin things. And where was Lois? Shouldn’t she be here by now?

The door to the building he was watching suddenly opened. Two women strode confidently out into the sunlight. Tempus held his breath, waiting, the sun too bright for the moment for him to make out their features from that distance; its glare making everything seem as though it were awash in white and gold. He slunk back deeper into the shadows as the rapid, gunshot-like clip-clopping of two pairs of high heels rang out in the quiet back parking area they were in. Yes! There! They were close enough now for Tempus to get a decent look at the women. One of them, he didn’t recognize. Perhaps a sister or aunt or friend. No, that couldn’t be right, could it? Ice Queen Mad Dog Lane wasn’t exactly rolling in friends at this stage of her life. Well, perhaps the sister or aunt theory was correct. The other woman though?

Tempus grinned and grimaced all at once. He’d know those

too-perfect porcelain doll features anywhere. He'd seen that face in text books, in movies, on TV movies, in holograms, on posters, graffitied onto walls in too-quiet neighborhoods, even on Utopia's coins and paper currency – now universal rather than country or continent specific. He'd even seen that face in his nightmares. Oh, how he *hated* that face!

Lois Lane.

And yet, he was thrilled to finally see her, in the flesh.

Because now she was *real*, rather than some mythological goddess of benevolence. And real people, unlike those imaginary gods, could be killed. He tightened his grip on the Glock and stepped confidently from the shadows.

"Hello, Lois," he said as a slow, malevolent smile curved the corners of his mouth.

She stopped dead in her tracks and instinctively reached for her purse. Tempus chuckled. What was she going to do? Mace him? She was too far away and the light breeze would carry the stinging chemicals away before they could reach him. Still chuckling, he squeezed the trigger.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Then the same for her companion, who'd pulled her own gun out in a futile effort to neutralize the threat. The woman squawked out a single scream of shock as the first bullet tore through her abdominal wall. The next two ripped through her heart.

Six shots.

Tempus knew he didn't have time to savor his victory. Anyone could have heard those shots. Police could be on their way already, for all he knew. But he still couldn't force himself to leave the scene. Not yet. He'd worked too hard for this.

Ignoring the unknown, older woman, he turned his full attention to Lois. One bullet had taken her through the heart. The other was slightly to the side and had to have rendered a lung useless. She'd twitched as the first bullet had hit; more a muscle spasm than a conscious decision as her life ended. The last one had hit her in the left shoulder; the shot hastily aimed as her body had crumpled, doing no substantial damage.

Tempus drank in the sight of her lifeless body. How her glazed, lifeless eyes were wide in shock and perhaps pain. How her white business top was soaked with a spreading red stain. How her legs lay at almost unnatural angles as her muscles had given out. How her maroon skirt had darkened in places as the blood dripped down to baptize it as well as it had the shirt she wore.

A siren rang out, sounding close. Tempus could no longer afford to delay his return to his own time. He wished he had a camera to capture an image of his great triumph. But, alas, the thought had come too late and he had nothing with which to immortalize the grisly scene. Opening the time window, he turned and took one last, lingering look, then reluctantly let go of the glorious firearm that had made his dream come true. It clattered to the ground at his feet, abandoned, its purpose fulfilled. But as he stepped through and into the familiar time-vortex – as he thought of that space between timelines – he couldn't help but feel like something was wrong. Something about her reaching for whatever was in her purse. She'd used her left hand, he'd idly noticed.

Why did it bother him so much?

He shook his head. No time to figure it out now. He had a dystopian future to return to.

With a barely audible *whoosh*, the time window closed and he was sent hurtling through the void into his own time.

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"So, what do you make of it?" Inspector Henderson asked Clark, not an hour later. He nodded in the general direction of the crime scene behind him.

Clark shook his head, feeling confused and sick to his stomach. He stuck his hands into his pants pockets. "Honestly,

Bill? It's...weird."

"Yeah, no kidding," Bill said, snorting a sarcastic laugh.

"It doesn't seem random, does it?" Clark pointed out. "No obvious signs of an assault or robbery, the murder weapon just... left here on the ground, for anyone to find. It feels...I don't know. Almost like a targeted assassination." He frowned, thinking again of the gun being left just laying around. "An amateur one at that."

"I've gotten a *lot* of...negative press lately," Lois put in, unable to tear her eyes from where the police were zipping up a body bag around her doppelganger. "A few threats. Not many people were thrilled with my decision to leave Lex Luthor at the altar," she added thoughtfully, with a heavy sigh. "Somehow derailing my wedding offended everyone in this city."

"Present company excluded," Clark said with a small smile meant to dispel some of her bleak mood.

She gave him a tiny, but forced, smile in return. "Yeah," was all she replied.

"Any IDs on either one of them?" Clark finally asked, both to break the silence and to begin his investigation.

It was clear to him that someone had seen – or perhaps tracked? – the Lois look-alike to this spot to kill her, thinking that she was Lois. It could *not* be a coincidence that something like this had happened at the same time that the city was seething with rage against Lois for dumping Luthor on what should have been their wedding day. On a separate, but somewhat related note, the public had also turned against Superman for having failed – or, as many saw it, for *refusing* – to save Luthor from his suicide. Everything about the public's mood seemed...forced, somehow. Perhaps the killer had been motivated by a mob mentality.

Henderson nodded. "Victim number two had her driver's license on her. Arianna Carlin."

Clark scrunched up his brow. Something about that name seemed to tug at the corners of his memory, but he couldn't quite place it.

"And my stunt double?" Lois quipped, as Clark turned the name over in his mind again.

Henderson shook his head. "No idea. Yet. She had no ID on her. But the building behind them? There's a plastic surgery office in there." His eyebrows raised up into his hairline. Clearly, he believed there was a connection. "My guess is we might find a clue in the patient records, but that's strictly *off* the record. Got it?"

"Thanks," Clark said quickly, nodding. "Keep us posted if you find out anything. And we'll do the same."

"Will do," the policeman agreed.

Clark led Lois away from the crime scene, slowing his stride to make sure he kept pace with her distracted gait. He wanted to reach out and sling a friendly arm around her shoulder, to bolster her and give her support. He could only imagine the dark, depressing thoughts that had to be swirling around in her head. It wasn't every day that one saw what appeared to be a perfect clone of themselves slain in a parking lot. But he restrained himself. His relationship with Lois, though restored to functional now that Luthor was no longer acting as a wedge between them, was still fractured and fragile. While he'd never lost his love or respect for her – despite his serious questioning of her judgment in choosing to nearly marry the narcissistic billionaire – she was still skittish around him. He didn't think that she didn't trust him, but there seemed to be some hesitation that she had in letting herself fall back into what had once been an effortless friendship between them.

When they reached Lois' Jeep, Clark turned to her. Unable to refrain any longer, he reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, needing to feel that connection between them, needing to let her know she had nothing to fear about the way he viewed her.

"Lois...I'm sorry," he said quietly, meaning every word.

She blinked in surprise. "For what?"

He shrugged a little, never taking his hand from her shoulder. “That you had to see that. I mean, it can’t exactly be a comfortable experience in seeing your own face on a murder victim,” he clarified, toeing the sidewalk self-consciously.

She sighed and dropped her shoulders a bit. For a moment, her eyes closed, as though she were blinking back a flood of emotions. She shuddered, then looked at him again, clear-eyed. “No, it’s not. But we’ll figure out what happened. It’s what we’ve always done best.” She summoned up a smile for him. “Besides...and maybe I’m horrible for thinking this but...perhaps it’s for the best that whoever that woman was...that second me...” Her voice trailed off. “God, I’m awful,” she added after a moment. She shook her head. “No one deserves to be murdered. Still...can you just imagine, if someone else who looked exactly like me was out there, running around doing God only knows what? Because something tells me she didn’t choose to look like me for flattery’s sake.”

Clark thought it over and nodded. “Who knows what kind of trouble she might have made for you.”

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Tempus was growing more and more irritated as the minutes and hours ticked by. He roamed the familiar streets of his own time, realizing that nothing had changed. Utopia still moseyed along at its sleepy, tumbleweed-like pace. Everywhere he looked, he saw happy people, smiling faces, and a Metropolis so clean that it sickened him. He longed to see – kept straining to see – a single piece of litter on the ground or gang tag spray painted on a wall somewhere. But nothing was to be seen.

Centennial Park.

He needed to get there, to check...

He wasn’t far from it. He would walk, rather than grab one of the pristine, emissions-free cabs with their overly friendly, helpful drivers. If he did, he was sure he’d lose everything he’d eaten for the last week. He quickened his pace, scowling darkly at anyone who dared to shoot a glance – however fleeting – in his direction. Within fifteen minutes, he was entering the park. As though on auto-pilot, he wove his way through the foliage and families, making a shortcut to the fountain where Lois Lane had eventually accepted Superman’s engagement ring.

“What the...” he started, leaving the rest unsaid.

The commemorative statue of the Mother and Father of Utopia – with Superman in his civilian clothing instead of the blue – still stood.

“How?” he breathed in disbelief.

This wasn’t fair! He’d gunned Lois down in cold blood. He’d watched the life leave her body. Unless he was mistaken, there was no way that she could possibly have survived the attempt on her life. Even now, with all the medical advances the future boasted, dead was still dead. There was no coming back from it.

Unless...

No, it couldn’t be...could it?

Frowning deeply, he activated the holopad before the statue, which responded instantly to the touch of human hands on the screen. He swiped through the timeline of Lois Lane’s life, searching until he found the time and place he’d visited earlier that day. As he watched, his anger grew.

“It wasn’t her! It was a fake!” he growled lowly, through teeth gritted so hard he felt in danger of shattering them. He pounded a fist on the screen; it flickered once and went dark.

That was the trouble with time traveling, he thought to himself as he brooded on his failure. You never could tell how your actions might – or might not – change the future.

THE END