

Encounter in the Woods

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Rated G

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Summary: A young and distraught Clark Kent meets someone very interesting in the woods one day.

He was turning into something. He didn't know what, but the things that had been happening to him lately just weren't normal—at least, not for anything human. Clark Kent had gotten enough teasing, growing up, just for being adopted; he wasn't sure he could survive becoming some kind of a freak.

Lana would be angry at him for standing her up on Valentine's day, but right now, he just didn't feel up to facing her, or anyone else. He needed to be alone; someplace far away where he couldn't hurt anyone, couldn't accidentally crush them, or see through their clothes, or light them on fire with a careless look. What was next; the power to instantly disintegrate someone by touching them? He was a monster.

He ran on. The open, snow-covered fields gave way to a thicket, which in turn became a forest. He charged through the trees, not stopping. A large pile of snow sloughed off a branch directly onto him, but he didn't even notice the cold. He came to a ravine, then stopped. He sat by the edge of it, his arms curled around his knees.

After a while, someone called his name.

Clark's head shot up. At first, he thought that maybe it was his mother, looking for him, but it didn't really sound like her. The voice called again. No, it wasn't anyone he knew.

He stood up and followed the sound.

"Clark?"

It was coming from this way...he pushed a few low-hanging branches aside and pressed on.

"Clark!"

He picked up speed, wondering who it could be. Maybe he had it wrong, though; maybe this person was just looking for someone else named Clark...

"Clark Jerome Kent! So help me, if you don't get back here right now..."

Or not.

He heard the crunching of footsteps behind the shrubs ahead. He pushed through.

There was a clearing. A woman was standing there, looking away from him. She was brunette, and except for the oversized jacket she wore, she didn't seem to be dressed for winter. She hugged herself tightly, tapping one foot impatiently. He didn't recognize her at all.

A man came through the bushes on the other side. Like the woman, he seemed to be dressed for a warmer day, although he wasn't even shivering. "Sorry, Honey," he began. "I—"

The man looked up at him and froze.

The woman turned, following the man's stare, and froze.

Clark himself froze. "I—I thought I heard my name," he stammered.

The man and the woman shared a look. "Well, this is awkward," the woman murmured.

The man looked up at him again. There was something strange about him that Clark couldn't quite put his finger on. "Er, we didn't realize there would be anyone else in these woods," he began, then paused. "It's Valentine's day, isn't it? Shouldn't you

be off somewhere with L—uh, with your girlfriend?"

The woman gave her companion a mildly annoyed look.

"Well, I—he's—at that age," the man told her. "You already know how it was—is—at that age..."

"Oh, I know," she said, rolling her eyes.

Clark looked from one to the other with a growing sense of uncertainty. "I wanted to be alone for a while," he admitted.

"Ah," said the woman, beginning to tug at the man's elbow.

"Well, then, we shouldn't keep you. So, sorry about the misunderstanding; we'll just be on our way..."

"Wait a minute," said the man, not even budging as the woman continued to pull. "Don't you—er, I mean, wouldn't a boy your age have some specific place to go when he needs to get away?"

Clark stared at him, blankly.

"Some sort of tree-house, perhaps?" the man prompted.

"Oh." Clark shrugged. "Yeah, I used to have one; Dad and I built it back when I was a kid. It got blown over in the storm two years ago, though."

The woman stopped pulling the man's arm, and they both stared at him in clear surprise.

"It—what?" the man asked.

"Oh, that's awful!" said the woman, drawing up to the man's side and wrapping her arms around his waist. He responded with an arm around her shoulders.

Clark squirmed. "It—it's not such a big deal, really," he lied. "I mean, yeah, seeing it smashed up was a bummer, but I'm not a little kid anymore."

They shared another look.

"You need something, though," the man said, softly.

"I—" Clark frowned. Just who were these people, and why were they so obsessed with whether he did or did not have a tree-house? Lots of kids didn't have them, and they had no reason to think he should be special. "Who are you?" he asked.

There was that look, again.

"You're not from here," Clark went on. "But, you know my name—I heard you call it out in full—and you seem pretty interested in my life. What exactly do you want with—" he stopped as a familiar sensation burned around his eyes. "Oh, no," he whispered.

Just as the heat began to well up, the man moved. Clark slammed his eyes shut, silently cursing himself. He felt something being slipped onto his face.

"It's all right," the man said. "You can open them, now."

Clark waited until the heat had fully passed before he dared to crack an eye open, dreading what he might see.

The man was standing in front of him, no-longer wearing his glasses. His shirt had a large hole burned into it, exposing his bare chest to the elements. Other than that, he seemed completely unharmed.

He didn't seem shocked, either. He didn't point at Clark and call him a freak. He seemed...to understand.

"So much for secrecy, huh, Clark?" the woman called from where she'd been left standing.

Clark's heart began to pound. "Wh-what?!" he stammered, staggering backward.

"Not you," she said, walking towards them. "The taller one."

The 'taller one' rolled his eyes and sighed. Clark studied his face again. It was remarkable how different it looked without the glasses... He reached up, feeling the frames settled somewhat awkwardly on his own face.

"All right," said the man. "You're right; we're not exactly from here. But I promise you, we don't mean you any harm."

"Okay..." said Clark. His mind was still racing. He looked at the hole in the man's shirt again, and the un-burned flesh behind it. And...that woman was calling him Clark...

"Are you...like me?" he asked, cautiously.

The other Clark paused. “You could certainly say that,” he said, slowly. The woman behind him started to cough.

So, they were alike.

And his name was Clark.

And he was older.

“Are you from the future?” he asked.

The woman gasped.

“Well, we’re from *a* future,” said the other Clark. “Not this universe’s, although it’s fairly similar.”

“Oh,” said Clark, nodding. “I see.”

The woman stared at them, her eyebrows raised. “I’m surprised you caught on so fast,” she said.

“I used to read a lot of sci-fi.”

“I read a lot of sci-fi.”

The two of them spoke at once. Clark and his older counterpart glanced at each other. The woman smothered a laugh.

“So, why are you here?” Clark asked.

The woman groaned. “It’s a long story.”

“Right now, we’re looking for a friend,” the man replied. “Only he doesn’t exist yet, so we have to wait for our *other* friend, so he can help us find him.”

Clark blinked.

“It’s a looooooong story,” the woman repeated.

“It sounds like it,” Clark observed. “So, when are you from?”

“July,” said the woman, stamping from the cold.

“Here, just give me a second,” said the older Clark.

There was a blur of movement that Clark himself could barely follow, and suddenly, a pile of dried branches appeared in the middle of the clearing. The older Clark stared intently at it for a while. Smoke began to rise. Flames began to crackle.

“Wow,” Clark breathed.

The older man smiled at him. “The powers really come in handy, once you’ve learned to control them.” He dragged a log over by the roaring fire. “Here you go, Honey.”

“Thanks,” the woman said, plunking herself down on the log and immediately holding out her hands to the warmth of the flames. “Mmm, much better,” she murmured. “This is why I married you.”

“I’m *married*?!?” Clark asked, his eyebrows shooting into his hair.

His older counterpart broke away from grinning at the woman, and coughed uncomfortably. “Er, technically, I’m not actually you,” he pointed out.

“And, technically, you are,” said Clark. He looked the woman over. “You’re not Lana Lang,” he observed.

The woman snorted. “Not even technically,” she said.

“So, who are you?” Clark asked.

Again, they shared a long look.

Clark sighed. “Look, I know that all the stories about time-travel have it where you’re forbidden to talk to your past self or give away information about the future. I get it. But, like you said, I’m not technically you. It shouldn’t break causality if you talk to me, and I just—I need answers. *Any* answers.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Yesterday, I nearly broke Pete’s arm. This week alone, I started two fires in the barn, and one in the school gymnasium. I don’t know what I’m turning into.”

The woman stared at him with sympathy, then turned to his counterpart. The older man was now sitting beside her, staring into the fire. “I know,” he said, then raked a hand through his own hair.

“He doesn’t have his tree-house anymore,” the woman said. “What if something happened to the globe, as well?”

The older Clark looked up at this.

“Globe?” Clark asked.

The woman nudged his counterpart.

“All right,” the man said. “Come have a seat.”

Clark dashed to the log and sat beside his other self, his heart

pounding.

The older man stared into the fire, apparently thinking. “Okay,” he said at last. “Do you know that you’re adopted?”

Clark nodded.

“Just checking,” said his counterpart. “You and I—we were born on a planet called Krypton.”

“Wait—we’re from another planet?!?” Clark felt his heart begin to sink. “So, I’m not even human?”

“Don’t even think like that!” the woman snapped at him, causing him to look up with a start. “What planet you’re from has nothing to do with anything. Clark has always been the most human guy I know,” she went on, resting a hand on the man’s knee. “In fact, even before I knew the truth about Superman—”

“Honey,” said his counterpart, “You’re jumping ahead.”

“Sorry,” she said. “But, Clark, he has to know that he’s still a person, and not some kind of—” she waved a hand vaguely in the air.

“—Monster,” his counterpart said, looking into the fire again. “That’s what I used to think I was.”

Clark nodded.

“But, she’s right,” his counterpart went on. “These things you can do don’t change who you are. You were raised to be Clark Kent, and you’re *still* Clark Kent, and no matter how strange your life gets at times, you will always *be* Clark Kent.”

Clark grinned. “You sound just like Pa,” he said.

His counterpart grinned back. “Who do you think I learned it from?”

“So,” Clark began, drawing up his legs and hugging them close to his chest, “are the other people on Krypton like us?”

“Krypton...exploded,” said his counterpart, softly. “That’s why you were sent away. It isn’t because no-one wanted you—far from it. You were born to two people who knew their world was dying, and did what they could to save you.”

“Oh,” said Clark. He stared into the crackling fire, his feelings mixed. On the one hand, he wasn’t just simply discarded. But on the other hand, he was an orphan, and probably more alone than anyone else in the universe.

“Our parents found our spaceship when we were a baby,” his counterpart continued. “They didn’t know where we came from, but they’ve been trying to protect us ever since.” He paused. “You might hear Dad mention laboratories and frogs...”

Clark nodded, unable to suppress the involuntary shiver.

“You don’t have to be paranoid,” the older man said, “but it never hurts to be careful.”

“Unless, of course, ‘never’ includes proposing without even telling your would-be fiancée—” the woman chimed in.

The older Clark rolled his eyes. “I would have told you afterward,” he said.

“You should have told me before,” said the woman. “And anyway, you didn’t.”

His counterpart sighed. “*Anyway*,” he said, “she’s got a point; don’t let yourself get so paranoid that you can’t even share your secret with someone you love and trust.” He took the woman’s hand and squeezed it as he spoke. She smiled up at him in response.

“Also,” the woman said, turning to him again, “never let someone who’s secretly in love with you think you’re dead for more than five minutes.”

Clark frowned in confusion, but filed this information away anyway. He reached up and touched the frames of the glasses again. “These really work?” he asked.

“You’d be amazed,” said the woman.

His counterpart chuckled. “The glass holds your vision-gizmo back, yes,” he said.

“Vision-gizmo?” Clark echoed.

“That’s what she calls it,” the man said, nodding toward the woman now leaning on his shoulder.

Clark thought back to what his alternate self said when he built the fire. “And...you can control it?”

The older Clark nodded. “It takes a long time,” he said, “but someday, you’ll learn to control your powers. You’ll learn how to hide them.” He grinned. “And one day, you’ll get to *show* them.”

Clark stared at him in disbelief.

“You’re gonna grow up to change the world, Kid,” the woman said, smiling at him. “You get to fly around saving lives, arresting bad guys, and confusing a woman into thinking you’re two different people.”

He crinkled his forehead. “Two diff—did you say *fly*?!” His eyebrows shot up.

His counterpart was grinning at him. “When you’re eighteen,” he said. “And believe me, it’s the best one.”

There was a cracking in the branches, somewhere deeper into the woods. Clark looked up, trying to pin-point the sound. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his other self do the same. The cracking got closer for a while, paused, and then started to get further away. “It sounds like someone’s lost in the woods,” Clark said. “Should we go help?” He heard the sound of muttering.

His counterpart stood and helped the woman to her feet. “That’s one of our friends,” he said. “We’d better be going.”

“Do you need these back?” Clark asked, reaching for the glasses.

The older man shook his head. “I have a spare,” he said, reaching for the jacket the woman wore and pulling a case from one of the pockets. He opened it, pulled out a pair of thicker-framed glasses and slipped them on. “Keep those. If anyone asks, you can just say that you found them in the woods; it’s technically true.”

Clark nodded. “Thanks,” he said.

The two of them turned to go.

“Wait!”

They paused.

“One last question,” he said. He turned to the woman. “Who are you?”

She smiled enigmatically, and his counterpart wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “She’s the greatest woman you’ll ever meet,” the older man said, and then turned and vanished with her into the woods.

‘Vanish’ was the right word, it turned out. After about an hour of searching for them, Clark gave up and headed for home.

He was just to the edge of the property when he heard a voice call his name.

“Clark Jerome Kent!”

He smiled. That would be Ma.

She was already standing at the door when he reached the steps of the front porch. “Where have you been, young man?” she demanded. “When Lana called, asking where you were, we didn’t know what had happened to you!” She paused, taking in his appearance. “Where did you get those, Clark?” she asked.

“In the woods,” he said, reaching up to adjust the glasses on his face.

“Is that where you were, Honey?” she asked, softly. “In the woods?”

Clark nodded. “Yeah. I just—” he suppressed a chuckle. “—needed to be by myself, for a while.”

His mom reached up and put a hand on his shoulder. “And did it help?” she asked him.

He smiled at her. “Yeah,” he said. “I think it helped a lot.”

THE END