

The Ghost of Christmas Future

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Submitted: December 2015

Rated: PG – for mild swearing

Summary: Tempus travels through time as he teaches himself a Dickens-inspired tale.

Story Size: 6,285 words (35Kb as text)

Author's Note: Thanks, as always, to my wonderful beta readers Laura and Sue.

Copyright disclaimer: Some dialogue from this story has been taken directly from the scripts of "Season's Greedings," written by Dean Cain, "Home Is Where the Hurt Is," written by Eugenie Ross-Leming and Brad Buckner, and from "'Twas the Night Before Mxymas", written by Tim Minear. No profit is being made from this story and no copyright infringement is intended.

Sometime in the 23rd Century

TJ exited the school bus with a heavy sigh. He had been on this exact same field trip every year since kindergarten. He couldn't fathom why his classmates were excitedly tripping over themselves to line up behind the docent – they had all been here as many times as he had. At best, he could offer a grudging appreciation for the fact that, since he was a high school senior, he'd never be forced to come here again.

The nine-story Superman Museum, situated in the heart of Metropolis, was Utopia's main tourist attraction. Blindingly bright sunlight reflected off the mirror-finished windows, which were polished to spotless perfection. The ornamental garden surrounding the building was fastidiously tidy, not an errant leaf out of place. Koi fish swam happily through the meandering stream that wound its way through the gardens, pursing their lips as they patiently waited for kind visitors to toss them torn pieces of bread. TJ's classmates smiled and pointed at everything, as if they hadn't seen any of it a billion times before. But TJ shuffled along dejectedly at the back of the pack, equating those nine gleaming stories to Dante's nine circles of hell.

TJ's girlfriend cloyingly hooked her arm around his. "Isn't it romantic?" Katie asked. "Lois Lane loved nature. Did you know that she had fish as pets? And she always had a beautiful plant on her desk at the Daily Planet."

TJ willfully suppressed the first response that threatened to fall off his tongue: "Duh!" Those factoids about Utopia's historical hero were part of the script that the museum's docents were required to commit to memory. Try as he might to ignore them over all these years, the little nuggets of information were buried in his head nonetheless; he could mouth the words to half the tour at this point. No use pissing off Katie with his sullen sarcasm, though – it wasn't worth the bother.

Katie was fine. She liked him – God knows why. And she let him feel her up sometimes. Maybe if they were still together by prom, she'd put out. Or not. Whatever. TJ's biggest complaint about his girlfriend was regarding her personality: she was mind-numbingly boring. But then, so was Utopia.

TJ trudged up the marble steps and entered the tall glass doors of the museum. His classmates gasped in delight at the

Christmas decorations that had been hung for the holidays. Giant Douglass Fir bedecked with lights and tinsel – check. Wreath tied with ribbon bows the size of his head – check. Artificial cinnamon scent being forced through the air ducts – check. Nothing was ever out of place in Utopia.

The docent led TJ's tour group through the main hall, pointing out the colorful glass ornaments and the foil-wrapped boxes. Katie clapped her hands in delight and noted, "Christmas was Lois Lane's favorite time of year."

"I'd heard that somewhere," TJ responded in a deadpanned tone.

The docent walked backwards so that she could speak to the class. "I have a special treat for you all today." She pointed towards an open doorway that was labelled with a huge yellow banner. "I'll be leading you through our current special exhibition, 'Lois and Clark: A Love Affair for the Ages.'"

A collective swoon rose up from the girls in TJ's class. Katie made an annoying squeal of delight and raced towards the front of the group. The senior boys had the decency to at least pretend to care. TJ felt a migraine coming on.

He stepped through the threshold into the brightly lit room. Valentine's Day had thrown up all over the exhibition hall. Countless photos of the couple cuddling and kissing lined the walls. Handwritten love letters were protected in sealed display cases; TJ took a peek at one and nearly gagged on the prose. A nine-foot tall Scotch pine stood in the far corner, topped with a crystal star, purported to be Clark's first Christmas gift to Lois. He recognized it, of course – replicas were on sale each holiday season in literally every department store.

TJ quickly moved on to the far end of the room, hoping his physical presence near the exit would spur the cooing masses onward. He rolled his eyes at the roped-off tree: the letters "CK + LL" surrounded by a heart had been burned into the wood. A maudlin display of Superman's heat vision, no doubt.

"Nauseating, isn't it?"

TJ turned his head and took in the middle aged man who had just spoken. He was wearing the silver suit so typical of his generation – a tragic ensemble TJ swore he'd never be caught dead in. TJ made a non-committal sigh and turned his attention away.

The man seemed determined to engage him in conversation. "Perfect couple, weren't they?"

TJ shrugged as he surveyed the room. "So the story goes."

The man leaned forward. "Too perfect, don't you think?"

That was an odd thing to say in Utopia. TJ studied the man more closely. He seemed familiar. "Do I know you?"

The man laughed. "Not yet. But I know you." He tapped his chin in thought. "How to prove that?" he seemed to ask himself. His eyes grew wide as he snapped his fingers. "Ah! 69, dude!"

TJ stared in bewilderment.

The man frowned and shook his head. "You've got to start watching the classics channel."

TJ felt a flutter of concern at the man's behavior. "Anyway, good to meet you. But I need to get back to my friends now."

"Pfft," the man said with a roll of his eyes. "You don't have any friends." He swept his arm across the room. "None of those small-minded sheep really understand you anyway. They just think you're the weird loner with the bad grades and the miserable attitude. Except Katie." He smiled, nodded, and said, "Keep her around until after prom."

"How..." TJ began.

The man turned to face him, and his face lost its jovial charm. "You hate this museum, you hate the nickname 'TJ', and you hate your boring, meaningless existence."

TJ gasped and looked closely at the man. "Who are you?" he asked with breathless curiosity.

The man's cocked half-smile returned. He extended his hand,

winked his left eye, and said, “I’m you, Tempus Junior. But call me Tempus. I dropped the Junior as soon as I dropped out of college.”

TJ studied the man’s face and suddenly saw himself, only twenty years older. “How is this possible?”

“Time travel. All the cool kids are doing it these days.”

Tempus gave a dismissive glare to the Christmas tree before moving past the roped-off area. He leaned against the exhibit hall’s wall. TJ followed him, completely intrigued by his visitor, who added, “How it works? Who knows? That’s way above my pay grade.”

TJ leaned against the wall, too, mirroring Tempus’ casual lean. “You could have gone anywhere in time, and you came here?”

Tempus threw his hands in the air as if he was tossing confetti. “It’s almost Christmas. I have a present for you.”

TJ made a face. “I’m not sure I want it.”

Tempus balled his hand into a fist and lightly punched TJ in the arm. “Of course you do! I’m going to give you the greatest gift in the world.” Tempus’ eyes sparkled, and then he said with a smile, “Knowledge.”

TJ grunted. “No thanks. If I cared about that, I’d be passing my history class.”

Tempus gave a derisive snort. “Who raised you? I’m giving you the chance of a lifetime. The opportunity to travel through time and see what things looked like without the rose-colored glasses.”

“Oh, God,” TJ complained. “Is this a moral lesson?”

Tempus laughed. “No, my boy, this is an immoral lesson.”

TJ cocked his head and smiled. “Now, that sounds right up my alley.”

Tempus stood up straight, extended his right arm, and formed his hand into the shape of a gun. He took aim and pretended to shoot the Christmas tree topper. “History is written by the winners,” Tempus said. He blew on his pseudo-weapon and pretended to pocket it. “But there’s always another side to the story.”

TJ felt butterflies of excitement flutter in his stomach. He took a step forward to recapture his older self’s attention.

Tempus blinked and refused. He turned his head towards TJ and said, “Lois and Clark aren’t the heroes you think they are. Superman has his flaws.”

That was the best thing TJ had heard all day. “What do I have to do?”

Tempus grinned – a wide, broad smile that lit up his face. “Come with me on a trip through time.” He pulled a small electronic device from his pocket. He pressed a button, and a large black frame appeared out of thin air. He held out his hand; TJ only looked askance for a moment before he grasped it.

“It won’t even hurt.” Tempus began to drag TJ through the window, and then said with a shrug, “Much.”

1994

TJ closed his eyes against the swirl of colors and tried to hold back a wave of nausea. He braced his hands against something solid and waited for the world to settle down around him. A few moments later, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

He definitely wasn’t in the Superman Museum anymore. He looked with fascination at the brick walls and old-fashioned paneling, the impossibly tiny television, and the hideous couch he was currently clutching. He released his grip and let his hands follow the contours of the hard back edge, amazed at how solid it felt.

“Don’t worry about the dizziness. Happens to everyone the first few times.” TJ felt Tempus slap him on the back as he came to stand next to him. “Congrats, though. You didn’t vomit.” Tempus’ eyes surveyed the fabric that covered the couch, then

added, “Not that anyone would be able to tell.”

“Where are we?” TJ asked.

“Not in Kansas, that’s for sure.” Tempus laughed at his own joke. “Lois Lane’s apartment. Christmas, 1994. See for yourself.” Tempus turned to his right, gesturing with his hand. TJ followed his lead and gasped when he saw the woman standing ten feet away from him.

The face was unmistakable – he’d seen it in textbooks and on posters more times than he could count. She was younger, though, with a spiral curl to her wavy brown hair that he’d never seen. She was wearing a short black dress, baring her shoulders and revealing her creamy bronze skin. His eyes zeroed in on her bust, and his body reacted inappropriately to the cleavage of Utopia’s mother. Three dimensions certainly suited Lois Lane.

“Keep it in check, Junior,” Tempus growled. TJ glanced at his future self and could see that Tempus was staring at Lois’ neckline, too.

It was mesmerizing to see such an iconic historical figure come to life. TJ was suddenly nervous, and then frightened at the thought that if he could see her, she could surely see him. “Oh, God! I’m sorry! I don’t mean to intrude.”

Lois didn’t bat an eye.

“She can’t hear you.” Tempus turned his head away from Lois as he spoke. “The time window has new and improved cloaking technology. We can interact with everything here, but we can’t be seen or heard. It’s like we’re ghosts.”

“Does it work in the girls’ locker room?”

Tempus smacked him on the head. “Pervert.”

TJ shrugged. “You would know.”

“I brought you here so you could learn something useful for once, not so you could get your jollies. Give you a chance to see Lois and Clark in a whole new light.”

TJ had a flash of concern. “Hey, is this going to create a paradox that will cause the fabric of space and time to fold in on itself?”

Tempus scoffed. “Who do I look like? Herb? I just muck around in time; others can clean up the mess.”

TJ’s eyes traversed the apartment with curiosity. “Why is she alone?”

“Because it’s Christmas and she’s lonely and pathetic. Being a raging bitch doesn’t earn you a ton of friends.”

TJ pointed at the sad, droopy excuse for a tree that was situated near the window. “And what the heck is that? Christmas was Lois Lane’s favorite time of year. Why doesn’t she have a real tree?”

“I wouldn’t trust everything you memorized on the tour. Some of those facts don’t quite check out.”

A rush of wind fluttered through the apartment’s curtains, and Lois excitedly looked out the window, but then looked dejected. TJ realized she must be expecting Superman to come by. He wondered if he’d have the chance to meet him. As much as Utopia’s hero worship annoyed him, it would still be cool to see a celebrity in person.

There was a knock at the door. TJ watched as Lois opened it, and he nearly laughed when he got his first look at Clark Kent in his boxy layers of ill-fitting clothes. What a dork!

“Clark! You came!” Lois wrapped her arms around Clark’s neck, and he put his arms around her back, touching her bare shoulder blade with his fingertips. TJ refused to identify the emotion that flashed through him as jealousy.

He moved to stand beside Clark, measuring their relative heights with his hand. TJ was a good two inches taller than Superman. “He’s a shrimp!” TJ said, as he began to laugh uncontrollably.

Tempus looked Clark up and down. “Heroes always seem larger than life. In reality...” Tempus used the thumb and forefinger of his left hand to measure out an inch. “...not so

much.”

“Why aren’t you in Smallville with your folks?” Lois asked Clark.

“Oh, uh...my plane got snowed in,” Clark replied.

“It did?” Lois checked the window. “It’s not snowing.”

Clark’s eyes widened in mock surprise. “It isn’t?”

TJ followed this exchange, understanding slowly dawning. He turned sharply to his older self. “She doesn’t know?”

Tempus shook his head with an amused smile.

“But...” TJ looked at Clark. “It’s so obvious! He’s standing right in front of her.”

Tempus’ voice dripped with a sardonic tone. “No, that’s Clark, not Superman. See? Clark wears glasses.”

TJ’s face contorted with incredulity. “Is she stupid or something?”

Tempus rolled his eyes. “Galactically stupid.”

TJ continued to watch the couple and listened to their sappy exchange as Lois opened a gift and pulled out the recognizable ornament. TJ moved closer as Lois placed it on the laughably small tree. “Well, the museum got at least one thing right, although our version is made out of cheap plastic.”

Tempus shrugged non-committally as he wandered towards the dining table.

“I love it,” Lois said. She mooned at Clark, who held her hand and mooned right back at her. The scene was sweetly romantic and utterly revolting. “I think I’m going to hurl,” TJ said sarcastically.

Tempus dipped his finger into the cranberry sauce and took a lick. “Ugh! Me, too. I think she really did make this herself.”

Lois and Clark leaned towards each other, a breath away from kissing, and TJ feared the sight would be as gross as watching his grandparents making out. But music from outside the building mercifully interrupted them, and they broke apart just in the nick of time. They cuddled as they listened to the serenading Christmas carolers.

“Those two are serious mush balls,” TJ said.

“Mmm hmm. Who knew Superman was such a wimp? He doesn’t even get any for a whole ‘nother year.”

“With her, you mean?” TJ clarified.

“With anyone, ever.”

“No! Seriously?”

“As serious as Perry at an Elvis impersonators convention.”

TJ cast his eyes over the heaping mounds of food on the table. “You’re not going to force me to stand here and watch them make googly eyes at each other over dinner, are you?”

Tempus snorted. “No. We’ve got a family reunion to attend.” He pushed the button on his device and opened the time window, giving a flourish with his hand. “After you.”

TJ put his hand on his stomach, remembering the unsettling feeling his first trip had induced. But then he took a deep breath, snagged a bread roll off the table to go, and continued on his journey through time.

1995

The swirling colors coalesced, and TJ gripped his bread roll harder, trying to keep a hold on reality. He blinked twice, took a deep breath, and then looked around. He was still in Lois Lane’s apartment. “It didn’t work?” he asked out loud, hoping that his older self hadn’t abandoned him.

“The where is the same. Only the when has changed.”

Tempus shoved him lightly. TJ reached his hand out and steadied himself against the wall before turning in time to see Tempus flare his arms dramatically. “Welcome to 1995.”

“One year later?” TJ took a cursory look at the room, taking in the paltry nod to Christmas décor. “Doesn’t look like much has changed.”

Tempus snickered softly. “Oh, a few things have changed.

For one, Clark’s secret is kaput.”

TJ nodded as he remembered a fact from the museum tour. “Yeah, yeah. Superman got on one knee in the middle of Centennial Park, asked Lois Lane if she would be his wife and build Utopia with him, and they got married and had a crap load of super babies.”

“Quite a story, isn’t it?” Tempus asked. There was something in his voice, though, something in the set of his eyebrow that seemed to suggest he knew more than he was saying.

“Another lie?” TJ said with a frown.

“I’m sure Superman’s descendants would prefer to call it an interpretive framing of the relevant facts.”

“So what really happened?”

“Clark used his freeze breath on Lois – nearly killing her, by the way – and so after less than one month of dating, he proposed in the park. As Clark. She’s the one who called out his alter-ego before rejecting him.”

TJ’s eyes widened in astonishment. “He asked her to marry him before he told her about Superman? Is he a freakin’ moron?”

“He’s the stupidest superhero this planet has ever known,” Tempus muttered.

“Wait! Did you say she turned him down?” TJ laughed uproariously. “Clark is the ultimate loser!”

“Pretty much.”

“How did Lois figure out his secret?” TJ asked.

Tempus’ lips formed into a slight grin. “I’d like to think I had a hand in that. I’m the one that told her, after all.”

“You talked to her? How? I mean, you said we were like ghosts.”

Tempus shrugged. “Who says the laws of time travel have to be consistent? New writer, new rules. But even though Herb meddled in my business and reset the timeline, I suspect our time together stuck with her, at least on a subconscious level.”

It was clear to TJ that his older self wasn’t divulging every bit of information he had. Maybe he had a legitimate reason for being cagey. Or maybe he just liked being deliberately obtuse. TJ suspected the later; after all, he knew himself pretty well.

“Make sure you warn Lois when she gets here,” an unfamiliar male voice said.

“Why do I have to be the bearer of bad news?” a woman asked.

TJ turned his eyes towards the couple, who appeared to be as old as his grandparents. He didn’t quite recognize them, but figured there must be a reason for their presence in Lois Lane’s apartment.

The man kissed the woman on the cheek. “Because you’re so much better at it than I am.” The woman rolled her eyes with a smile.

“Martha and Jonathan Kent, here for the holidays from Smallville, Kansas,” Tempus said by way of introduction.

“Superman’s parents?”

“His Earth ones, anyway.”

The museum didn’t have much information about the Kents. Clark had been hypersensitive about their privacy, even after they had passed away, so TJ had only ever seen the small stock photo that appeared in every single history textbook. “They seem nice enough.”

“Eh,” Tempus said with an exaggerated yawn. “They’re marginally tolerable.” Coming from him, it seemed like a ringing endorsement.

TJ moved closer to the couple to get a better look, but was distracted by the large fish tank at the edge of the living room. He tapped lightly on the glass. The floating goldfish didn’t stir. “He doesn’t look so good,” TJ deadpanned.

“Lois couldn’t keep a fish alive if her life depended on it. It’s a wonder her children made it to adulthood.”

TJ turned towards the front door when he heard the locks

being disengaged. The door opened, and Lois and Clark entered bearing a box full of Chinese take-out.

“Jonathan! Martha! I am so sorry! I forgot all about dinner.” Lois scrambled to open the take-out containers.

TJ’s stomach rumbled, so he took a bite of his purloined dinner roll. “Why do we keep showing up at dinner time? Are you trying to torture me?”

Tempus took a peek into one of the boxes. “Drama always happens around the dinner table. Probably stems from some outdated notion that family members should actually talk to one another.”

TJ tilted his head in thought as he took in Clark’s appearance. “Is that the same black coat he was wearing a year ago?”

Before Tempus could answer, the front door burst open, and a woman yelled, “Surprise!”

“Mother!” Lois exclaimed.

“Oh, boy,” muttered Clark.

Tempus gestured towards the woman. “Meet Ellen Lane. My apologies for not getting you an aspirin first.”

“Hmm. It’s strange,” TJ said, recalling the various images he had seen of the woman. “She looks like most of the pictures I’ve seen of her. But there are a few scattered ones where she looks much older, almost as if she was a completely different person.”

“I know what you mean,” Tempus said with a nod. “Same thing happened to Herb. Must be the butterfly effect. Change even one small thing in the past and it can cause weird and varied changes in the future.” Tempus moved closer to him and clapped TJ on the shoulder. “Just go with it.”

Ellen Lane said, “I couldn’t stand the thought of you alone and miserable in this wretched city for Christmas. Actually, I pictured you more alone than this.”

Lois responded, “Uh. Well. Yes. Uh. Mother, this is Clark, and these are Clark’s parents.”

Martha Kent tried to get Lois’ attention, but then a man emerged from the bathroom. “Surprise!” he said.

“Daddy!”

“Princess!”

TJ laughed. “Meet the folks, eh? Good luck with that one, Superman.” He finished off his bread roll and rubbed his hands together. “This should be deliciously awkward.”

“You have no idea. Wait for it,” Tempus said with a cocked grin.

Sam and Ellen Lane bickered about abandonment issues, alcoholism, and letting go of the past, and TJ watched with a gleeful feeling of schadenfreude. Seeing the polite veneer of Utopia peeling away to reveal an uglier truth felt like a priceless gift.

The front door opened once again, and Sam said, “I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Baby Gunderson.”

“My God, she’s nine years old,” Ellen said derisively.

“I’m speechless,” said Lois.

Clark said, “Well, hello, uh, Baby. Gee, you must be cold.”

“I do not feel the cold,” Baby said.

“Eggnog?” Martha offered.

“I do not drink,” she replied.

Ellen muttered, “Not yet, that is.”

Sam said, “Don’t think of her as a human being...”

Clark interjected. “Sir, that’s a little harsh.”

“I made her. Built her. You remember how I used to tinker with cyborgs. Baby Gunderson’s an improvement; one hundred percent machine.”

“Of all the sicko, psycho, sexual...” Ellen remarked with distain. Sam and Ellen began arguing again.

TJ turned to Tempus in shock. “Lois’ stepmom was a robot? That detail is not in the museum!”

Tempus nodded. “Mom’s a booze hound and dad’s a nut job. But that doesn’t sell commemorative plates in the gift shop.”

Lois adorably pulled on Clark’s tie and said, “We’re gonna elope.” TJ rebelled at the idea that he found the gesture adorable, but a little nugget of jealousy burned like kryptonite nonetheless. God, he really hated Clark Kent.

Tempus nudged TJ in the arm. “Let’s get out of here before this heartwarming scene devolves into sci-fi improbability, an over-the-top antagonist, a maudlin hurt/comfort trope, and the inevitable happy ending that Lois and Clark always luck into.” Tempus shook his head derisively as he opened the time window. “Besides, I’ve got an even more outrageous slice of history to show you.”

1996

TJ wobbled slightly, steadying his hand against a desk. He felt a spark of pride at his lack of nausea – he was capable of mastering time travel, after all. He picked up a small package marked “Wrigley’s” from the desk and slipped it into his pocket. Pilfering objects from the past felt oddly satisfying.

TJ looked over his surroundings. The when appeared to be the same – he could see a dismal display of Christmas décor scattered throughout the room. The where had definitely changed, though; he was in the Daily Planet bullpen.

He scanned the desks and found the one with Lois Lane’s nameplate. He sat in her chair and put his feet on her desk. On the corner sat a dead plant that probably hadn’t been watered for months. So much for her love of nature; the museum had that detail wrong, too.

“1996,” Tempus said. “Oh, how a year has changed things for our romantic leads. No more frog-eating clones, previously dead fiancées, unscrupulous doctors taking advantage of amnesiacs, and the New Kryptonians have been sent packing. Wedded bliss abounds.”

TJ raised an eyebrow. “The textbooks seem to have skipped a few chapters.”

“Swear to God, I’m not kidding,” Tempus said drolly.

“Of course, there are whole books about the New Kryptonians. How Superman stood up to the aliens and defended Earth. He saved our entire planet.”

“I guess we’re all very lucky that not a single human picked up any nasty Kryptonian diseases we’d lack natural immunities to. Almost as if it was a plot point conveniently glossed over.”

“Odd that we’ve never been visited by any other alien races since then. I mean, we can’t be the only two life forms in the whole universe.” TJ’s eyes widened. “Or have we? Are those government conspiracy whack-jobs right?”

“Hey, watch who you’re calling crazy. I’ve spent enough time in an asylum to know that sometimes people in the looney bin are really the sanest ones around. It’s all a matter of perspective.”

“Yeah, well, what I’m perceiving right now is the most pathetic excuse for a Christmas party in all of history.”

“Fear not, the party’s just getting started.”

The elevator door chimed as it opened, and Lois and Clark stepped into the room. A drunk guy threw himself at Clark, but was brushed aside as the couple descended into the bullpen.

TJ was aghast. “Okay, I know that’s the same coat as last year, and the year before that. Dude needs a new wardrobe!”

“You didn’t figure that out from his collection of ties?”

Tempus snarked.

Clark took Lois by the arm and led her to the conference room. TJ couldn’t hear what Clark was saying, but he pointed to several people in the room, all of whom looked sadder than the next.

“Perry White,” Tempus said, nodding his head towards a gloomy old man. “Please don’t get him started on the Elvis stories.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” TJ assured him.

Tempus identified a young boy with floppy hair. “Jimmy

Olsen.”

“No! More butterflies?”

“Exactly.”

TJ caught Superman zip away out of the corner of his eye. Lois began winding through the room, and TJ noticed Clark’s parents and Lois’ mom. It made no sense that they’d be at the Daily Planet, but he didn’t have the energy to analyze that fact too closely. Jonathan and Martha Kent were arguing about tough times on the farm. Ellen Lane was helping herself to a glass of eggnog. TJ smiled at the chaos.

After several lame attempts by Lois at improving people’s attitudes, or harmonizing their chi, or whatever the heck she was trying to do to lift everyone’s spirits, Superman returned and stuffed Perry White into a clichéd Santa suit. Children cheered and ran to Perry, who began distributing presents. TJ’s smile turned to a frown. “Oh, come on!”

“Sickening, isn’t it?” Tempus said. He swatted TJ’s feet off the desk and sat on the edge. “Wait for it. The worst is yet to come.”

Lois began singing. TJ put his hands to his ears, ineffectually trying to block the wretched croaking from his hearing. And then others joined in. “Oh, Lord, no!” TJ wailed.

“Smile, boy. It’s Christmas. Joy to the world!” Tempus’ sarcasm was all too evident.

Suddenly, a man popped into existence, floating in mid-air. “What is this? You’re not supposed to be delighted.”

TJ gasped. “Another Kryptonian?”

Tempus shook his head. “A magical creature from the fifth dimension.”

“The what?”

“You’ll never find that one in the history books, I assure you. But trust me, kryptonite isn’t Superman’s only weakness. He’s affected by magic, too.”

TJ soffed. “Magic? Like sawing women in half and making tigers disappear?”

“No. Like cursed Druid masks and Caribbean voodoo and the whim of mysticalimps.”

“Now you’re just yanking my chain.”

“Sadly, no. But however outlandish the situation, Clark finds a way to come through with flying colors. It’s completely unfair.”

TJ stomped his feet. “The man’s a menace! He always wins. Someone needs to put a stop to it.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Tempus said.

TJ watched as the magical creature was frustrated by over-the-top laughter from Perry and Ellen and the Kents. But when he received a present, his attitude changed to wondrous surprise.

“The only way to get rid of Mxyzptlk is to get him to say his own name backwards,” Tempus said with a yawn.

“Who’s it from?” Superman asked the imp, who was looking at the present’s name tag.

TJ cocked his head. “He’s not about to fall for a trick that even I can see coming from a million miles away, is he?”

“Well, of course he is!” Tempus cried. And, sure enough, the bad guy was vanquished, the universe was set right, and TJ heard an announcement about peace being declared in the Middle East.

“It all gets wrapped up in such a neat, tidy bow,” TJ grumbled.

The elevator door chimed and opened, and out stepped Sam Lane, who offered some hollow apology for being late. Ellen threw her arms around him, and they kissed.

“Even they get a happy ending? What happened to Baby Gunderson?”

Tempus sighed. “She’s probably stuck in the back of a closet somewhere.”

“Clark – it’s happening,” Lois said, drawing TJ’s attention.

“What?” Clark asked.

“This. It’s magic. Just like you said. I mean, I may not be able

to see through walls or start a campfire with my retina, but right this second, I really do feel like I can see everything through your eyes.”

“Then you’re the lucky one, because I’m looking at you.”

Tempus rolled his eyes. “Oh, barf.”

Lois and Clark embraced each other and settled into a long, sloppy kiss.

TJ covered his eyes with his hands. “Ugh! Seriously? That’s just revolting.” He threw his arms wide open. “When is this torture going to end?”

Tempus hissed out a breath. “One thing Utopia’s got going for it – you’re not subjected to the sappy soap opera of their lives on a daily basis. At least it’s all contained in a once-a-year field trip to hell.” Tempus removed his electronic device from his pocket. “That being said, it’s about time to get you home. Don’t want you turning into a pumpkin.” The time window opened, and TJ and Tempus returned to the future.

Back in the 23rd Century

The time window zipped shut. TJ blinked in the bright artificial lighting and found himself once again in the Superman Museum’s special exhibition hall. He surveyed the room and noticed that his classmates were still fawning over the displays. It appeared that no time in Utopia had passed during his travels through history.

TJ felt around in his pocket and removed the small package he had swiped from the Daily Planet desk. Holding it made his whole trip feel solid and real rather than a figment of his imagination.

“Gum!” Tempus exclaimed. He took the object from TJ’s hand and unwrapped it, withdrawing a silver foil package. “I haven’t seen this in ages. It was outlawed centuries ago.” He opened the foil and popped the contents into his mouth. He leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial aside, “Personally, I blame Singapore.” He handed the package back to TJ, who copied Tempus’ actions and began chewing a piece of gum.

Tempus balled the foil trash and tossed it to the floor. TJ’s eyes widened at the casual display of something he’d only ever read about in school: littering. Such a thing just didn’t exist in Utopia. TJ grinned broadly as he dropped his trash onto the floor, too. Littering existed now.

Tempus leaned back against the wall, crossed his arms, and gave TJ an appraising look. “Well, my younger self, what have you learned tonight?”

TJ’s eyebrows furrowed. “It’s all worse than I thought. Year after year, I’ve been forced to come to this museum. Day after day of living in this soul-crushing Utopia. But watching Lois and Clark fall in love, and support one another, and kiss – oh, God, the kissing! It’s even more revolting than I could have imagined.”

Tempus curled his lip in disgust and shuddered. “Be glad you haven’t had to see how cute he was as a baby.”

TJ’s eyes flew wide open in horror. “Please, no! Tell me that’s not in my future.”

“Ugh! Regrettably, it’s in my past.”

TJ straightened his spine. His jaw set, and he began to radiate confidence, a sense of purpose, a mission in life. “I have to stop this.”

Tempus smiled and nodded.

TJ became lost in thought. “All this time, I’ve been wasting away, slacking off when all the do-gooders tried to convince me that I could make something of my life. They were right!”

Tempus arched an eyebrow. “Just probably not in the way they thought.”

TJ looked at his companion and said sincerely, “Thank you, future me.”

“Awww, shucks,” Tempus said with a coy swat in the air. “I didn’t do nothin’.”

TJ's eyes narrowed playfully. "You know exactly what you did. You showed me my future by showing me their past." And suddenly, the path before him seemed so clear, like the overly spotless shine on the museum's glass windows. "I'm destined to be a pain in the ass."

Tempus scrunched up his face as if he was about to cry. "I'm so proud," he said as he fluttered his hands in front of his face, pretending to hold back tears.

A question came to mind, and TJ cocked his head in curiosity. "Hey, me. Why didn't we just kill Lois while we were in the past? We could have saved ourselves both a lot of trouble."

Tempus pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "Youth," he said with impatience. He looked back up and wagged a finger. "You've got a lot to learn about being a bad guy. It's not just about witty dialogue and knowing winks to the camera."

TJ looked around the room, curious to see if he was being filmed.

Tempus smacked him on the side of the head. "It's about the entertainment! Every good villain knows that you have to let the heroes catch you so that the game can continue. Geez, I spend days writing and practicing the exposition speeches I have to deliver as a delaying tactic until Lois and Clark figure out how to foil my schemes."

TJ raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Seems unnecessarily complicated to me."

Tempus put an arm around his shoulder and patted him on the back. "Trust me, when you grow up, you'll understand."

TJ began to step forward, and Tempus guided him to stand in front of the Christmas tree. TJ set a look of determination on his face. He glanced around the room; the docent and the rest of his group had already moved on to the next room. TJ pulled the flavorless piece of gum out of his mouth, reached across the curtesy rope, and stuck it in the dead center of the engraved heart, squishing the used gum into the lasered letters of Clark's name.

And both Tempuses smiled.

THE END