

Star Struck

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Summary: A visit to the museum gives a young Clark Kent a lot to ponder.

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Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All Superman characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC Comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise.

Author's Note: I have played around with the timeline for deep space photography here, allowing for images to be taken well before the Hubble was launched. But hey, if a man can fly in this universe, NASA could have certainly gotten deep space telescopes into place earlier than in the real world.

"Here we are, everyone!" Coach Campos announced, flinging his arms wide as if to encompass the entire building. "The Metropolis Natural History Museum. Your passes allow you access to the entire museum, including the newly renovated planetarium. *However*," he amended, "if you're looking to see one of the films in the theater or one of the planetarium shows, you'll have to purchase those tickets separately. The bus is picking us up at 5, so make sure you're back here in the lobby no later than 4:45. Got it? Do *not* make me have to come find you. Understood?"

"Yes, Coach Campos," the throng of college football players mumbled, most of them sounding annoyed to be spending the day inside a museum.

Clark understood his teammates' grumblings. It was a gorgeous day out – cool and crisp but full of sunshine and the excitement of being in Metropolis. But, unlike his fellow football players, he wasn't complaining about being in the museum. He was looking *forward* to spending the day uncovering the interesting facts held within the building and seeing all the things he'd never had the chance to see in the much smaller museum back in Kansas. He could scarcely wait to get started.

"Okay, everyone. Have fun and stay out of trouble," Coach Campos stressed, gesturing to the turnstiles behind them.

Everyone started to move at once, except for Clark. For a moment, he just stood there, taking in the sights and sounds of the museum. Here, inside the building, the bustling Metropolis traffic was absent, replaced by a rolling wave of voices that echoed off the white marble floors and pillars, as well as the high, arched ceiling. Not just a handful of voices either, but close to sixty or seventy different ones in the lobby alone. Hundreds, if not thousands, more people were inside the museum already, gawking at ancient tools, discussing the intricacies of the pottery and other artifacts on display, staring awestruck at the massive dinosaur skeletons that commanded an entire wing of the building.

It was a little overwhelming and he had no idea where to start first. He wanted to see it all. But his incredible speed wasn't practical, not here. Too many prying eyes could possibly see him use his abilities. He also wanted to take his time and really study the things that interested him the most. With a resigned sigh, he knew that it was unlikely he'd be able to see the entire museum. He'd have to pick and choose which exhibits to see, and be mindful of his time in each section to ensure that he got to see as much as possible.

Still, it gave him a little thrill, to be let loose in the museum on his own. As a high schooler, the teachers had stuck with the class whenever they went anywhere bigger than the local library. But now he was a freshman in college and was suddenly being treated like an adult. It felt good, to know that Coach Campos trusted his players not to chaperone them as they explored the building. Clark smiled to himself. The coach treated them like adults on the football field too. That's why they were such a good team, and why they'd soundly beaten the Metropolis University Tigers the day before at the big game. The Tigers had their every move micromanaged. They'd appeared to be hesitant and less capable of deviating from their coach's plan as they'd played than Midwestern had been. Clark and his team were a well-oiled machine, capable of adapting in a split second, discarding the plan in a heartbeat and without a spoken word if need be. It was that kind of ability that would net them the national championship, if Clark was correct.

"Hey, Kent! Where are you heading first?" his friend Austin asked, clamping him on the shoulder.

"Not sure yet," Clark said with a light shake of his head. "This place is *huge*."

Austin shrugged. "For *you*, maybe," he teased gently. "Did they even *have* museums in Idaho?"

Clark laughed at his friend's ribbing. "Yes, we had museums in *Kansas*," he said, emphasizing the correct state name. "Nothing like this though. I guess it must be old hat for you, growing up in New York and all."

Austin grinned. "You've seen one, you've seen 'em all. Still... this place is supposed to have some really cool stuff."

"Why don't you pick the first exhibit then?" Clark offered, opening up his pocket map.

Austin didn't even look at it. "I was kind of thinking maybe we could start in the Egyptian wing, then move over to Feudal Japan."

Clark nodded and smiled, putting the map back in his pocket. "Excellent. I'd like to see the dinosaurs too. We only had a couple of skeletons in the museum I grew up with. I'd love to see what they have here. I've heard the T-Rex they have is pretty impressive."

Austin nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

"Looks like it's just you and me too," Clark observed. The rest of their teammates had already scattered. Clark could see at least three of them already in the gift shop.

"That's fine," Austin replied. "I'm actually glad Colton isn't tagging along."

Clark rolled his eyes. "I've never heard someone complain *that much* about going to a museum."

"Right? It was like we were dragging him to a medieval torture chamber the way he whined on the bus." Austin shook his head.

Clark laughed. "Yeah." He shook his head. "Between you and me...?" He let his voice trail off for a moment.

"He was acting like a child?" Austin supplied.

"Well...yeah," Clark said, hating to speak ill of his teammate, but knowing the criticism was more than justified. "Anyway, he's gone off to...wherever it is he ran off to."

"Probably the cafeteria," Austin joked, though the comment rang of his belief in the matter.

Clark laughed again. "Probably. Okay, Mr. History Major... lead the way. I am your eager student," he said with an exaggerated flourish that made his friend chuckle again.

"Right this way, oh unenlightened one," Austin replied with a grand gesture to the left most doorway into the museum.

"Unenlightened one, eh?" Clark replied, losing the battle to suppress a grin and arching his eyebrow. "I guess helping you with your World War I research paper was... what then? Me spouting rubbish?"

Austin clapped Clark on the shoulder. “Did I say unenlightened? Because what I meant to say was...Master Wordsmith and Future Pulitzer winner.” He grinned impishly at Clark.

Clark bit back a laugh. “Come on. The riches of Egypt await our inspection,” he said with a mock bow.

“So...what should we see next?” Austin asked a few hours later, as he and Clark sat in the cafeteria eating the last few remaining morsels of their burgers and fries.

“Well,” Clark began, sipping the last of his soda. “I was really hoping to see the rocks and gems, then make my way to the planetarium.”

Austin frowned a little. “What’s so exciting about a bunch of rocks?”

Clark shrugged. “There’s just so many cool gems to see. Did you know this museum has the biggest piece of uncut quartz in the country?”

“Umm...” Austin stammered, clearly not all that interested in the subject, but trying not to hurt Clark’s feelings. “Sorry, Clark. I know you really want to see the rocks but...”

Clark gave his friend an encouraging smile and gently interrupted him. “Look, it’s not a big deal if you’re not interested. Rocks aren’t exactly the most exciting things in the world. We can split up for a bit and meet up later.”

Austin thought it over and checked his watch. “Okay. I was hoping to check out the new Native American wing. I just started reading up on the Lakota and I’d love to see what the museum has. Let’s meet up in the planetarium later. Okay? Say...around 3:30?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Clark happily agreed as he started to clean up his trash.

Austin followed suit. “You too. Go and ‘rock out,’” he replied, his eyes glinting in amusement.

Clark shook his head as he emptied his tray into the trash, then placed the tray on top of the shelf above the opening. “That was truly awful,” he teased his friend. “In fact, that was worse than ‘Dad-joke’ level.”

Austin put a hand to his heart, feigning a wound. “Ouch. That hurt, Clark.”

Clark grinned and fought back a chuckle. “Sorry, Austin, but *someone* had to break it to you sooner or later. I tried to do it gently,” he said, putting as much innocence into his voice as he could.

“That was gently?” Austin shot back playfully. “Good thing you’re going into journalism, not medicine. I can just imagine your bedside manner now.”

Clark gently clapped a hand on Austin’s shoulder. “And it’s a good thing *you’re* not pursuing a career in comedy. I’m not sure there’s enough rotten tomatoes out there.”

Austin hooted a laugh so loud that a group of high school kids stared at him like he’d suddenly sprouted an extra head. “Low blow, my friend. Low blow.” He shook his head. “Okay, it’s just about one now. So...see you in a couple of hours?”

Clark confirmed it with a single nod. “Later.”

“Later.”

Clark checked his watch. It was just about a quarter to three. Plenty of time to get a good look at the planetarium on his own, before he was scheduled to meet up with Austin. It was just down the hall from the rocks and minerals, so he took one last long look at the pieces of obsidian in the case before him, committing the scene to his nearly flawless memory. Then he was off to the planetarium, quickening his step a little to avoid the influx of high schooler girls who were coming into the exhibit.

The planetarium was quiet when Clark arrived, much to his surprise. Whereas the rest of the museum had been busy and filled with the dull roar of the masses, it was hushed and less crowded in

the planetarium. He wondered for a moment why that would be. The place had only recently reopened to the public after two years of renovations. But, compared to the rest of the building, this exhibit was a virtual ghost town. Sure, others were there, but not as many as he’d expected to see.

Does it really matter? his mind asked as he stood still, drinking in the peaceful quiet of the area. *Perhaps most of the visitors started their day here and have moved on to other areas of the museum. Maybe the families with young kids thought this area might be a little boring, compared to the dinosaurs.*

Whatever the reason, he was glad. His sensitive ears were still ringing from the assault of noises in all the other areas he’d been in, despite his iron grip on his enhanced hearing ability. A slight smile ghosted over his lips as he looked again at the planetarium. The whole area was done in black, as if to mimic the darkness of space itself. The lights were dimmer here too, adding to the effect of drifting through the universe. He made his way to the first display case, which showed a miniature model of the Earth’s solar system, complete with comets and the asteroid belt.

He stopped there and gazed at the tiny planets, awestruck at how, even in such a miniscule form, the scale model could be so large. He marveled at Pluto – barely more than a pinhead in size – and how far flung it was from the sheltering, nurturing warmth of the sun. After a few moments, he moved on to look at a 3D model of the moon. He remembered how thrilling it had been to watch the lunar landing on television with his parents.

He supposed he was somewhat of an anomaly that way. Most people his age would have little to no memory of the event, being only three or four years old at the time. But he could remember every last detail, down to the grainy images on the screen, to the red plaid T-shirt he’d been wearing, to the smell of his mother’s apple pie, fresh out of the oven and cooling on the stovetop. He remembered the rush of adrenaline he’d felt as those first few images from the surface of the moon flickered onto the screen and he’d caught sight of the brave astronauts who’d put their lives on the line to plant the flag into the lunar dust. He remembered how proud he’d felt to witness such a historic event, even if he hadn’t quite understood *exactly* how big a deal it had been. He even remembered how smitten he’d become with the idea of one day becoming an astronaut himself and going up into space to explore vast, uncharted new worlds. He’d spent so many afternoons having lunch on Mars or Neptune or some made up new planet that his mother had gone to the fabric store and found a shiny, silvery material to make him his very own space suit. His dad had found some old rubber hoses and a sizable empty box. A layer of duct tape and some painted-on designs later, and Clark had had a wonderful oxygen tank to strap to his back, like a backpack.

He glanced toward the domed theater that featured star gazing exhibits, in which the room would go pitch dark and projected stars would spread across the ceiling. He checked his watch again as he looked at the times listed on the marquee above the ticket counter. “Exploring The Constellations” was about to start and he had plenty of time before he needed to meet up with Austin, so he made the snap decision to see the show and quickly crossed the exhibition floor to the theater to purchase his ticket. The theater was only about half full when he got inside, the lights nice and low to prepare the audience for their plunge into utter darkness. He took a seat and relaxed, but not for long. About two minutes later, the theater doors closed, the lights went out, the self-proclaimed “Space Tour Guide” began to speak, and the night sky blossomed above everyone’s heads.

For the next forty minutes, Clark sat in rapt attention as the “Tour Guide” showed everyone a multitude of constellations and pointed out easy ways to find them in the night sky, though Clark doubted whether or not most could be seen within the Metropolis city limits. He’d seen, first hand, how much light pervaded the city even in the middle of the night, rendering it an almost hopeless

cause to try to look at the stars. Which, he had to admit, had been a bit of a disappointment. Back home, in Kansas, and even on Midwestern's campus, on a clear night it felt like he could see the fullness of the universe, though he knew, logically, that what he could see – enhanced vision aside – was a mere drop in the bucket, compared to all that was out there, trillions of miles away.

After a host of constellations were paraded before everyone, and their mythic stories too-briefly explained, their “Tour Guide” brought them rocketing off the ground and into their solar system. By way of cheering, the audience decided to explore Saturn when presented with their choice of which planet to visit. Clark had actually wanted to visit poor, lonely Pluto – mostly because it was so far out into space, and, as a result, rather mysterious. Still, he enjoyed the up close, though digital, images of Saturn immensely, and left the theater feeling like the money he'd spent on the ticket had been more than worth it.

He went back to his examination of the other exhibits. A series of photographs taken from various deep space telescopes – almost all of them developed by a joint effort between NASA and S.T.A.R. Labs – caught his interest. As Clark looked at them, his eyes widened. Each of them showed the same section of the universe, but with more and more advanced telescopes. As a result, the images were clearer and more detailed. It was fascinating, and Clark had the sense, as he sometimes did when gazing up at the star-filled heavens, that the answers to all his questions were out there, somewhere, hidden in the vastness of the universe.

Why do I have the powers that I do?

Why am I so different from everyone else on this planet?

Am I a Russian experiment, like Mom and Dad once wondered?

Did I...come from another planet?

Mom and Dad always made a point of talking about the capsule they found me in.

If I'm from...somewhere else, it is a mistake that I'm here?

Am I, myself, a mistake?

If I was sent here on purpose...why?

Was I unwanted?

Is that why I was sent away, if I actually was sent away?

Who am I, really?

Who am I supposed to become?

What am I supposed to do with these powers?

Will I ever find the answers to any of these questions?

Would I even be happy, if I were to learn the answers?

Should I even want to know at all?

He sighed heavily as he once more swept his eyes over the photographs. As he did so, something caught his eye. He looked again, harder this time. Yes, he was almost certain of it. But it didn't make any sense to him.

“Excuse me,” a girl said, coming up alongside of him, to his right.

Clark had been so engrossed in his study of the photographs, that he hadn't even noticed her approach. He felt his neck and cheeks heat in a blush.

“I'm sorry,” he quickly apologized. “Did you need to get by?”

“Oh...no,” the girl said, blushing in turn. “It's just...you looked like you were...looking for something in these pictures.”

“Uh...” Clark stammered, at a loss. He didn't want to look like a crazy person in front of this young lady.

Wow! his brain screamed, as he looked at her.

She was wearing a high school uniform, all maroon and white in color scheme. In white thread, the name St. Mary's Preparatory School was emblazoned on the upper left corner of her maroon cardigan sweater. A garnet glittered within the setting of her school ring, clearly designating her as part of the senior class. She clutched a notebook to her chest and had a black pen stuck behind her right ear.

But her garb didn't interest Clark at all. It was the girl *herself* who had him captivated. She was easily one of the most attractive women Clark had ever seen.

No, not one of, he corrected himself immediately. *The most attractive.*

Wow!

Her dark tresses spilled down her back like a cascading waterfall, framing a too-perfect face. And her eyes! Oh, those intelligent, warm chocolate eyes! Clark felt he could drown in those eyes and die a happy man. He wondered, for a brief moment, what her smile was like, but imagined it would light up the room brighter than the sun could ever hope to do.

“I was just...looking...at the images,” he lamely added, gesturing limply to the wall where they were displayed.

“Obviously,” the girl replied, arching an eyebrow, perhaps amused by how flustered he was.

And Clark knew that his fluttering heart would be reflected in his features. He had a terrible poker face, as Austin usually teasingly reminded him.

“I thought I saw something...unusual about them,” he went on vaguely, not quite sure why he was explaining himself.

That appeared to pique the girl's interest. “Unusual?” she asked. “How so? I mean...I'm supposed to be writing up an article for my school paper about the new planetarium. But so far...I haven't found any good angles.”

“You write for the school paper?” Clark asked, intrigued even more, and forgetting, for a moment, what he'd been looking at only a few moments before.

The girl nodded. “Since my freshman year. It's gotten my feet wet enough to know that I'm pursuing the right career...and the right college major.”

“Journalism?” Clark asked, immediately feeling like this girl was a kindred spirit. “Me too,” he added, when she nodded in the affirmative.

She smiled then, and Clark was thrilled to learn that his suspicion about her brightness eclipsing that of the sun was correct. “Really?” she asked, in a way that didn't speak of surprise, but asked him for more information.

He nodded. “Yeah. Well...I will be when I can finally start my introduction to journalism classes next fall.”

“Which school?” the young woman pressed.

“Midwestern,” Clark responded, pointing to the initials embroidered on his football jacket.

The girl's eyes widened in respect. “That's a good school. Decent journalism program too, from what I've heard.”

“It is,” Clark grinned. “What about you? What schools are you looking at?”

“Metropolis U,” she said with another smile.

Clark let out a low whistle. “Their program is excellent. I applied there myself, but I wanted to play ball too. Midwestern offered to take me onto the team, but not Met U.”

She gave him an impish grin. “You don't seem like the typical meat head football player,” she said, appraising him.

Clark couldn't help but to laugh. “I'm not, trust me. My studies are way more important. But playing ball allows me to cover both my academic *and* residence hall fees.” He shrugged. “Met U gave me a full ride, but *only* covering my education, not my housing fees.”

The girl nodded slowly in understanding. “Makes sense. Met U is *notoriously* expensive.”

Clark smiled. “Couldn't have put it better myself.” He paused for a moment. “Meat head footballer?” he asked quizzically, giving her a teasing smile.

She rolled her eyes. “Let's just say most of the football players at my school are...well...less than academically inspiring. Sorry, I guess I shouldn't have painted *all* athletes with the same brush.” She blushed ever so slightly, but not enough to look totally

abashed.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her with another small, almost shy smile. “No offense was taken. Sad to say...I know exactly the kind of guy you meant.”

She looked a little relieved that he was prepared to drop the subject. She gestured to the wall. “So...what was it that you thought you saw here?”

“Oh...um...it’s probably nothing,” he stammered.

“‘Probably nothing’ is a lot better than what I currently have to report,” she argued gently.

“The thing is...I’ll probably sound crazy,” he replied with a self-conscious shake of his head.

The girl grinned, urging him to continue. “Crazy, huh? Come on, humor me.”

Clark took a deep breath, deciding if he should brush off her request or submit to the charms of her natural beauty. In retrospect, he had no choice. His heart was a molten puddle of goo inside of his chest.

“Okay,” he said at last. “Bear in mind that I’m probably wrong. But...look at these two images here. 1965 and 1970. Notice anything odd?”

The girl studied the photos for half a minute. “Um...not really?” she replied, her statement more of a question, asking him to point out what he’d seen. “They look the same to me. The one from 1970 isn’t exactly centered the same...it’s off just a little.”

“Right here,” Clark said, pointing, his finger just centimeters from the glass. “There’s something here. A star maybe. Or a planet. This faint blueish white dot here. See it?”

The girl got closer and squinted a little at the image. “Yes...” she said hesitantly.

“It’s not in the one from 1970.”

She snapped her attention away from the photo to him. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure, yeah,” he replied, pointing to where the dot should have been, but wasn’t. Instead, the space was as inky black as the rest of the void of the universe surrounding the other celestial bodies that the colored points of light represented.

The girl checked where Clark was pointing. “You’re right,” she said at length. “It’s not there. Some kind of mistake in the first picture?” She quickly checked the images from 1976 and 1981. But the dot didn’t appear in any of the other photos. “It isn’t in the others,” she announced after a moment.

“I know,” Clark said with a slight nod.

“What do you make of it?” she asked, turning to him, so close that Clark could smell her coconut scented shampoo and cucumber body spray.

Never in all his life had Clark wanted to ask a girl out on a date as badly as he did in that moment.

It was only through the sheer torture of his steel will that he refrained from doing so.

She’s in high school.

You’re in college.

She could be underage.

You could be arrested.

Your career and dreams for the future would be destroyed.

She’s a stranger.

She’s given you no indication that she’s even interested in you, past this potential story lead.

She won’t appreciate you making any kind of a move.

What’s wrong with you anyway? You don’t even know her. Why are you so strongly attracted to her?

“I...don’t know,” he managed, his throat bone dry. He swallowed hard, hoping she wouldn’t notice, trying desperately to restore some moisture to his throat, lest his voice crack embarrassingly in front of her.

“Could there be a mistake in the original image?” the girl wondered. “You know. Like a lens flare or something?”

“I don’t know,” Clark hedged, his tone letting some of his disbelief show through. “From what I can tell, literally everything else is the same in all the other pictures. Sure,” he said with a tiny shrug, “the image clarity got a lot better in each newer picture. Everything is sharper, more in focus. The color saturations are better. But other than that, they appear identical, except for that dot.”

“I wonder,” the girl said, her voice trailing off as she thought. She whirled around, searching the exhibit, then grinned as she saw whatever it was she was looking for. “Come on!” she said, brazenly reaching over and grabbing Clark’s hand, dragging him away from the images they’d been discussing.

“Where are we going?” Clark asked in bewilderment, even as he gave his body a stern warning not to mimic his heart, which was soaring. The last thing he wanted was to start floating in a public space, filled with witnesses, including the occasional scientist. But the young woman’s touch sent tendrils of fire into his veins while lightning flickered through every nerve ending and his mind turned into jelly and his only thought was that he never wanted to let go of her hand ever again.

“Excuse me!” She used her free hand to wave at a man in a white lab coat.

Clark felt his heart clench reflexively in fear. He wanted nothing to do with a scientist at that moment. But his companion was moving with all the speed and force of a freight train, and he felt almost helpless as he allowed himself to be dragged along. And maybe, just maybe, he admitted to himself, he was a little curious to see what she was planning.

“Yes, young lady?” the man said as she brought them both to a halt in front of the older man.

Clark looked at the man’s name tag.

Dr. Bernard Klein.

The girl had apparently checked out the scientist’s name tag as well.

“Dr. Klein? Um...do you...um...happen to work here? In this part of the museum, I mean.” Her words came out in a rush, a little uncertain at first but gaining confidence steadily throughout. She held herself tall and proud, as if she was the man’s equal, not a kid on a school trip.

Dr. Klein shook his head. “Sorry, no. I’m just here to return something my lab needed to borrow. Why?”

“Oh.” It wasn’t hard to see the girl was disappointed by the news.

“But...perhaps I can help anyway?” Dr. Klein offered.

“Well...” she began, then turned to Clark. “He noticed something, in one of the displays.”

Interest immediately flooded the doctor’s kindly face. “Oh? What?”

When Clark didn’t immediately respond, the young lady gestured impatiently. “Well, tell him!” she gently prodded.

“It’s...probably easier to show you,” Clark finally settled on.

“Lead the way,” Dr. Klein encouraged.

This time, Clark led their ever-growing little group back to the series of images. Once more, he explained what he’d seen and showed the doctor the dot that had so mysteriously disappeared in between the times the images had been taken. The doctor squinted at the picture and scratched his balding head.

“Interesting,” he muttered under his breath. Then, louder, “How did you even notice that?”

“I’m...not exactly sure,” Clark replied, toeing the carpet and feeling uncomfortable. “I just...did. I’m not sure why or how it caught my eye. But, when I compared the photos...it definitely seems to be missing from all the later ones.”

“Indeed,” the doctor replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“We wondered if anyone knew what happened,” the girl supplied after a moment. “Or,” she continued, her eyes sparkling as a thought occurred to her, “if he might have discovered

something new.” She pointed to Clark as she spoke.

“To my knowledge...I’ve never heard of anyone noting the missing ‘dot,’ as you put it,” Dr. Klein said slowly. “This could very well be a new discovery.”

“Really?” Clark was more than a little excited, but it was the girl who lit up like she’d just hit the lottery.

“Really?” she pressed, her excitement barely contained.

“Well, I can’t say it with one hundred percent certainty, of course. I’d have to do a little research to confirm it. Can you meet with me, say, a week from now?”

Clark regretfully shook his head. “Sorry, sir, but my teammates and I are heading back to school late tonight. We were only in town to play an away game against Met U.”

“I see,” Dr. Klein said, nodding in understanding.

“I, however,” the young woman put in, “am local. I could stop by, if you’re willing. Uh...if that’s okay with you?” she amended, looking imploringly at Clark.

He shrugged. “That’s okay with me. Just give me credit in your article,” he said, giving her his best smile.

She laughed and it was as if all the angels in heaven had suddenly begun to sing. If Clark hadn’t already been heartsick for her, he would have fallen under her spell in that exact moment.

“Of course,” she agreed, smiling and touching his arm with a feather lightness that set his senses ablaze.

“What could it be?” Clark forced himself to ask Dr. Klein. “I mean, our disappearing dot.”

“I can’t say for sure but, it’s not uncommon for stars to die. It’s possible that dot was a failing star that died in between the two images being taken. Or it could be a planet that is no longer there.”

The sparked Clark’s interest. “A planet can just...vanish?” he asked, arching a curious eyebrow.

Dr. Klein spread his hands as he explained. “Well, not quite. It could have been sucked into the gravitational pull of a black hole. If it was small enough, a large asteroid could have impacted the planet and turned it into cosmic dust. Any number of things could have happened to it. Space is still vastly uncharted. We know probably less than one percent of the secrets the universe holds. For all we know, it was a populated planet, full of alien life that launched weapons we can’t even conceive of, things that could have vaporized their world. Maybe the planet was unstable to begin with, and alien volcanos erupted with such force as to rip the planet apart. Unfortunately, it’s unlikely we’ll ever know.”

“Too bad,” the girl said in a somber tone.

“Yeah,” Clark said, his earlier excitement dampened.

Dr. Klein sighed. “I wish I could offer more concrete answers. But our technology is frustratingly limited when it comes to space investigation. I don’t think we’ll ever know for sure what that dot even was, let alone what fate befell it.”

“We...err...I understand,” Clark said, correcting himself so that he didn’t speak for the young woman. “I definitely appreciate you looking into things though.”

“Believe me, *any* space discovery – or potential discovery – is taken seriously at S.T.A.R. Labs,” the doctor said gravely. He fumbled in his pockets for a moment. “Drat, I thought I had a pen and paper,” he mumbled to himself.

“Oh, here,” the girl said, offering up her notebook, where she’d scribbled down some notes.

But the doctor didn’t take it right away. Instead, he gestured to the blank page opposite her notes. “If you wouldn’t mind giving me your contact information, I can let you both know if I find out anything about what you’ve found today.”

“Sure,” the young woman piped up immediately, jotting down her information quickly.

Clark was more cautious. What if this Dr. Klein suspected that Clark was not quite a normal man after all? What if, by finding such a minute detail in the space images, he’d accidentally exposed himself as being someone with better than normal vision? Calmly,

he declined the notebook that the girl held out to him.

“Sorry,” he said, with a shake of his head, “I don’t have a phone at school.”

It was a lie. And a *weak* lie at that. Of course he had a phone so that he could talk to his parents at least a couple of times during the week. But, remarkably, the lie held up. The girl nodded and withdrew her notebook. Dr. Klein took it instead, jotted his own information down, and ripped out the girl’s contact information.

“I’ll get started on this now,” he said as he tucked the paper into his pocket. “Thank you. Both of you, for bringing this to my attention. I don’t know how you managed to catch what you did, but I’m glad you did.” He offered them each his hand to shake.

“It was nice meeting you, uh...I’m sorry, I didn’t even catch your names.” He reddened, embarrassed.

“Clark,” Clark replied, deliberately not giving his last name.

“Lois,” replied the girl.

The doctor dipped his head in acknowledgement. “Lois. Clark. Well, it was a pleasure meeting you both.”

“You too,” Clark offered. “Thanks for taking my observation seriously.”

“I wouldn’t be much of a scientist if I wasn’t willing to explore all the possibilities,” Dr. Klein said with a smile. Then, as if to some unspoken cue, he took his leave of them.

“So...Clark,” the girl – Lois – said, turning to him. “How does it feel, knowing you may have just made a previously undiscovered scientific observation?”

“On the record?” Clark asked, with a teasing grin.

“Maybe,” she replied playfully.

“Honestly? It feels a little surreal. Granted, we don’t know yet if it really *is* a new discovery. But it feels good to, you know? To know I may have contributed to science. I’ve always been fascinated by space. So this...to potentially see something scientists missed...” He shrugged. “It feels pretty amazing. Oh, and thanks, by the way.”

“For what?”

“Dragging me – quite literally – over to meet Dr. Klein.” He smiled again, unable to help it. It was as though all he could do was to grin dopily in Lois’ presence.

“Yeah, well...you’re welcome,” Lois replied with a shy smile, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

Clark wanted to say something – anything – to her, that might help him get to know her better. But he knew it would be pointless. He lived too far from her and she wasn’t even a college student yet. Any relationship he might try to forge with her would be a sham. Long distance relationships could only last when an *actual* relationship had already been established prior to the separation of the couple involved. And even then, Clark knew it was difficult to maintain one, as evidenced by his friend Pete and his now-ex, girlfriend. Besides, he reminded himself, he didn’t even know if Lois was eighteen yet or not. He wasn’t going to get involved with a minor, no matter how much she set his heart fluttering.

“Hey! Clark!”

Austin, his mind both groaned and rejoiced, as it saved him from making a fool out of himself.

“Hey, Austin,” Clark said, waving.

“Come on! We gotta go! Bruno and Terrence got into trouble. Like ‘kicked out of the museum’ kind of trouble. Coach is *pissed*. He’s making us all leave early.” Austin’s face was red in his anger. “Those idiots!”

Clark was flabbergasted and, for a moment, he had nothing to say in response.

“Come on, don’t just stand there. I don’t want Coach Campos to have a reason to be mad and you and me too,” Austin said, coming up alongside Clark. He nodded at Lois. “My apologies, but I need to pry my friend away.”

“By all means,” Lois conceded. “When you need to go, you

need to go. It was nice meeting you, Clark.”

“It was *more* than nice,” Clark countered softly.

She extended her hand to him and he took it, grateful for that last bit of physical contact with her. Fireworks exploded before his eyes and his heart thumped faster and harder than before. But there was also a heaviness in his heart, knowing he’d likely never see her again. Or... would he?

“And who knows?” he added as he slipped his hand out of hers and took a step backward. “Maybe we’ll see each other again someday, when we’re reporters.”

She laughed. “I look forward to it!”

It was all Clark could do to tear his eyes from Lois as he turned and walked alongside Austin, heading for the lobby once more. Austin patted his shoulder sympathetically.

“Sorry to pull you away from your new girlfriend,” he said with a mischievous grin.

But Clark wasn’t in a joking mood. He didn’t respond.

“Hey, I was joking,” Austin apologized after a moment. He gave Clark a sideways look. “Oh...man. You really *do* like that girl, don’t you?”

“I...it doesn’t matter,” Clark replied somewhat hollowly, shaking his head. “She lives half the country away from Midwestern. There’s no possible way...” He let his voice trail off with a soft sigh. “The best I can hope for is that I can forget her just as quickly as she’ll forget me.”

But, of course he *couldn’t* forget. All that night and for months later, his mind repeatedly turned back to Lois. Not only Lois, but that mysterious vanishing dot in the deep space photos. An emptiness and a longing clouded his heart whenever he thought back on that afternoon in the planetarium. Whatever that dot was – a dying star, a doomed planet, a wayward asteroid, a spacecraft full of intelligent, otherworldly beings – it was a part of him now. And he wished he could know, with certainty, what it had been and what had happened to it. It went beyond simple curiosity. He felt like...like the object that had disappeared called to him somehow, across time and space to whisper teasingly with promises of uncovering his origins and explaining why he had the powers he did.

For months, he wrestled with knowing he’d never really know what happened to that blurry, barely-there dot in the image. But, for some reason that he didn’t understand in the least, it made him profoundly sad, knowing that whatever it was, it was no longer there. He wished he could explain why it had affected him so deeply, but he didn’t even know where to begin in answering that question. A part of him, perhaps, didn’t believe it was an asteroid wandering aimlessly through space – a dead piece of rock and metal that somehow had managed to get its picture taken. It had to have been a star or planet, a part of him acknowledged, deep within his heart, so whisper-faint that it never verbalized itself in his thoughts as such.

Neither option was “better” in Clark’s mind. If it had been a star that had died – how many planets had been dependent on its heat and light? How many worlds had frozen over when the burning ball of gas had been extinguished? And if it had been a planet – had it been populated? How many hundreds or thousands or trillions of life-forms – people, animals, plants – had been snuffed out upon its destruction? In his own, odd way, he mourned the loss. Even if it had been a dead world, it could have one day possibly been studied and perhaps even helped bring about scientific breakthroughs for the people of Earth.

But all his thoughts about that dot paled in comparison to those of Lois.

She filled his heart with joy when he thought of her. She’d been achingly beautiful and her smile had been unbearably heartwarming. And her mind! As brief as their interaction had been, and as narrow as the subject matter of their conversation had been, he’d been given the gift of a glimpse into her mind, and it

had at once humbled him and intrigued him. Every fiber of his being cursed the fact that he’d been forced to leave her as soon as he had. It had taken every last shred of his restraint not to go off on Bruno and Terrence about whatever they’d done to get them all kicked out of the museum. Clark hadn’t even bothered to find out just what they’d done. In the end, it didn’t really matter. Clark would have needed to say goodbye to her sooner or later.

Still, even just five more minutes with her would have been something Clark would have treasured for the rest of his life. So, while he was grateful and joyful to have met her, thinking about her made him profoundly sad. But whereas thinking about the deep space images brought about an abstract, ill-defined sadness, the pain in Clark’s heart over losing contact with Lois was dangerously sharp and crystal clear.

Was it love at first sight? he often wondered to himself, late at night as he reclined on his bed, his hands beneath his head, his mind drifting from his studies and football plays he’d memorized during the day and inevitably veering back to that fateful afternoon.

Doesn’t matter, he would immediately remind himself. *Chances are, I’ll never see her again, even if we both do wind up becoming reporters. Face it, Clark, there’s no future with Lois.*

And then, after each half-hearted and heartbreaking self-remonstrance, he would slip off into dreamland, where, if he was lucky, Lois sometimes would join him.

THE END