

To the Heart of Egypt

by htbthomas

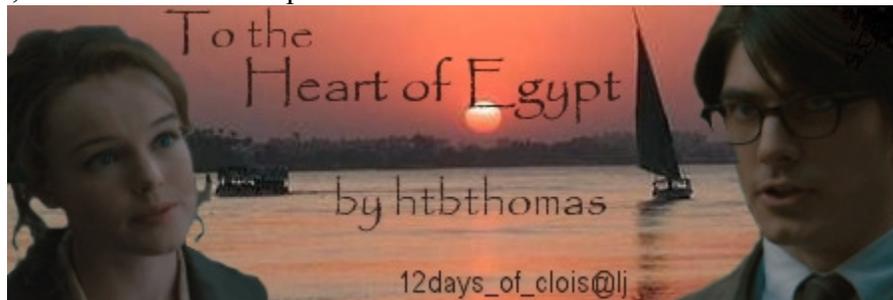
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Rating: K+

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Author's Note: Most of my friends list knows that I spent three years in Japan, but you may not know that I spent the two years before that in Cairo. Most of these scenes come directly from my husband's and my experiences there. Enjoy!

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Perry White's words about her next news assignment were still replaying in Lois' mind as she sat back at her desk. *"The Planet has to be the first to find out what's going on with Superman. His behavior has changed so much in the last few months... he's spending more and more time here in Metropolis, only appearing to help in the most dire of emergencies... there's got to be a reason."* Perry had stared distractedly out of the blinds for a few moments, an old habit of his, before turning back to her. *"And if anyone can find out, it's you, Lois."*

As she logged in to the system, Lois chewed thoughtfully on her pencil. *You're right, Chief. Lois Lane is the best woman for the job. Only problem is...* She glanced toward Clark's empty chair. *I know what's going on with the Man of Steel... His priorities have changed.*

But of course, she couldn't tell Perry it was because Superman was devoting more of his time to his family... It was becoming increasingly clear in the last few months - the months since she and Clark had made their marriage official - that Superman was being seen less and less in public. Clark was marvelously content these days, snatching every moment he could with Lois and Jason, really trying to make up for the years he had lost with them. And as much as she was enjoying this extended honeymoon, deep down inside she had the niggling worry that they were taking him away from his duties a little *too* often - even though he was always there when he was really needed.

In these months of adjustment, they had hoped, rather foolishly it seemed, that his less frequent appearances wouldn't be really noticeable. But in today's information age, any change was noticed and remarked upon ad infinitum. Lois sighed briefly and started up her word

processor, hoping for a flash of inspiration to hit her.

"Hey, Ms. Lane?" a voice called to her right, and she looked up into the overeager face of Jimmy Olsen.

"Hmm?" she grunted, pencil still in her mouth.

"Which of these do you like for the late edition?" He bent over the edge of her desk, flaring the photos out like a hand of poker. She and Clark had been trying to make sure that Jimmy had at least a few Superman photos each week - especially since Superman was getting harder and harder to spot. And Lois had to admit, she was growing just as fond of Jimmy as her husband had always been. He'd helped keep their little relationship secret for them during the early months, and one good turn deserved another.

Jimmy and Lois had managed to get to the hostage crisis this morning just in time to snap a few photos of Superman bursting through the bank doors. He really had some good action shots here - she pointed to the ones that she thought Perry would like, and he nodded, pleased grin on his freckled face.

Lois grinned slightly in return, tilting her head... there was something different about Jimmy today... "What's this? Is Jimmy Olsen going for a new look?" Lois teased, reaching up to touch his collar. "I don't remember ever seeing you without a bowtie."

"Oh..." He ducked his head, looking embarrassed. "I... uh... I don't *always* wear bowties..."

As he was stumbling over his words, Lois noticed something glinting under his collar. *Is Jimmy wearing a... necklace?*

Just as she started to ask him about it, he reached into his neckline and lifted the golden chain out for her to see. "My grandmother got this for me on her trip to Egypt, and it just didn't look right on top of the bowtie..." His earlier embarrassment disappeared quickly as he excitedly explained what it was. "It's a cartouche. It's got my name spelled out in hieroglyphics."

She stood up from her chair to study it more closely. The pendant had an oblong shape, made of gold with green inlay. Five symbols were stacked vertically on its surface: a snake, a couple of different birds, a feather-looking thing and a line with two hatches across it. "So that spells Jimmy?"

"Yeah," he said proudly. "No, well, it actually says James..." he corrected. "Grammy's always called me that."

Behind her, she vaguely registered someone coming into the newsroom. And then she felt a warm hand on her arm - Clark had returned. He gave her a soft kiss on the top of her head, and greeted Jimmy with a nod. "What's this?" he asked, eyebrows rising above the frames of his glasses in curiosity.

"It's a cartouche," Jimmy explained, even more eagerly than he had for Lois. "You see, it's got my name here-"

"In hieroglyphics," Clark finished for him. "Those are really neat. Where'd you get it?"

"Oh yeah, you've probably been to Egypt, haven't you, Clark? Anyway my grand-" Jimmy paused, and a frown drew his eyebrows together. "Need some aspirin?"

Lois turned to see Clark, face abstracted, placing a hand to his forehead. Any moment now, Clark would be making his excuses to leave again. He must have heard about some crisis - it had been a busy day.

But instead of making an excuse, Clark lowered himself slowly, gingerly, into Lois' chair. Startled, Lois told him with concern, "Oh, honey, let me just grab you some Advil out of my

purse..." Lois swiped her bag from the floor, and began to dig in it - not that the pills would help in the slightest.

"Thanks... but it's really nothing. Just a twinge..." His face had gone pale.

Jimmy looked back and forth between them for a second, and then made to leave. "I'd better go turn these in, anyway," he said, lifting the photos. "Thanks for the advice, Ms. Lane. Hope you feel better, Clark." He walked away, whistling slightly.

Clark shook his head slightly, and blinked several times, confusion in his clear blue eyes.

"What's wrong?" Lois laid her hand on his shoulder, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"I don't really know... this headache just hit me all of a sudden... it's passing now." As he spoke, he gazed around him in all directions, as if trying to pinpoint the source of the problem.

"What could have caused that?"

"If I didn't know better..." Clark stood suddenly, not explaining himself. Recovered, he got up and walked toward the coffee machine, past Jimmy's desk. As he came directly aside where Jimmy was standing flipping through his files, Lois saw him stagger slightly - nothing that anyone would notice - no one except her. Doubly concerned, she felt a cold touch of worry prick at her stomach.

Once across the room, Clark stopped and turned toward her again, nodding askance at Jimmy's desk, where he was working, oblivious.

Lois raised her eyebrows, *Really?* In a quiet voice, she added, realizing there was only one thing it could be, but not quite believing it... "Kryptonite?"

Clark nodded almost imperceptibly.

"No - not Jimmy... How?" Then Jimmy turned toward her, and as his necklace caught the light again, there was a sinister flash of green.

"Welcome in Egypt!" The shout followed them out of the jewelry shop, and Clark nodded back, polite as you please.

"*Ma'salaama*," Clark returned. The shopkeeper's broad face brightened in a toothy smile.

"How many does that make now?" Lois asked Clark worriedly, threading her way through the throng of people at the *Khan Al-Khalili* market. "Six? Seven? And not one twinge?"

Clark grimaced slightly at her question, shaking his head. Without raising any suspicion, they had learned that Jimmy's grandmother had bought the cartouche in Cairo, and Clark had managed to snap a surreptitious digital photo of it to show around if needed. She and Clark had made their excuses to Perry yesterday afternoon, and after making sure Richard was all right with watching Jason for a few days, they had flown straight here. Lois had snatched a few hours of fitful slumber at the Nile Hilton, since it was evening when they arrived. Clark had already flown over the city several times before morning. They were both uneasy about the fact that he had found absolutely nothing.

"There was so little of the kryptonite in Jimmy's cartouche - I had to be right next to it to feel it at all..." Clark let his words trail off - they both knew what they were up against. Who had found it? Where did they find it? How much did they have? And how long before they realized what it actually was? Even the less-potent form of kryptonite created by Luthor's monstrosity was dangerous if Clark was exposed to it for a long enough time period - they'd learned that all too well a little while back.

Lois tried not to let that worry her as she idly looked over a collection of delicate blown-glass perfume bottles in a window display. What would happen if they searched every jewelry shop in the Khan, and all the ones in the cities along the Nile... would they have to

head out to the Sinai resorts, too? It was giving her a headache just thinking about it.

And Lord knows I can't let Clark go searching on his own... not when he's looking for the one substance in the universe that can kill him...

If only they were here on a real vacation - she'd always wanted to explore the antiquities, and really wander her way through the shops. Her fingers touched unconsciously against a jade-tinted perfume bottle - it was gorgeous, sparkling in the midday sun, but she couldn't help but be suspicious of anything green. Clark wasn't reacting in the slightest, though... He wandered across the street to scan another shop.

"Ya miss? You like?" An adolescent boy had popped his head around the threshold of the shop door. His head of thick, curly hair and deeply tanned face seemed incongruent with his startlingly sapphire eyes.

Lois pressed her lips together. "Hmm. Not this one. But thanks..." She started to turn away, to walk toward the next merchant.

"I can get you good price..." he cajoled.

Lois turned back. There was something in his tone of voice, something a little more desperate than just the basic smooth-talking salesman that seemed to transcend culture. She softened. "Well, what about this blue one here?" She pointed to a tall bottle, about eight inches high, with a tapered spiral stopper.

In a flash, he had sidled up to her. "Oh, a very beautiful choice, ya miss. It brings out the blue in your eyes." Now that he had her attention, he grew slightly more confident. "It will be... fifty Egyptian pounds."

Lois' eyebrows rose, quickly doing the math. *About ten U.S. dollars?* It seemed like a reasonable price... but she had gotten a taste of bargaining earlier that morning. Terribly jealous and disappointed when he found out where they were going, Jason had made them promise to bring him back a souvenir, so she had enjoyed haggling over a small alabaster Sphinx for him. Feeling like another go around, Lois shook her head. "Fifty? No... how about twenty?"

The teenager placed a hand over his heart, wailing in mock-despair, "Ohhhh, twenty?! I have many younger brothers and sisters - we must eat! No, no, no..." He lifted the bottle from the display case to let her inspect it more closely. "My father will beat me sure, but for you - forty pounds."

Despite his dramatic behavior, Lois seemed to sense that she should play along. "Still seems pretty high..." she replied, frowning worriedly, tapping a finger against her mouth as if she were really considering his offer.

She paused in thought, purposely overlong. Off to the side, she noticed a look pass between an older man behind the counter and the boy-salesman - he had been watching their transaction with seeming disinterest, nursing a glass of steaming tea - and after a silent moment, the older man gave a slow nod.

The boy opened his mouth again, she assumed he was about to lower his offer...

"What was the price again?" Clark interrupted, suddenly pushing his large frame awkwardly between them and fumbling out his billfold before she could protest. "Fifty pounds? Gee, Lois, it sounds like a swell price to me. In fact, I know Ma would love that red and gold one right here - let's get both."

Pleased, the boy carefully snatched the two bottles up and brought them over to the counter to wrap them up in foam. "Excellent choice, ya mister. Your man has very good taste."

"Claaaark," she complained in a low voice, nudging him with her shoulder. "I could have

gotten that for a lot less - maybe only thirty pounds!"

He handed the brownish-colored bills over and pulled her to the side gently. "Yes, I know, Lois, but I X-rayed their cash box a few moments ago, and it was nearly empty - we're probably their first customers of the day."

"Oh," she said, feeling abashed and touched by Clark's kindness. The touch of desperation she had detected earlier must have been very real.

"And the first sale of the day brings very good luck," Clark added. The boy handed him a paper-wrapped parcel with the bottles inside. "*Shokran*."

"*Afuwan*. Please come again. And, welcome in Egypt!"

"We feel very welcome, thank you." Clark reached into his suit pocket and pulled out the digital camera, taking advantage of the moment. "Excuse me... do you know where these necklaces are sold?"

The teenager placed a hand on his chin, frowning thoughtfully. "Hmm. My uncle's shop down the street, it has much better quality. You go there instead."

"Please - do you know where *this* one was made?" Clark's voice was almost spellbinding in tone.

The boy seemed almost to change his mind on the spot. "Yes, a place called *El-Fekry*. It's on the north side of the Khan. But Uncle Ahmed is much better, ya mister..."

"We promise to check your uncle's shop out. Have a good day." Clark nodded pleasantly, and then he guided them away from the shop.

"What was that back there?" Lois teased him once they were on their way north through the meandering passages. "Some sort of 'super-hypnotism' to make him tell us?"

Clark laughed. "Nothing except good luck... and my powers of 'super-politeness.'" He then turned down a small alleyway, and winked one twinkling eye as he beckoned her to follow. "And you could have gotten it for *five* pounds."

"*Eeeeeee!* Good God! Watch out for that goat!" Lois shifted back onto the seat out of Clark's lap, where she had been repeatedly thrown, and replaced her white-knuckled grip on the passenger strap in the back seat of the black and white taxi. She actively struggled between shutting her eyes tightly or keeping them wide-open. But when they were passing so close to other cars, not to mention random pedestrians crossing the road, animals and donkey carts - *I swear I saw the ear fluff on that goat wave in the breeze!* - she found herself closing her eyes and squealing in protest.

"Not to worry, Madam. Mahmoud is the best driver in Egypt! I will get you to the Corniche as quickly as possible," the driver assured them. Although with the pounding dance rhythm and Middle-Eastern strings in her ears, she could only guess that was what he had said.

"I don't care about quickly - I'd take safely!" she called over the music, but he just nodded his head in time and kept driving, swerving in and out of the traffic like a fish swimming upstream. To Clark, she muttered, "I'd ride on the back of a camel to get there, if-*Aaaaaa!*" Lois shrieked involuntarily, toppling into Clark again, as a passing taxi practically scraped the paint off her side of the car. *Where are the seat belts in this thing!?*

The driver honked twice lightly, and the other car answered the honks with two of his own - otherwise he had no other reaction.

Clark placed a supportive arm around her, helping her sit up. "Lois, we're fine," he chuckled. "There are actually fewer accidents on the road here than back in the United States. The drivers here are aware of everything around them - which is better than some drivers who

pay more attention to their cell phones than the road."

Lois elbowed him.

He pretended to be hurt, but she caught the wicked glint in his eye. "Besides, zipping along in a car like this is kinda fun. So different from the air..." As she bounced into him for the umpteenth time, he added, eyes lingering on her, "And quite pleasant."

"Speak for yourself," she quipped with irritation. "You're not the one about to lose her *kofta* sandwich..." He was probably enjoying picking her up out of his lap every few seconds.

Lois was decidedly nauseous when they finally arrived at the docks. After spending *way* too much money at *El-Fekry*, Lois had managed to wheedle the story of the making of these 'special' cartouches out of the shopkeeper while Clark waited outside the shop, far away from the deadly mineral. At the end of the man's convoluted story, she finally learned that the 'beautiful stone' had been found by accident.... in the Heart of Egypt, the Nile River. Where else? A quick nod from Clark, who had been listening and monitoring the merchant's heart rate from where he waited, confirmed that the story was true.

As she stood recovering from the taxi ride, Lois wondered, *Where in the Nile?* It was the longest river in the world, after all. And even then, it was now the middle of the afternoon - and Clark couldn't look for the kryptonite until after dark. Not without raising questions about why Superman was flying up and down the Nile with nary a catastrophe in sight... She sighed, putting her hand on her forehead.

Clark finished paying the fare and came to stand beside her, slipping an arm around her waist, his beautiful eyes contrite. "Are you okay? I didn't realize you'd get motion sickness..."

"I'll be fine, just give me a few minutes..." She leaned heavily against him, and looked out over the water, where an array of smallish boats floated lazily. They rocked ever so gently back and forth, back and forth...

Lois closed her eyes, and turned toward the street. When she opened her eyes, the cars zoomed in and out of each other, participating in some sort of convoluted spinning dance...

Finally, she buried her head in Clark's chest, groaning. "Well, maybe I'll need a *little* longer than that..."

Clark smoothed down her wavy hair, comforting her just with his solid presence. "Whatever you need."

"It's not just dizziness. When I think of all the places that damned rock could be...?" She looked directly up at him, fearful. "It's just the two of us. And your powers are limited... if we only had some sort of technology that could detect it without putting you in danger." Lois had a sudden thought. "Is there something at the Fortr-?"

"I've been working on it, Lois. I've been trying to match its resonance so that I can clean up the last of the kryptonite, but Luthor created such a bastard hybrid that it's been difficult to replicate." He squeezed her a little tighter as he continued, "But I can see I'm going to have to step up my efforts, after this little scare."

"And it's too bad we don't have a couple billion lying around anywhere to play with. You wouldn't happen to have any friends with money...?"

Clark chuckled. "Not unless Jimmy is heir to a fortune and doesn't know it yet."

Lois smiled back at him, finally starting to feel better. She laced her fingers through his and tugged at him to begin walking down the sidewalk. "You know, Clark, if you can't search for the kryptonite until dark, we might as well take advantage of being here. Any suggestions, Mister World-Traveler?"

He nodded toward the pier and the bevy of small boats anchored there. "I hear a felucca

ride is a lovely way to spend the afternoon." He lowered the pitch of his voice and whispered into her hair, causing a delightful shiver to run through her body. "Watching the sun set over the Nile is supposed to be very romantic."

A touch breathlessly, she asked, "Those things are for rent? Do you know how to sail?"

"Well, the owners would pilot the boat - and they charge by the hour. C'mon." He caught her hand, and this time he led her toward the wooden planking. "Unless you'd rather go to the Egyptian Museum or look at the Pyramids." With a twinkle in his eye, he added, "But it would mean another taxi ride."

"This sounds great." She pushed right past him to the first likely-looking boat. Up close, they were larger than they seemed, seating about 12-25 passengers, with one extremely tall triangular sail in the center. Clark spoke for a few moments with the owner in Arabic, and within minutes, the boat was gently gliding out into the middle of the river.

There was something about the gentle motion of the waves and the flapping of the sail, far from the noise of the city, that caused a silence to settle over her being. With Clark's arm around her shoulders, both of them gazing placidly over the water, she felt her worry for him lessen.

The sun slowly sank in the sky, and the boat drifted almost aimlessly across the surface of the Nile. Just as the sky was turning a deep shade of orange, Lois tilted her head back to look into Clark's face. Neither of them had hardly said a word for the past hour, happy in each other's company. But she found she wanted to know what he was thinking about... "Clark?"

His deep-blue gaze settled on her. "Yes?"

"I..." Instead of asking, she placed a soft kiss on his lips. "Thank you for this. As crazy as our lives are... it's nice to just spend time alone with you."

"I know what you mean. Even though I'm trying to stay around home more, I still spend so much time trying to save the world..." He looked out over the green reeds the boat was nearing to starboard with clear, far-seeing eyes. "But the world feels safest when you're right here with me." He bent his head to kiss her gently in return.

The feather-light kiss spoke of tenderness and contentment, and she felt her heart stir powerfully in response. Lois wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and pull him into a deeper kiss, but she'd learned enough in her crash course in Egyptian etiquette to know that it wasn't really appropriate in public. "Mmm. Let's continue that later, okay?" she breathed regretfully.

"Okay..." Clark said, but as he pulled away, he frowned. He turned toward the reeds again, face taking on the peculiar expression he wore when scanning something with his X-ray vision. "Wait, there's..."

"The kryptonite?" she whispered.

Clark only nodded in affirmation, eyebrows lowered in thought. "There's a pretty good-sized chunk of it in the riverbed, tangled among the reeds. The river is shallow behind this, all the way to the shore. Whoever found the other batch must have found it wading into the water, or snagged it fishing..." He moved closer to the edge, leaning over the side as if he was about to dive into the river...

"What, are you crazy?" Lois grabbed his arm frantically. "You can't just jump overboard! What about him?" She gestured at the owner of the boat, who was starting to notice their odd behavior.

"No, I'm not going to jump in, Lois. At least... not yet." She opened her mouth to protest again, but he put a finger to his lips. "Can you learn a few words of quick Arabic?"

"Um... I guess...?" *What is he up to?*

"Okay. *Yimeen* means 'right.' *Shimel* means 'left.' Can you repeat those for me?"

Lois did, growing ever more confused and annoyed. "I think I've got it. Why?"

But before he could answer her, she heard a shout from the opposite side of the boat - a cry for help coming from out on the water. The captain leapt to his feet, shouting. He worked the controls, turning the *felucca* toward the sound of the shout. Had someone from another boat gone overboard? The shout came again. Lois peered intently into the water, but she could see no one at all...

She turned around to Clark - even though he couldn't be seen as Superman, he could use his telescopic vision to help find the poor soul. But Clark had disappeared completely. Had he gone to help anyway, and damn the consequences?

She heard a faint splash in the water behind her, *away* from the shouts, and suddenly she understood what Clark had wanted - a diversion. He must have used his talent for ventriloquism to make the sound seem to come from far out on the water. "I see something!" she called to the captain, pointing out at the empty water. He looked at her blankly, and then went back to desperately searching the river for a drowning person. "*Yimeen! Yimeen!*" she shouted, pointing to her right, and immediately he nodded and turned the boat that way.

Lois knew that she could only keep up this charade for a few minutes longer, or the captain would notice that Clark was gone as well. Unfortunately, at the same moment, he seemed to wonder where her companion was... and Clark was there again, not even looking wet...

He spoke quickly in Arabic, gesturing toward another boat, and the captain relaxed. The man sat at the controls again, and turned the boat back toward their port.

"What did you tell him?" Lois asked quietly, sitting beside Clark

"That a man had indeed fallen into the water, but that I saw him climb into that other boat over there." He grabbed one of her hands, and caressed her fingers with his. "I took care of the kryptonite."

"You could have warned me of your plan ahead of time..." she chided, squeezing his hand affectionately. She realized she was feeling grit beneath her fingers as she touched him.

"Sand?"

"I buried it in the desert, where I thought the Bedouins wouldn't accidentally stumble across it. I'll come back for it later - when I can better contain it. I didn't even notice I had any on me."

"Well," Lois murmured, running a fingertip down his palm, "you'd better not get any of that on the bed sheets tonight after you finish clearing the river. You may be impervious to pain - but take it from me - sand is pure evil."

Clark glanced toward the pier, which was fast approaching, and then told her with a naughty smile, "Well, then... you must help me fight this great evil."

Author's Note 2: "Welcome in Egypt!" is the ungrammatical and charming way most tourists are greeted in Cairo.