Knives and Fire: National City

by Alsike

Summary

Alex Danvers knows what rock bottom looks like, and this isn't it. But still, getting fired and blackballed by your mob-connected boss is not really 'success'. Reality TV has not ever been part of the plan. But it's time to make a change, and Knives and Fire: National City is her best chance at making it.

The fact that it will piss off her mom? Even better.

Ever since the explosion that took her parents from her, Kara Olsen has been struggling to find out where she belongs and what she's meant to do with her life. But everything she pursues seems to end in failure. Working on her boyfriend's taco truck seemed to be the answer, but without an infusion of cash and some new ideas, the taco truck is doomed.

Going on Knives and Fire: National City is a harebrained scheme to save it. And the prospect of public embarrassment when Kara inevitably fails again is mortifying. But what else is there? Just giving up?

This season on Knives and Fire: Knives! Fire! and Dreams. 8 young chefs come together to prove themselves in the oven of destiny. Bonds will be forged, remade and tested, but in the fires of competition, what you truly find is yourself.
Welcome to the post PhD unemployment anxiety writing that is my life!

Updates planned to be every day or every other day, as the editing progresses.

Thanks Theriacs for this post which was very inspirational. As with all my prompt fills, nearly nothing is in the same shape as suggested, but I hope it scratches the intended itch.
The scent of the sponge, pungent and sour, rose up as Alex lifted the cover off the bowl. She leaned down, breathing it in. "That's right, baby," she murmured softly. "You're doing just right."

Gently encouraging the risen dough out onto the lightly floured baking tray, using the dough scraper to nudge it along, she patted it gently into shape and then cut it into four smaller loaves, shaping them just as gently and spreading them far enough apart that they wouldn't get in each other's way. She covered them, and left them to rest.

"What the fuck are you doing in there, Danvers?" Her boss's voice echoed through the back room and Alex grimaced. Making sure the dough was hidden she emerged back into the main kitchen.

Chef Lord was at Alex's station, picking through her mise en place. "Those shallots are too fine. There's no texture to them." He grabbed a handful of them and threw them toward a compost bucket. "And what the fuck is this? Parsley? It looks like it's rotting. He upended her bowl of sultanas. "We're changing to dried apricots. Christ Danvers, I let you run my kitchen for one night a week and you always seem to fuck it up."

Alex grit her teeth, not looking at her boss's beady little eyes. One night a week, fuck him. She ran his kitchen every night. He was the 'executive chef' so he made the menu, made the decisions, but Alex ordered food and paid the dishwashers and made sure food got out of the kitchen in time.

On the nights he was supposedly cooking, he just hung around the kitchen, yelling at anyone who looked like they might be getting in the weeds, and occasionally grilled a steak. But it was fucking Tuesday, her night, and if he didn't get the fuck out of here soon she wasn't going to have a chance to get the bread baked in time for Family Dinner.

Alex Danvers hated her job.

Max did disappear eventually, most likely out to the bar, telling her to just throw together some oyster foam and caviar for his wiseguy buddies. Alex ignored the request and preheated her oven, starting to fry up strips of lightly breaded chicken, tossing in a splash of Madeira, layering the strips into a pan with shallots and parsley and a brown tomato madeira sauce, topped with parmesan rinds. That would go into the oven under the bread while it was baking, give it some steam, and get all thick and viscous, needing to be mopped up with the sourdough ciabatta that was puffing into loaves up top.

"Hey Chef," Vasquez called out from where she was prepping her mise at the fish station. "You hear that Knives and Fire is coming to National City?"

Alex froze. Then shook herself. "What the fuck do I care about that garbage show?"

"Dude, Sara fucking Lance got six figures in investors from that show. Barry what's his name had a food truck. Now he has a franchise."

"So what?"

"So, you--" Vasquez pointed at her with her knife. "--need to get your own gig, and you better give me a fucking call when you do. I am ready to be poached out of this shitstorm like nobody's business."

So were they all. Max was an inch away from the red, and if Alex hadn't redone all his delivery
ordering, he would have been out of money by now and trying to stiff them on pay. "I'm not going to go on Knives and Fire."

"Why the fuck not? You're young and hot and you can cook circles around those idiots."

"I have never in my life wanted to be on TV." Alex scowled and layered on the last of the parmesan, throwing the casserole into the oven. "And that show is all drama all the time. They're supposed to be chefs, but they're always drunk or fucking."

"Have you met a chef?" Vasquez drawled. "Drunk or fucking is our natural state."

Alex snorted. She wasn't wrong.

#

When Alex got home at 2AM she had a voicemail from her mom. She paced around the living room for a minute before she pressed play.

"Alexandra." Her mother's slightly exasperated voice filled the room. "I don't understand why you were so rude to Dr. Alvarez at my party. He complained to me all day at work today. And honestly, telling Sheila, 'these are disgusting, and you couldn't afford me' when she asks if you happened to do the canapés for this party and could she hire you for hers, was completely inappropriate."

Alex groaned and rubbed her forehead, wishing she could have a drink. But that would make her getting hugely pissed at Dr. Alvarez for trying to force a glass of wine on her when she said she was fine, she said she didn't drink, kind of ironic. But fuck Sheila. Those sad still half-frozen pastry shells with some insipid mixture of fake crab and mayo were revolting and it was an insult to be asked if she'd made them.

Mom had never approved of her behavior after she fled grad school for CIA. Mom had never approved of anything she did that differed from the plan she'd set for Alex before Dad died. Oh, Alexandra. Your dad wouldn't approve. He had plans for you. He'd wish you could meet them, was the unspoken subtext every time Alex came home having done something wrong, whatever it was: cutting off her long hair, getting each new cartilage piercing, coming out as a lesbian, showing off her first tattoo, dropping out of school, saying she wanted to become a chef.

Always getting it wrong. Always disappointing her dad.

Her mom didn't know anything about her life, not really, or she would have disapproved a lot more. Maybe she thought that being a chef meant Alex was living in a scummy world of drugs and mobsters and unprotected sex, and to tell the truth, she was. But it didn't compare to what she'd done before. She'd drunk her way through college and did more blow in her first year of grad school than she ever had when working in kitchens where everyone knew where to get it. She'd had to stop day drinking when she was going to be around sharp knives all the time, and in kitchens many older chefs were on the wagon and unashamed of it. Her first real mentor, Chef Jonzz, had sat her down one day and told her that what she was doing had a shelf life. "You either learn to not hate yourself and drop the crutches, or you wash out. I think you'd hate yourself more if you didn't even try to not wash out."

If Alex set herself a personal challenge, she met it. And the only time she wanted to go back on her promise to herself was when she had to deal with her mom. "Are you dating, Alexandra?" "When are you going to give up cooking and find a real job?" "I ran into your high school bio teacher and he was so disappointed to hear you didn't finish grad school."
She hadn't told her mom about her AA chip. She wouldn't understand. And if Alex told her that things had happened which made it so she had to drop out of grad school or she would have ended up dead in an alley, she wouldn't believe her, and Alex couldn't deal with not being believed about something that important. It was easier to just be the stubborn headstrong kid who never listened to wiser heads. It didn't matter that she was nearly thirty. Her mom was never going to see her as anything but a child and a disappointment.

Alex flopped into the couch and flipped on the TV. There was a rerun of Knives and Fire: Starling City playing. She groaned, realizing it was the season where it became clear that Sara Lance had slept with 6 out of the 8 contestants. She'd met Sara once or twice back at CIA, and she'd hated the cocky kid who was such a fucking show off. The only thing that had changed about her between CIA and going on the show had been her sense of style--and there was an ex she referenced in interviews a lot. It sounded like she'd been working for a mob connected restaurant and banged the Don's daughter. Only Sara fucking Lance would be that much of an idiot.

Her mom would hate it if she went on Knives and Fire.

At the bottom of the screen scrolled by an announcement. Knives and Fire is coming to National City, go to www.knivesandfireNC.com to apply.

Alex chewed on her lip, and rummaged for her laptop, stuck down the side of the couch. Ugh, the application involved an essay on why she deserved to be on this show. What was her 'story'? What does cooking 'mean to her'? Garbage show with garbage drama. She despised people who went on reality TV shows. So did her mom. Nah. There was no way she was going to do it.

#

When I was thirteen my family fostered a kid for a couple of months. She was just a year younger than me, and really sad. She had been in a big explosion, and she'd lost her parents in the collapsing building. At first I wasn't thrilled about having another kid there, but she was so sad. I just wanted her to feel better, if only so I wouldn't feel sad being around her. I tried a couple of things to cheer her up, music, hanging out on the beach, but it wasn't until we made brownies together that she smiled. So then it was baking every day. We made cakes and scones and focaccia and pizza and I heard her laugh for the first time.

She became my best friend.

It was a long fucking time ago, because we watched some of the first season of Knives and Fire that summer, and made joking plans to be on it some day.

A couple of months later, my dad was killed in a car accident. My mom couldn't deal with a foster kid, so we sent the girl away. I think I didn't talk to anyone for a year after that, not my mom, not anyone at school. It wasn't fair, I thought, that I lost Dad and had to lose my best friend too. I know it was probably better for her, but I missed her so much and I hated my mom for sending her away.

I guess because of all that it made sense to me, when my life was falling apart, to turn to baking and cooking. It brought my best friend back to herself, and it did the same for me. Going to CIA helped me screw my head back on straight. It's weird that this girl I knew for three months ended up being so important to me. I never saw her again, and I don't even know if I'd recognize her today. But every time I double check the oven thermometer, I think about her, and the way her eyes would light up when she tasted something delicious, and the way she'd laugh at me when I got flour in my hair. And suddenly all of the bad things, the hard things, they slide back into the background, and all there is is the bread.
"Danvers, babe."

Alex froze as she finished locking up the restaurant. Max had been leaning against the brick wall, smoking. She knew he'd taken most of the staff to the club down the street since it was Sunday and the restaurant was closed Mondays.

"You never come out with us."

"Someone's gotta make sure the rats won't eat your profit," Alex said flatly.

"You're always working so hard." Max rolled his eyes. "Suppose it's a plus for me. But you know why I really hired you Alex? It's because you're so hot."

He stubbed out his cigarette and took a step toward her. "Come on. No one's a total straightedge. You've got to have some vices. Bet you're dirty as fuck in bed." He grabbed a handful of her ass, and Alex grabbed his wrist and twisted. She heard a snap. Her hand landed in his chest and she shoved him back against the wall.

"Don't you ever fucking touch me!"

"My arm! My fucking arm!" Max was wailing. Alex dropped him and he cradled his wrist to his chest. "You broke my fucking wrist! You're fucking fired!"

"You wanna keep your balls, you keep your hands off women who work in kitchens, yeah? You should know that by now!"

Max's face changed, pale from the pain it was now a rubbery mask. "I'm serious! You're fired!"

Alex stepped back, startled. Max was a dick, but most dudes in kitchens were dicks. You just had to show them you wouldn't take it, and they'd treat you like one of the guys. But maybe she'd shown Max she wouldn't take it a little too hard. "Fuck you too."

"You're never going to work in this town again!"

Max was always on about his 'connections'. Alex was not looking forward to seeing how many he actually had. "Go suck your own dick."

"I'm going to sue you for fucking assault, bitch!"

"You're going to be broke in a week without me running your kitchen, fucker, so good luck!"

Alex stormed off down the street towards her shitty windowless apartment. She banged through the door, banged into the fridge and pulled out her smoked sardine spread and goat cheese. If she couldn't have a fucking drink she was going to eat something good, dammit.

Fuck, she'd gotten fired. Fuck.

Alex opened her laptop. The application to Knives and Fire was still open.

Well, it wasn't like she had any better options.

#
The line for callbacks was long and winding and Kara crossed her arms in front of her chest, hunching over, uncertain if she should be here at all. She knew there were a lot of professional chefs here, and that was something she wasn't. She didn't have training or a lot of experience. All she had was a boyfriend with a food truck, and the food truck wasn't even operational anymore.

Her brothers kept telling her to come back to Metropolis. They'd never thought Mike was good enough for her, but they never thought anyone was good enough for her. She'd left home with Mike, moved to National City for him, because he wanted his taco truck to have a more ‘authentic vibe.’ She loved Mike. She felt relaxed with him, like he saw her, and she didn't have to always live up to some image of her kept on a pedestal.

And, of course, there was the taco truck. When she thought about how she'd met Mike, fallen in love with him, she was pretty sure it was the taco truck she'd fallen for first.

She'd loved its comfortable confined space, the big sheet grill, the bins and buckets that looked like they'd be full of industrial cleaner and instead were full of delicious fresh guacamole and grated cheese. Added to Mike, his enthusiasm about tacos, his flavor combinations, how he'd taught her to make fresh tortillas and carnitas, she’d thought she finally found where she belonged.

He'd shown up just at the right time, the evening after Perry White had called her into his office and said that she wasn't cut out for the investigative team, but if she wanted to stay on as his assistant, she could stay for as long as she wanted.

Dignity torn away, a failure again, Kara had nodded slowly and said, "I think you're right that journalism isn't for me. I'm going to try and find out what is for me, though. So, thank you for the offer, but I won't stay."

Her brother Jimmy was horrified, but she'd made up her mind. And then Mike had driven up in his taco truck, and he'd asked her out, and then said that he needed a helper, and it had been a matter of right place right time. Mike was kind of scrawny and full of himself, not really her usual crush-type. But he was overenthusiastic and dorky and awkward, a lot like her, really. And he loved tacos. She'd always felt that she'd never love anyone who couldn't love something outside themselves with that kind of passion. She loved him for how much he loved tacos.

They'd expanded the taco truck menu, Kara learning to make different fresh salsas, experimenting with filling meats, making enchiladas in the parking lot with two cinderblocks and a blowtorch. After Mike nearly blew up the truck, Kara took over with the blowtorch.

Cooking made her feel calm and happy when the rest of her life was mostly chaos. It always had. She'd cooked with her mom and her aunt when she was a kid, and she'd dealt with a lot of the hard times in her life with cooking. It was a way to make friends and bond with people. She'd had a couple of foster families before the Olsens adopted her, and the ones who hadn't cooked were always the worst. She had a good one at first, but it hadn’t worked out, and then a string of bad ones, with only takeout and microwave dinners, and when she'd gotten to the Olsens she was skittish and tired. But the scents coming from the kitchen as both Professor and Mr. Olsen took turns making dinner had slowly lured her out of her shell.

Her new brothers, Winn and Jimmy, were not natural cooks, but they'd had a lot of fun together, making cake and pie and one disastrous attempt at donuts. It made her feel like she was part of a family again.
She’d moved out at nineteen, having stayed a year past her majority, guilty for it, even though Professor Olsen wouldn’t hear of her leaving before she’d finished high school. She’d fumbled her way through odd jobs and nearly all of college, but she’d never really felt at home for the next seven years, when all she had was herself. No point in cooking elaborate meals or baking desserts when there was only one person to eat it. But without it, there was an emptiness inside. She always cooked for guys on the second date. If they weren’t suitably appreciative, she cut them loose. But Mike had cooked for her on the second date. She’d thought he was perfect.

After they’d driven the truck cross-country to National City, things had been a little different. Mike loved the culture, which to him meant drinking Mexican beer in seedy bars. He never got around to getting his food truck license, so finally Kara had gone and done it for him. But in Metropolis, a taco truck was fun and interesting. In National City, they were a dime a dozen. And honestly, the food trucks were all better than theirs. Whenever she had an extra dollar fifty, Kara found herself showing up for lunch at the tamale truck on the next street over. It was run by two older Oaxacan ladies, and their banana-leaf-wrapped tamales were probably the most delicious thing she’d ever had.

In comparison to the best trucks in NC, Kara and Mike’s tacos were mediocre. The other trucks weren’t going for an ‘authentic vibe’, they just made good tacos. There were so many Latino owners, people with backgrounds from all parts of Mexico, bringing different flavors and techniques to their product, that ‘authentic’ was totally intangible. Kara wanted to try every truck in the city. She chatted with the chefs and asked for tips, excited to hear about what they’d learned at home from family or friends, and what they were changing and making new and different.

That was the difference between a great truck and a boring truck. Just another taco truck run by two white kids from Metropolis was not going to interest anyone. They needed to be doing something interesting or extra well, bringing something to the table. Imitating what other people could do better and selling it to the hipsters who worked in midtown and felt more comfortable buying it from a chef who looked like them was not the answer. Mike seemed to think it was the answer though. It was disappointing.

Kara spent hours every week at the library in the cooking section. She hung out in the various ethnic quarters of the city, eating everything she could afford. She wanted to get better, to be better, to find the thing that she could bring to their food truck to make it a success again. But whenever she made a suggestion to Mike, he’d make a face and say, ‘we can’t afford to make that kind of change. Also, lamb tacos sound gross.’

She started to bake bread.

It had been a long time since she’d made bread. But there was something about the process, the physical labor, the waiting, the scent of it. It made her calm down when she was waiting for Mike to get back from the bar, yet again. After he’d come home smelling like stale beer and fucked her in his overenthusiastic way—like a windup monkey really, exclaiming idiotic things like ‘I’m Superman! Ready to rock my cock of steel!’—and collapsed drooling on her chest, she’d slip out and check on the rise.

She baked late at night, sometimes falling asleep on the table, only to be jarred awake by her phone vibrating its alarm. Baking was a way to pretend things weren’t wrong.

Eventually, she couldn't pretend anymore. They were out of money.

Kara got a job waitressing at a diner, and Mike got a part time bartending gig. The taco truck stayed parked and empty. The diner played TV all day, and every day after the lunch rush when it was slow right before dinner, Knives and Fire came on. Kara watched it, jealous of these young up-and-coming chefs, remembering when she’d seen it for the first time and talked about being one of them.
Then she saw the scroll. Coming to National City.

Offhandedly, she mentioned it to Mike. He sort of grunted, not seeming to pay much attention.

And then he'd come home with the half-filled out applications.

Kara had never thought they'd actually make callbacks. But here she was, waiting as Mike ran off to get coffee. Around her in the line she heard other people talking, bragging about where they’d worked, comparing their sob stories, but the thought of speaking to any of them made her cringe. She wasn't great at chatting with strangers, and everyone was a competitor here, and most of them were professional chefs. Kara felt like an imposter. Also, some people just looked terrifying.

For example, a few places in line ahead of her there was a girl with sleek hair bluntly cropped to her chin standing with her legs apart and her arms crossed. She'd taken off her leather jacket and pushed up the sleeves of her grey button-down, showing the creep of a tattoo down one arm. She was gorgeous, ears full of rings and a totally 'done with this shit' expression. Kara internally snorted at the idea of talking to that one.

A petite young woman with a clipboard and a sternly set chin was walking up and down the rows, giving everyone a narrow-eyed look. "You. What's your name?" she asked Kara.

"Uh, Kara Olsen?"

The woman scanned her list. "Ah, yeah. Right. Come with me."

"What? But-- my boyfriend--"

The woman made a dismissive wave of her hand. "Yeah," she checked her notes. "Mike Ellingham? Don't worry about him. Everyone interviews alone."

"Okay?" Kara followed the woman out of the line and into the building.

When they were out of sight of the line, the woman smiled at her. She was actually quite lovely when she smiled. "I'm Lucy Lane, assistant to the producer. Nice to meet you."

"Oh, you too." Kara took her hand and they shook.

"We really loved your essay. I wanted to talk to you about how comfortable you are about discussing your past on camera."

Kara rubbed the back of her neck. It was nice that they were asking. And a few years ago she might have had to be more circumspect, but it didn't matter now. "I don't really have anything to hide. There are a lot of other orphans and foster kids around, not half of them as lucky as me."

"Great," Lucy said, and made a note on her clipboard. "Honestly, the producer hates that I ask, but people don't always read the paperwork thoroughly, and it saves headaches in the end. Okay, here are the waivers we need you to sign. And then here's your handbook. Report to the compound, address is on the back, in two weeks, 'kay? Miss Olsen?"

Kara stared blankly at her. "You mean I'm in?"

Lucy grinned. "Welcome to Knives and Fire. We try to live up to the name."

#

Lucy entered the room where Cat Grant stood in front of the bay of monitors, all showing the line of
people waiting to be evaluated. Cat raised an eyebrow. Lucy nodded.

"She's a cute kid," Cat said. "Good call for the Heart. Now her boyfriend . . ."

Lucy found the image on the monitor of the rumpled guy in a 21 Pilots t-shirt holding two cups of coffee and looking around, confused. He had a scruff that was probably supposed to make him look manly, but just made him look unkempt. "His essay was kind of boring."

Cat waved a hand. "He'd be handsome if you get him to shave, and we always need more men. Go grab him, flirt a little. If he bites at all it's a definite yes."

Lucy raised an eyebrow, but didn't question the instruction. She knew well what Cat wanted out of a show. She'd been with Cat for six out of the fourteen seasons. After the second, she'd known what the formula was.

The scowly girl with the leather jacket had reached the interview stage. "Look," she snapped at the hapless interviewer. "I can cook and I need money. That's the real reason people go on these shows, isn't it? Unless you really love being a dancing squirrel, and I don't. But I am willing to fucking dance, okay? Just don't try to make me cry about my drinking or my dead dad or any of that garbage and we will be fine."

Cat was smiling narrowly. "This is the one with that sob-story about baking her way out of pain, isn't she? Do you think she wrote it herself?"

Lucy looked at the girl, frowning for a moment. "Yeah. I don't think she would take the cut in dignity to let anyone else do it for her."

Cat snorted. "Think she'll make a good Bitch?"

"Nah. She's a Go-Getter." Lucy pointed to a screen where Siobhan Smythe, cupcake maven, was sneering at someone who had just bumped into her. "That one for the Bitch."

Cat laughed. "Look at you. You'll be able to do this in your sleep soon."

Lucy rolled her eyes. Most days she seriously wondered why she was in TV at all. But she was in it now—thanks sis—and she didn't want to stay second-fiddle to Cat forever. Cat was half checked out of Knives and Fire already. If Lucy could make this a season to remember, she had a chance at getting producer credit on her own show.

Casually, she flipped open a folder. "Oh, Rick just told me that one of our guest judges had to cancel. I was thinking we should bring in that new food-blogger for the third episode and screen-test her, maybe see if she's ripe for the network."

"Who?"

"Uh," Lucy checked her notes. "Alura Z. Food for Thought."

Cat made a face. "Do we even know what she looks like? I know most chefs are ugly fucks, but we have some standards."

Lucy rummaged for the headshot that Rick had gotten. She flipped it open and paused. "Um. Wow." She probably should have looked at this before. She'd read some of the blog posts and thought crunchy. But in black and white this woman looked like she'd been sculpted from marble, high cheekbones and intensely grey penetrating eyes.
"What?"

Lucy shook herself. "She's attractive." She handed over the pic.

Cat made a face. "What are those scars?"

"Part of her story. She was in an explosion, lost her memory, stuff like that."

"Ugh." Cat made a face and pinched the photo between thumb and forefinger. "Is this supposed to be inspirational or something?"

"I think she raises goats."

"It's as if you're trying to drive me crazy."

Lucy grinned. "So, I'll go up there and do a personal interview before we say yes?"

"Also send me her readership stats," Cat said. "If Rick thinks it's worth it, they're probably good enough. But I want to check them myself."

Lucy nodded. The stats were pretty good, but she could adjust the presentation to make them look better. She took back the headshot. The woman stared into the distance, looking lost, or like she'd lost something. The scars that marked her neck and cheek didn't make her any less beautiful. But who knew what she'd be like in person. From what Lucy had seen of the way she handled comment nonsense, she might be a match for Cat herself, or, Lilian, on screen. That could be fun. Lucy hid her grin and made a note on her calendar to find some time to travel up to Big Sur and meet her. This whole thing might just work out.

"The other judges are still in? The mentors for the final?"

"Yes, we've got J'onn, Barry, Ra's, and Kelly all on stand-by, and Diana and Lilian are clear for the whole season."

"Right." Cat went back to peering at the screens. "Bring her in too," she pointed to a woman with a kid hanging off her shirt. "And find me another man. Preferably hot and ethnic. And then one of those big barbecue guys. People eat them up."

#
Episode 0: Part 3

Pre-Show Interviews:

Kara: I'm just so thrilled to be here. And, well, terrified. I'm not a trained chef or anything, but cooking and baking have gotten me through some of the hardest times in my life. I'm excited to test myself, and see if maybe I was right, that this is what I was meant to do.

Mike: My taco truck is my life, man. If I don't have that, I don't know what I'd do. Probably tend bar. But, I love tacos. I love food and cooking and . . . stuff. I want to own all the taco trucks, everywhere!

Alex: I want to open my own restaurant. My skills are in high end fine dining. I'm CIA trained, and I focused on molecular gastronomy. At one point, I was going to be a biologist, so I understand cooking down to the atom. I can work miracles with foam and jellies. I just want to show everyone what I can do. I'm here to win.

No. I'm not interested in making friends.

M'gann: I've managed a bar for ten years now, sometimes cooking in the back. I'd love to be able to renovate and hire enough staff so I can develop the restaurant side of things. I love my customers and I know they want more than a seedy bar. I want to bring a good family restaurant to my neighborhood where people can come for good food and a safe, comfortable environment.

Maggie: When you're a short-order cook, people think that's all you can do. But I have experience in hotel restaurants and I want to get back into the business. I had to drop back into daytime shift work for a while because I'm raising my brother's daughter Jaime all on my own. She's a bit older now, and very busy and independent, so I was hoping this show could give me a chance to open a café, or get some private clients. I always want to be able to be there for her, but also to be able to give her the life she deserves.

Siobhan: I know some of these people think they know what they're doing, but I have been the queen of cupcakes in National City for five years. I sold my cupcake franchise because I was bored with sugar and icing. I'm a well rounded person and I am ready for a new game. Whatever game I play, :smiles: I always win.

Adam: I am ready to be an executive chef of my own restaurant. I have an MBA that I got before I went to Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. I will be an excellent manager, and I have a perfect palate. I'm here to show investors that I am their best bet.
Waylon: If you've never barbecued croc, you've never lived. It’s been my dream to open a big barbecue joint in National City, and bring them that lovely flavor of smoked rattlesnake. I like to kill what I eat myself. There ain't no better health and safety standards than from looking that big fella right in the eyes, and then loading your plate up with his meat when you've been the one doin' all the steps in between.

"We're going to be on TV! We're going to be on TV!" Mike whooped and leapt around the living room, bouncing off the couch cushions.

Kara moved out of range, her arms around herself, and tried to keep calm. It felt like that time all over again, where Perry had given her a chance with the investigative team and she'd proven to be such a failure. Everyone was so much better than her, so much more experienced. She was going to fail again. She didn't know if she could handle that. This was something she really loved, and proving that she was an incompetent amateur on TV in front of millions of people . . . How could she recover from that?

"You're with me?"

"I'm with you, sir."

Alex glared at Vasquez, who grinned. "Don't call me sir."

"Yes, ma'am."

Alex rolled her eyes. "All right. Keep look out. I'm going in."

She unlocked the door to the restaurant and slid inside. It was still and empty, no sign of the night cleaners. She ducked into the back, opened the fridge and rummaged behind the bins of vegetables until she found her giant tupperware container. "There you are baby," she cooed at it. "Are you feeling alright?" She peeked in. The starter looked hungry, but she didn't have time to feed her here. She'd have to do it at home. Loading her baby into the bag she'd brought with her, she glanced over to the freezer doors. Hmm.

Max was a disaster at keeping track of supplies. She stuck her head in. Yep, he'd over-ordered steaks again. Just because that was the only thing he'd buy at a restaurant didn't mean they went through them as fast as he thought. Alex grinned and added a case of steak to the bag. He'd never notice the difference. It would save him having to push a special where they’d lose money on every one they sold, again.

She scampered out, Vasquez giving the all clear, and they locked the door and hustled down the street. "Tell the crew I'm throwing a thank-god-I'm-no-longer-working-for-that-fucker-party tomorrow," she told Vasquez and patted her bag. "There's gonna be steak."

Once shooting started, Lucy was as good as chained to set, so she scheduled her trip up to Big Sur as soon as possible. The puddlejumper landed in Monterey and she picked up her rental car right outside. Cat always got a driver, but Lucy liked to be on her own. She headed down Highway One,
over the cliffs, enjoying the gorgeous view of the ocean, until she reached the turnoff.

Alura Z lived up a canyon road, very narrow, one lane, with huge-ass redwood trees marking either side of it. Lucy barely managed to pull off into a shoulder to let a big white truck pass her before it ran her off the road. She swore a little, and was kind of glad she didn't have a driver. Who knew how some 18 year old schlub would have dealt with that.

The canyon road led up the mountain. At a fork, a small wooden sign said Ziehl, and pointed up a rutted dirt road. Lucy grimaced, gave a prayer for her little car’s suspension, and headed up.

The first sign she was nearing the place was an old wood fence, wired together, setting a boundary between the fields of poison oak and what looked like an orchard. Lucy slowed, blinking at the peaches and apricots and lemons just hanging off the trees. Was that a fig? And an avocado? Fuck.

She nearly drove off a small cliff as the road forked again, but turned the car up the road that veered towards the next painted sign that said Ziehl. The driveway bent back, preferring a downward approach, and Lucy had to maneuver a bit to get the compact car up it. Her wheels spun in one rut, but then caught and trundled up the slope to where a dusty red jeep was parked.

There was a woman standing out on the porch of the house, jeans and boots and a sturdy--army surplus?--jacket, her hair in a ponytail, the wind carrying stray strands across her face. She leaned a little on a cane, but stood casually. She waved as she spotted Lucy looking, and Lucy swallowed hard. Fuck, she was just as pretty in person, wasn't she?

Whatever, Lucy worked in Hollywood. She saw pretty people every day. She waved back and finished parking, then got out of the car, and tried to straighten her plane-rumpled slacks.

"Wow," she said. "It's kind of an adventure getting up here, isn't it?"

The woman--Alura--nodded, one side of her mouth quirking up in a grin. "I try not to have to do it every day. I'm impressed. Most people call and have me meet them in town."

Lucy grimaced. "I tend to just put things into the GPS and go for it. When you get your marching orders from Cat Grant it's 'make the straightest line between two points.' It wasn't anything I couldn't handle though. Just dodging that truck down in the canyon gave me flashbacks to Mosul."

"You were in the army?" Alura opened the door, gesturing Lucy inside. There was a pitcher of iced tea sitting out on a table and it smelled like rose and za'atar and woodsmoke in the room.

Lucy stopped on the threshold. "I-- yeah," she said. "Wow, um, it smells like my aunt and uncle's house in here."

Alura looked surprised. "Oh? I made some things for tea. I hope you don't mind. I know sumac is not to everyone's taste."

Lucy bit her lip. "I like it," she said. She did like sumac. She wasn’t sure if she liked the fact that the house smelled like it. It made the place smell like home in a way that nothing had for fifteen years, but it so clearly was a stranger's house, that the cognitive dissonance was a little much. She shook her head. "I've been working on Knives and Fire for five years and no one has ever made anything that smelled that Lebanese. I mean, it's hard to pick out particular scents when there is so much cooking going on. But I think you've got something right about it."

Alura's mouth quirked up in a wry grin. "That's good to know. I would feel more confident, except the years I spent in Lebanon were before my head injury, and sometimes it's like playing with a jigsaw where half the pieces are missing in my head."
"You spent time there?"

Alura nodded. She sat, leaning her cane against the wall and pouring tea. "I've been around. Diplomat's wife. It was why I was at the Quraci embassy when it was bombed." She handed Lucy a glass, strongly scented with rose syrup. Lucy took a sip, it was sweet and only a little floral.

"I've never been," Lucy said. "Though I've been close. But I don't suppose I got the food-culture side of things when I spent the whole time in convoy carrying a semi-auto and eating MREs though." She wrinkled her nose. "My aunt and uncle live in Bludhaven."

"No different if you're always in a limo with armed guards I suppose." Alura shook her head. "I'll apologize for talking about myself in the third person, but some of the things that are gone are my emotions and the reasoning associated with certain memories. I think 'Alura' back then was trouble. She was always wandering off without bodyguards, looking for good places to eat. Sometimes even with her daughter." There was an odd frown there, a furrow in her forehead.

Lucy bit her tongue. Reality TV had made her used to asking follow up questions that were none of her business. But she wanted to know, how much did Alura remember about her husband and daughter with that jigsaw puzzle memory? How much loss was there, or was it just like a poorly remembered movie? That was way too personal for a preliminary judges interview. Down to business.

"Tell me," Lucy said, taking another sip of the iced tea and trying not to be thrown again by the rose flavor. "Why do you want to be on TV?"

#
"This is how the contest works. Each episode involves three challenges, spaced over two days. The first day contains individual challenges, where you will show your style, your creativity, your competence and skill. The second day is the team competition. What everyone must remember is that a head chef is a leader. Being a great chef requires teamwork and leadership. On the third day you will split up into groups and each group will run a kitchen, feeding actual patrons--patrons who could become investors. Once we are down to three contestants, each contestant will pick a sous chef from the already rejected contestants, and with their sous's help, develop and run their own establishment, culminating in a final meal for our panel of judges."

Alex set her jaw and took a breath. Filming hadn't even started, and she was already on edge. She'd arrived at the compound in a taxi at 3, as stated on the contract, and then been shuffled through incredibly invasive security, relieved of all electronics that could contact the outside, and passed through into a lounge area, where one by one, the other contestants filtered in.

The assistant producer, Lucy Lane--'Major' she'd added with narrow eyes--had shown up around four fifteen to give them the run down, as well as bags of linens and towels. It felt like summer camp: regimented, unpleasant, no internet, and with far too much forced socializing.

None of that mattered. Alex wasn't here to have a good time. She was here to win. The individual challenges didn't worry her. She knew her skills and had confidence in her training. The team challenges were more of a concern.

She knew how to handle a kitchen. She also knew that this group of 8 were likely to be a shitshow as a crew. Drama queens the lot of them. Good luck getting them to drop their ego and buckle down. Making the finalists pick one for their sous chefs was more of a handicap than an assist.

Alex scanned the group. From the little chitchat she'd overheard while they were waiting around for the assistant producer to show up, she'd made some preliminary judgments. If she got to pick a team, she'd go straight for Maggie and M'gann. They both seemed experienced, competent, no-nonsense. As a fourth, she wavered. Mike was hyperactive and didn't seem to know about anything besides tacos. Adam was a shithead as full of himself as Max Lord, and she was well rid of that douchenozzle. Siobhan was a possibility, but Alex was kind of certain that being in close proximity to her for more than five minutes at a time would give her hives. That left it between the cute, tall, nervous-looking blonde--Kara--and the big black southern guy with forearms like tree-trunks--Waylon.

Waylon seemed obsessed with barbecuing crocodile, but when you pushed him, he could talk quite sensibly about kitchen structure and spice blends. He'd clearly been in the business for a while. He was just putting on a show. Alex had done a double-take when she'd heard the name 'Kara'. She'd known a Kara once. But this one looked nothing like her Kara, too tall, too blonde, chunky hipster glasses, and even the way she stood was wrong, her shoulders forward, her head a little bowed. Cooking-wise, this Kara hadn't said much to go on. She stuck by taco-numbskull and stammered when asked a direct question. Looked and sounded inexperienced.

Better be Waylon.

"When we're not filming, you have the run of the house, but you are not allowed to leave the compound. If there is an emergency and you need to leave temporarily, you must check out through security. You are not allowed to contact anyone outside the compound save for your designated phone contacts, and you will only have access to your phones at appointed times in a controlled
location. If you need to get in touch with someone not on your list, we can do that for you discreetly, or we will courier them an NDA. We want you all accounted for at all times, okay?"

There were grumbles of agreement. Alex rolled her eyes. If they'd read the contract, they'd know all this already.

"All right. The first trial begins tomorrow at nine am! That means your call time is seven-thirty and you go straight to hair and make-up. You get there on time, because cameras start rolling at nine-fifteen. We do not have cash for overtime. Any laziness on your part that costs us comes out of the prize money, got it?"

Lucy snapped her folder shut, and glared like a drill sergeant. Everyone nodded meekly. "All right. Tonight there's going to be a barbecue by the pool starting at five. Go ahead, settle in, have fun." She grinned. "The Knives and Fire part starts tomorrow."

Alex picked up her name badge and her room key and headed up stairs. She wasn't looking forward to the socializing part of this experiment. And having roommates again? Gross.

There were two biggish rooms, each with four beds--bunk beds too, to make the horrible flashbacks to summer-camp even worse--and one small double room. Dorm-style bathrooms were down the hall. One of the big rooms was for the boys, and the girls had been split up in the other two. Their names hung on the door. Alex, M'gann, Siobhan; Kara, Maggie. Alex grimaced. Fuck. Sharing a room. Sharing a room with Siobhan. Just her luck.

There was some clustering and sorting in the hall, people popping into their appointed rooms, checking out the others—to make sure no one was getting special treatment—claiming beds. Alex grabbed a top bunk, threw her gear on it, and went to scope out the bathroom.

When she emerged from the depths of the shower stalls, she frowned. There was already arguing in the hall.

"What? It's not a big deal, right? There are four beds in there. Kara's my girlfriend. We should get the double. You just grab the other bed in the girl's dorm."

Alex stepped out into the hall, seeing taco boy badgering Maggie who was starting to glare daggers. Blonde-tall Kara was looking exhausted. "Mike," she was saying. "Just go with the room assignments. It's not important."

"It is important! We're a team!"

"Jesus christ, dickweed," Alex snapped. "If you're so desperate to fuck your girlfriend have her give you a blowie in the bathroom. But don't give us any shit about it. Stay in your goddamned bunk. There are too many girls in the bigger room already."

Mike stopped, making an awkward and constipated expression. Kara looked mortified, her face reddening.

Maggie snorted. "Right," she said, and grabbed Kara, shoving her into the double. "Lexie, you're a peach. They're going to bleep you to kingdom come. They'll just press the mute button whenever you open your mouth."

Alex casually flipped her off and headed out towards the pool.

There was a cooler full of beer, another one full of soda, and a third full of meat. Waylon came out after her and immediately started checking out the grill. "Not bad, not bad," he said.
Alex wrinkled her nose at some of the bottled barbecue sauces. "Who do they think we are?"

Waylon laughed. "Chuck that in the dumpster, I've got some of daddy's special spice rub up in my bag."

Alex grinned. "I brought my sourdough starter."

Waylon gave her a high-five.

Kara was the next to emerge. She gave Alex a weird look, sort of confused and hunted, and kept her arms crossed defensively over her chest as she walked up to them. "Do you need any help?"

Alex tossed her an onion. "Chop some rings, we'll throw it on the grill."

Startled, Kara untwisted her arms and grabbed the onion out of the air.

Alex started laying out meats in order of cooking speed, unpackaging the steak and salting it. When she glanced over, Kara had already chopped all the onions: some into rings, transfixed on kebabs, ready for the grill; others diced and tossed in bowl along with tomato and jalapeños and lime juice.

Alex moved up beside her. "Whatcha got there?"

"Oh, just--" Kara pushed the bowl hesitantly down the table to her. Alex took a scoop and tried it. It slammed straight into her mouth, none of that watery sadness of most salsa fresca. It burned too, and crunched and made her wince at the sour.

"Fuck," Alex managed. Kara wrinkled her nose, and for the first time since she'd started working in kitchens, Alex felt awkward about how much she swore. "I think I would like your taco truck."

She tore open a bag of corn chips and took a second scoop. Kara looked astonished, and then started to go pink. The smile that melted across her face was super adorable. Also . . . kind of familiar? Had she gone to their taco truck?

"Mhmm, like her taco truck? That's what she said," Maggie commented, coming up right as Alex was trying to chew, and making Alex inhale and choke on an onion. Alex hacked it up and punched her arm. Kara was red and awkward again.

"Gimme some of that," Maggie said. "If it's making Lexie here wanna try tacos."

"Fuck you, I am well-versed at eating tacos."

Maggie wiggled her eyebrows. "I'm sure you are."

Alex punched her again. Maggie was appropriately approving of the salsa though, and Kara's pleased smile broke through the storm clouds once more.

Alex liked her smile. Something about it made the world seem to right itself, like a picture settling to hang straight from its hook.

Waylon was back with his spice rub, followed by Adam and Mike. Mike was in his swim-trunks and took a run and cannonballed right into the pool. Siobhan and M'gan emerged next, both also changed for swimming, or at least lounging mostly unclothed (Siobhan). The grill was hot, the first meat got tossed on it, and even though it was with a bunch of strangers, it started to feel like a party. Alex cracked open a can of seltzer, noticed Kara hadn't made for the beer, and offered her one too. Kara took it with another puzzled, contemplative look, and went back to doing something mysterious
and probably delicious with the onions that had been softened on the grill.

Waylon was just as good a grill-man as he claimed, even without his favorite crocodile meat. Adam wandered by and made snide comments on occasion. M'gann came around to ask if they wanted mixed drinks and was polite enough to notice the seltzer and offer to mix her something virgin. Maggie overheard this and shouted from a lounger by the pool, "the only thing virgin about Alex is her margherita!"

"The only thing virgin about you is your earhole--and only one of them!"

Maggie raised her hand as if to flip her off, but instead pinched her thumb, index and middle finger together. "Sit on this, but a little bit forward, and I'll get that stick out of your ass!"

Kara was looking mortified again.

"Shut the fuck up," Alex yelled. "There are ladies present!"

Maggie snorted hard. "Sorry, cabra. I don't wanna get in the way of you eating that taco."

Fucking hell. As if the only clearly taken and blatantly straight girl here was going to be the one she was planning to make a move on. Alex's eyes skittered to the pool, but Mike was underwater. Good. She could take him, but she could do without getting thrown out of the competition for fighting. "Yeah, yeah," she snarked back. "You're the one who's gonna get hungry without your daily meal."

"Aww, I'm flattered you think I'm such a player."

"Ugh," Adam commented from the sidelines. "Why are women who work in kitchens always so unappealing?"

"Man, maybe because none of them are looking to appeal to you?" Waylon said, getting a cross look from Adam.

Adam tried to saunter in towards Kara, clearly the easiest target, but M'gann neatly cut him off, and Alex moved in with another seltzer. "Hey, sorry we're all foul-mouthed assholes here. Protective coating for working in a kitchen."

Kara took the can and leaned against the table next to her. "It's fine." She laughed. "Makes it obvious I've never worked in a kitchen, doesn't it?"

"What, you think you can't talk the talk?" Alex hoisted herself up to sit on the table, her feet on the bench. She nudged Kara lightly with her shoulder. "Come on, start with a 'fuck you.' Say it like you're saying you love me, but you don't mean either one."

Kara scrunched her nose. "Fuck you," she said, a little too earnestly, laughing halfway through it.

"There we go, now we've just got to get you to the point where you can cuss someone out in both English and Spanish where every word is part of an expletive and it still makes sense as a sentence."

Kara laughed. "Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Not if I can help it," Alex shot back. "And don't you say your pretty little lips are so clean either, I made some suppositions about where they've been and where they're going earlier, and you didn't deny it."

"Fuck you," Kara responded, getting the inflection just right this time. "I'll tell you that these lips--"
She gestured with her full hand, flat, with a little arch. "--are as pure as the driven snow, and you will
never know otherwise."

Alex grinned. Kara was all right, she decided. She bumped her a little up the list, knocking out that
asshole Maggie, who was, admittedly, just the sort of person she’d hang out with by choice. She’d
rather trash talk her across the kitchen than chivvy someone that bullheaded into doing work though.
Kara seemed like a team player, and she was nice to look at. She’d be all right. Helpful, and not real
competition.

But *fuck* that salsa had been awesome.

#
Day 1 Interviews:

Alex: This is it. I've got to hit the ground running and take no prisoners. No time to make friends. I'm a chef. That means I'm a leader. I make the calls, I put out fires, I don't get emotional.

I don't get emotional.

Mike: I am ready to make some tacos!

Siobhan: Some days, I just wake up, knowing I'm better than everyone else in the room. Today was one of those days. Watch out. :winks:

Waylon: I got to get my grill on last night. I am ready and raring to show my moves.

M'gann: I just want to go in there and show them who I am today--not what I look like, or what they think I can do. Just me. In my cooking.

Maggie: I am here to win it for my little girl. I want her to be proud of me. And if I can win it cooking some of her favorite foods, even better.

Kara: Yeah, I . . . really didn't sleep much. I might puke. But at least I won't be going in there alone. Yeah, yes, Mike, but also my roommate Maggie, and M'gann and Waylon, and . . . Alex, they all seem like really great people. I'm so glad I got to meet them, even if this doesn't :looks down at her hands: . . . yeah.

#

Lilian Luthor and Diana Prince were the every week judges. Lilian was well established on the East Coast, with restaurants in every major city. She had Michelin stars at more than one, and her cookbooks were *de rigueur* for elegant hosting. Not that anyone actually cooked out of them. She made a point of having every recipe being painfully difficult and explained in the most obtuse way possible. But, of course, if you were the sort to make a big deal about owning the complete set of Luthor cookbooks, you also hired a private chef for parties, who knew the code and could make at least a semblance of her named recipes, so you could smile and fake that you'd done it yourself.

Diana was an up-and-coming food writer from Europe. With roots in Greece and the sort of training that made for epic travel books of adventure--hunting magnosa barefoot off the coast of Italy, chasing boar through the wilds of Estonia, learning the secrets of local cheeses from French farmers,
charming nomadic Arabs out of their lamb kofta recipes—she was more of a writer than a restaurateur, but she had the sort of glamorous connections that meant that if you caught her eye, she could point a thousand investors in your direction.

Also, she was gorgeous. They were both gorgeous: Lilian immensely tall and statuesque with a gimlet eye and a wry grin that promised evisceration, Diana nearly as tall, with smile that could turn from kind to playfully vicious in a moment, and a twinkle in her eye, which made the sympathetic tilt of her head and the accented, "I am uncertain why you believed it a good idea, this?" utterly brutalizing.

Kara was terrified.

The third judge, in the rotating chair, was some guy she didn't know, but who was probably famous? Honestly, she had enough to worry about without adding him into the mix.

Kara looked around the room, hoping for another panicked face with which to share a glance of support. Alex, at the station two in front of her, was stiff backed, hands fisted at her side. She looked like she was freaking out too. That was a little comforting really. Alex was clearly a badass. If she was freaking out, well obviously Kara should be freaking out.

Mike, one station over and one in front, was bopping like he was rocking out to the music in his own head. For a moment, Kara's anxiety was replaced by exasperation. Then the anxiety came back.

M'gann was just across the way and she met Kara's eyes and gave her an understanding and sympathetic smile. Kara gave it right back. M'gann was quickly becoming her favorite.

The thing Kara hated the most about the structure of this show was that they didn't tell you what you were cooking before the challenge started. Kara liked recipes. She liked to have more to rely on than her own knowledge and judgment. But just meant she was a baby and didn't belong here. She didn't have the practice to improvise on anything besides taco fixings. Admittedly, if it was a baking challenge they did give you a grace period the night before so you could spend an hour frantically looking up measurements on your phone. But for the straight up cooking, you got nothing but a fully stocked fridge.

Kara shut her eyes and prayed silently to any god of cooking who might be listening.

"Welcome everyone," Diana began. "We are all most excited to see and taste what you have to offer us."

"But we don't just want to taste your cooking," Lilian continued. "We want to taste . . . you ."

Kara gulped. She hadn't really expected cannibalism to be on the menu.

"Your souls, your heart's blood," Diana explained, unhelpfully. "You must cook it for us."

"Make what you feel represents yourself most fully as a chef. You have three hours."

"This is your chance to show us your stuff, Ladies and Gents," the random third man said, clapping his hands obnoxiously. "What is your most 'you' recipe? Impress us!"

Kara could hear her blood pounding in her ears and nothing else.

You don't belong here. You don't belong here. You don't belong here.

Well, except for that voice in her head.
Alex was striding immediately over to the tool bins, searching out items that Kara had never seen before, much less had an idea of how to use. Mike was still rocking out, already rooting through the storage bins. She knew exactly what he was looking for. Masa, limes, cumin, oregano . . .

Waylon was in the meatlocker. "Oh baby, it's like you knew I was coming!" Crocodile.

M'gann was heading determinedly towards the walk-in. Maggie had her head in the dry-goods cupboard. Siobhan was with Alex, getting equipment together. Kara dropped her face into her hand, trying to think. She could make tacos in her sleep, but the idea of competing directly with Mike made her feel sick. Tacos were his thing. He'd taught her. Of course his would be better. And if by some chance she made better ones than him . . . well, she couldn’t imagine how he’d react, but she wouldn't have a boyfriend, probably.

"What am I going to do?" she murmured.

"Hey," M'gann put a hand on her shoulder. "Take a deep breath. Can't think of anything?"

"My mind just went blank."

"What do you usually cook when you're stressed?"

"I bake, mainly bread. But that's not--"

"It's a start. Keep thinking, and go over there and grab something that looks nice."

M'gann gave her a push, and Kara found her feet, staggering off toward the walk-in. Alex was inside, sorting through mushrooms with a growly look on her face. She glanced up, and her lip quirked when she saw Kara, almost affectionately. It was familiar, that smile, that wry twist of her lip, and Kara's chest went tight. It was so strange her name was Alex. Not that it was an uncommon name. But she'd known--

Pizza.

Okay, okay. Kara told herself, it's gotta rise, that means I need time. I need time. Flour, yeast, salt, water, olive oil, right now. Under the lights in the studio it was already sweltering, and no one had even turned their oven on yet. That was good. The dough would rise quickly. Pizza was fast, compared to other breads.

She didn't measure. If she couldn't make a pizza dough by feel by now, she really didn't belong here. She rolled up her sleeves to begin to knead.

"Fuck. Kara, babe. Where have you been hiding those guns?" Maggie called out.

Kara felt herself blush as everyone looked around. A camera zeroed in on her arms. But she couldn't stop kneading, and at least Maggie swore, so they probably wouldn't keep it in.

She saw Lucy, standing up on one of the catwalks, slap her forehead, and turn around to head off toward Cat Grant's office.

With the dough rising, panic again clutched at Kara’s stomach. She knew she could make a decent pizza fast, but could she make it good? Could she make it better than any pizza they judges had before? Not likely. But it was too late to change now. One hour thirty minutes left.

She started the sauce, thick with browned onions, heavy on the red pepper flakes. She wanted the
sweetness and darkness of the onion and the burn of the pepper along with the acid brightness of the tomato. She added anchovies then pureed, the onions thickening it into a paste. She checked the dough. Nowhere near doubled yet. For a moment she hesitated, then ran for the milk, then for the chemistry set area Alex had been rummaging in. Fuck it, she was making her own slabs of fresh mozzarella. Basil, fresh tomatoes. Right.

The surface of the pizza was just bubbling when the judges called five minutes. Pull it out--everyone seemed to be using towels instead of hot pads. Burn your fingers. Plate it.

It was a mini-pizza. How did you plate a mini-pizza to look nice? Maybe she should have a salad too? It was too late now. Kara set down the unadorned plate, subsumed by the round of pizza.

It was what it was.

The judges had each of them bring their plates to the front. Their offerings were dissected by three forks. Some commentary emerged. Alex's foam and caviar creation was 'fanciful'. Waylon's crocodile barbecue was 'deliciously tender'. Maggie's variation on chicken cordon bleu was 'technically skilled' and 'creative.' Mike's tacos were 'full of flavor'. Adam's steak lorraine was 'uninspired.' M'gann's mushroom stroganoff was 'earthy' and 'compelling'. Siobhan's cupcakes were 'meltingly perfect.' And Kara's pizza was 'packed with zing.' Kara was uncertain whether that was what she wanted her pizza to be packed with.

"We want three of you to come up here. M'gann, Adam, Alex."

M'gann, Adam and Alex moved out from behind their stations and gathered in the tape-marked semi-circle around the judges.

"One of you, we thought was the best in the challenge. The others are the bottom two."

Kara froze. Wait. Did that mean she was in the middle? Relief washed over her. She was in the middle.

But. Oh no. Both Alex and M'gann were up there. That meant at least one of them had to be bottom two. But how could that be? M'gann’s had smelled incredible, and Alex’s looked insanely complicated.

"M'gann, congratulations," Diana said liltingly. "We all agreed that your mushroom stroganoff was the best thing here. So much depth of flavor, and the fresh saffron noodles were so tender and delicious."

They all shook hands.

M'gann went back to her station, beaming.

Alex had her arms crossed over her chest, her back stiff. Adam seemed to bristle, affronted.

"Adam," Diana said. "We said that your steak lorraine was not very inspired. It was technically adequate, but what would you say is 'you' about it?"

"It's classic. You can't improve on the classics. Just like you can't improve on me."

Kara repressed a snort.

"Alex. Your creation was complex and well-designed, but it didn't seem to have a core to it, a body. What was the connection your dish had to you?"
Alex didn't speak right away. In the monitors, Kara could see her brow was furrowed. She seemed confused. "I-- It shows my skills. I can foam and gel and make complex flavors inside them. Everything was cooked perfectly."

The male judge tipped his head, making a sympathetic, but clearly disappointed, face. "But it wasn't supposed to show only your skill. It was supposed to show us you."

"Honestly," Lilian cut in. "That showy sort of nouveau cuisine? That died in the eighties along with grunge music. If you want to be a chef, you have to serve food these days, not seascum and wallpaper paste."

"Alex," Diana said softly, gently. "Your dish was technically perfect in every way, but there was no heart to it. When I eat this, Alex, I feel that you do not like cooking very much. In fact, I think perhaps you hate it."

The look of appalled horror on Alex's face was like watching a trainwreck. "But I do like it." She lurched forward. A camera operator stuck up his hand, warning her to stay in the taped circle. "I love it. It's--"

"Then show us," Diana said, stepping down off the dais and putting her hand on her shoulder.

Alex looked from it to Diana's face, her lips parted, shaking. "I-- I will."

Diana's smile was warm. Lilian scoffed a little.

"You both may go."

Alex staggered back to her station. Adam strode quickly back to his.

"All right," Lucy shouted out from the catwalk. "You have a break. Be back here in ninety minutes for round two. Grab some food or coffee or ichor--whatever you monsters live on. Cameras roll again at two-thirty! And Maggie, I love you, but Cat wants you to tone down the fucking gay."

Maggie cheerfully flipped her off with both hands.

People started milling around and asking to try everyone else's cooking. Kara was getting a lot of visitors, each taking a tiny slice of the remaining pizza, and grinning at her when they tasted it. Even Lucy came over to grab one. Maggie was still there, interrogating Kara for details, because her kid would love it. "Sorry I had to do that," Lucy said to Maggie. "Honestly, we might leave it in. Kara's arms really are epic."

Kara felt herself blushing again.

"It's cool," Maggie said and squeezed Kara's tricep. "These babies just made me forget that I was supposed to be playing single mom with a heart of gold."

"I understand," said Lucy, taking hold of the other one. Kara squeaked. "And she's so cute when she blushes."

When they finally stopped molesting her, Kara made her way over to Waylon to try his crocodile. It was tender and well seasoned, juicy with a slight flavor of fish and game, but with the bite of lobster tail. He'd made little chutneys to go with it, and they were delicious also. She trailed around, trying anything that still had a bite left. When she reached Alex's bench, her dish was still there, but she was gone. Most everyone else was still chatting. Maggie had gone off to call her kid. Mike was making tacos for anyone still hungry.
Kara slipped out and headed back to the house. Alex wasn't in any of the bedrooms. She found her, eventually, out by the pool, hunched over in the hanging couch, hidden by its canopy, her head in her hands.

"Hey," Kara said softly, when there was no real response, she settled in next to her on the sofa. "Are you okay?"

Alex made a weak little grumble. When Kara gently touched her shoulder, she didn't flinch, so Kara rubbed it.

"Are you okay?"

"Would you be okay?" Alex snapped, but she didn't move enough to force Kara to move her hand.

"No."

Alex slumped more. "It's just mortifying, to have someone like Diana Prince look at you and tell you that she's sorry, but you're really no good at all."

"She didn't say that."

"They said I was dumb." Alex shook under her hand. "And I was. What was I fucking thinking? I know what I was thinking. I worked for nearly three years for a dumbfuck who thought that this kind of in your face fancy garbage was the way to go. I let him get into my brain. I forgot what my mentor taught me--that gimmicks are garnishes."

"That sounds like good advice."

Alex nodded. "He was a great mentor."

She hung there for a moment, still achingly miserable, and then let out a sigh, leaning back, her shoulder brushing against Kara’s. Without intending to, Kara's hand slid onto her far shoulder, and Kara found herself with an armful of usually-angry chef. Alex still didn't recoil, too slumped and beaten down. "Kinda wished I'd taken his offer to stay in Gotham and work at his restaurant there, but I wanted to come back to National City. Couldn't stand the cold in Gotham. Got into my bones."

Kara shifted just enough to make a stable place for Alex against her chest. She fit right into it. For all the presence Alex had, for all her bristling strength, she wasn't actually very big. She smelled nice, and Kara let their heads lean together.

Slowly, the stiffness in Alex’s back and neck relaxed. Then, as if she was realizing where she was, and that she was losing her tough-girl cred, she hunched further.

"Ugh," Alex mumbled. "You smell like that pizza you made, and now I'm starving."

"If they haven't cleaned up yet, I think I have enough stuff to make you another one."

Alex's eyes lit up, and she grinned. "You're a feeder, aren't you?"

"Hm?"

Alex extracted herself from the hanging couch and pulled Kara up after her, heading back toward the studio. "There are different kinds of people who become chefs. Some of us like the knives, some of us like the macho atmosphere. It can be the creativity or the excuse to just think about food all the time. But some of us really like feeding people. Gives us a rush. I think that one's you."
Kara bit her lip, trying to hold back a smile. It was lovely how Alex just called her a chef, as if she deserved the name. "I also just really like to eat."

Alex glanced back over her shoulder at her and grinned, squeezing her hand.

The cleaning crew hadn't made it as far as Kara's bench yet, and skipped hers when she said she'd make them another one too. And she loaded up the rest of the dough, grabbing some regular mozzarella when she was out of home-made. Alex tasted her sauce and a furrow cut between her brows. "You blended up anchovies in there."

"Yeah. Do you not like them?"

"No, no. I like it a lot." Alex ducked her head a little, her sleek hair falling over her face. "Just someone I knew a long time ago came up with that, and also had your enthusiasm with red pepper flakes. It's what I do too. It tastes like home."

Kara frowned. She looked so familiar, not exactly in the face, and definitely not with her hair or those hints of tattoos she kept seeing peeking out from her sleeves, but every once in a while there was something about her expression that made Kara sure she'd seen her before. "Did your family ever--"

"Kara! Babe!" Mike swung up, throwing an arm around her shoulder and kissed her messily on the cheek. "Look at us. Doing good. Taco truck, represent."

"Hi," Kara said, squirming out from his embrace to check on the pizza. Alex had gone stiff again.

"And better luck next time," Mike told Alex.

"Thanks," Alex said, making it sound like 'fuck you.'

"I already called my mom," Mike said. "She didn't believe me and told me that I should stop bothering her if I was just going to continue to waste my life." He grinned.

Alex snorted. "Sounds like my mom. And I'm definitely not calling her after that shitshow."

"You going to call your brothers, Kar?"

The thought of telling James and Winn that she'd cooked for people here and they'd liked it warmed her up inside. "Definitely. But I'm feeding Alex first, go away."

Mike cupped her face and leaned in, kissing her, his mouth wet. He plied his tongue, and Kara didn't want to make a scene, so she parted her lips to let him in. He broke the kiss just when Kara was starting to feel like the PDA was way, way too long, and grinned at her. "I'm so happy you did this with me. You're the best. We're the best."

He spun and pranced off, leaving her with Alex, who was looking vaguely disgusted.

"Sorry," Kara said.

"He's your boyfriend." Alex shrugged and peeked down into the oven. "Ooh, that's looking good."

Kara relaxed. When the pizzas were ready she took them out, and stood shoulder to shoulder with Alex, eating and feeling pleased as Alex ragged on the cleaning crew and vice versa in what seemed to mostly be kitchen Spanish.

Generally it was easy enough to follow, with her high-school Spanish and the ability to tell colorful
swears by inflection. There was one bit she didn't quite catch, a gesture at her followed by something like, if you want those cookies, you watch your hand, and Alex turned red and let out a flurry of swears which made the whole cleaning crew laugh their heads off.

She seemed happy when she'd finished her pizza though, which was a big improvement from earlier. Kara counted that a win.

#
Episode 1: Part 3

Alex breathed deeply, trying to remember what her therapist told her to do if she really, really wanted a drink. Admittedly, for this particular crisis, a drink was hardly going to do the trick; she mostly wanted to die. Or at least be sucked into the earth and disappear from everyone's view. But the methods for calming down and staying focused were the same.

She glanced behind herself, back to where Kara was twitching slightly, wiping at a nonexistent spot on her countertop, and felt herself relax a little. She hadn't come here to make friends. She'd come here for the money, and, admittedly, to show off. But as she'd fallen on her face at the first bar, she was kind of glad she hadn't been a total asshole and stayed in her room last night.

Alex rubbed her shoulder. It felt weirdly over-sensitized. Not intentionally, she’d cut herself off from human touch when she'd cut herself off from drugs and alcohol. Her dad had been the hugger in the family. Making friends was hard for her, and she'd never been very good at seeking out sex when she wasn't impaired. Her mentor had given her a slap on the shoulder or a squeeze on the arm every once in awhile, but he had been awkward in the same way she was. Letting Kara hold her on the hanging couch had been grounding in the way she remembered her dad's hugs being.

Although watching taco boy slobber all over her was vastly unappealing, it was actually a bit of a relief to know she was taken and straight. Alex could sink into the comfort, the feeling of having a friend, without worrying that it would skid into the sort of thing she didn't have any control over. Both sexual feelings and romantic feelings were too much of a boiling lava pit for her. She hated feeling out of control like that. She hated always thinking about what she wanted from someone, what they wanted from her, what her chances were of getting it. But this, this was no pressure. Unless, of course, Maggie saw them hugging and then it would just be mortifying.

"Welcome back!" said the third judge--who Alex was sure she was supposed to know. Brian something? "I am sure you are all ready and raring to get cooking!"

"For this challenge," Lilian said, a wicked glint in her eye. "We decided to start you on something fun."

Two of Lucy's lackies rolled a cart into the center of the room. It had something large on it, covered by a tarpaulin. Alex frowned, trying to identify what might be under there by its shape.

"You must select part of what is concealed beneath the cloth, and prepare it for us, in whatever way you choose. The focus should be on the secret ingredient. Nothing else. No side dishes, no conveyances." Diana continued. "You have two hours."

"Knives out," Lilian said, narrowing her eyes. "Go."

The lackies ripped off the tarp and what lay underneath was an entire side of beef.

Alex heard a small gasp from an unexpected direction. Siobhan? And a long, Fuckkkkkk from Mike. But she felt herself starting to grin. This was crazy. But after a miserable morning doing miserable things with tubes and vaporizers, hacking at a cut of meat sounded awesome. She glanced around, saw Maggie already plunging forward with a sort of maniacal glee, saw Waylon heft a cleaver and grin, and then spotted Kara, looking panicked. Alex caught her eye and made a face. This is insane, right? And Kara smiled, the panic receding, and made a 'what the living fuck' face in return. Alex selected her chef's knife and a serrated boner, and started up towards the cow.
Waylon had found the bone saw they'd left on the cart and hefted it, starting up the buzz. The side had already been severed into four major chunks: round, loin, rib and chuck. "I'm grabbing some shorthips," he said, and started cutting the mass of ribs in half.

"Hey!" Maggie yelled. "Aren't you going to pull off the skirts first?"

"You got dibs?"

"I've got my eye on something else."

"I'll take skirt!" Mike yelped.

"Grab it then," Waylon said, holding the ribs out to him. Mike stared blankly.

Maggie rolled her eyes and pointed. "Rip off the membranes then peel it out of there. Where's your boning knife?"

She snagged the bone saw from Waylon and started for the chuck.

Alex vaguely remembered her one butchering course from the CIA. It was not something she'd ever thought she'd have to use. Weirdly, one thing she remembered vividly was that the skirt steak was the muscles controlling the cow's diaphragm. That's why it was in the chest cavity. She tried to forget it again. Thinking about what the muscles were doing when they were on a living cow was not conducive to wanting to eat them.

M'gann was holding the chuck steady as Maggie removed upper the shoulder and neck. "Too bad two hours is too short for brisket."

Maggie severed the arm from the scapula.

"I'll take that one," M'gann said, peeling out a small steak from the meat on the scapula. Maggie took the whole rest of the scapula off to her bench, likely going to peel off the flat-iron steaks and clean them.

"I claim the tenderloin!" Adam demanded, but he wouldn't go near the beef when the saw was running and from his eyes and the look on his face Alex kind of thought he had no idea where to find it.

Alex turned up her oven. The half of backribs was right there. She took the buzz saw and took off the spine and featherbones and took the whole fourteen pound chunk of ribeyes off to her station. It was a douche move, as she needed like an inch and a half of it. But it was a challenge, right? It wasn't like anyone had even touched the loin yet, where nearly all the good stuff was. They'd just had a bunch of showoffs take the lead.

Kara was frowning, her knife flopping up and down as she stared at the mass of half-butchered flesh and silverskin. Then she moved to the chuck ribs and shoulder clod and prodded at the meat, frowning. A puzzled look came on her face as she hit the muscle in the center of the mass filling the remaining ribs. She slid her boning knife in and wriggled it out. Alex stared. It looked like she'd just gotten the chuck half of the ribeye and identified the only tender, quick cooking part of the shoulder left by feel. Alex didn't even know that was possible. She prodded her own cut with her thumb. Okay, sure, it was possible. It felt like a pretty great steak, and she'd probably prodded ten thousand steaks in the last five years, and tested for doneness by feel. She could do it if she had to. But still, Kara didn't work in a restaurant cooking steak. What did you cook in a taco truck? Ground beef and pork shoulder? She'd just done it cold. Hidden depths, this girl had, it seemed.
Siobhan and Adam were still arguing over where the tenderloin was, and who would get it. Adam said he’d take the filet mignon instead, and Alex wanted to bash her head against the counter. Both of them had clearly missed butchering class.

Alex cleaned and deboned her steaks, then salted them and let them sit to dry.

"What is she doing?" Alex heard Adam mutter, just as she was moving to grab parsley and garlic. Alex glanced back. Kara was smearing what looked like . . . gochujang? onto the board for her now thinly butterflied steak. That was . . . unusual. Alex shook her head, ignoring it and getting back to her own business.

But as she moved to grab a bunch of parsley, she paused. She wasn't at work, just making another steak for a customer who would ask for it blue and then complain that it was bloody. Kara wasn't trained, and because of it, she was doing interesting things. Alex had a good cut, but she wasn't even thinking about what to do with it. Had working for Max Lord really made her stop caring about cooking?

Alex stared at the steak for a while, then skipped the parsley and grabbed a birdseye pepper and a whole bulb of garlic instead.

#

"Moist, juicy, barely cooked through, and fiery hot," said Brian(?) "Just how I like my rib eye."

"You're competent," Lilian said.

Diana smiled. "I don't know who you are yet, but I know, at least, you punch hard, with a straight wrist."

Satisfied, Alex crossed her arms over herself and didn’t feel like she’d be in the bottom two again.

"The strong flavors of the peppers and onions and spices overwhelmed your skirt steak, Mike." Brian (?) said. "Sometimes you've got to let your main ingredient speak for itself."

"Tough," Lilian said flatly to Siobhan. "You had tenderloin and you managed to overcook it. That takes skill."

"I'd eat your short ribs every day," Brian (?) said to Waylon. "Getting that flesh to almost melt off the bones in such a short time too."

"I've never even heard of that cut, but so tasty! And finishing that extra fat under the broiler, wow," Brian (?) enthused at M'gann.

"Ah," Diana shook her head at Adam. "The poor little tender-loin, it does not have enough--what is it--oomph, on its own. So you wrapped it in bacon," She shrugged. "When I want beef I want to taste beef, not pork smoked by someone else. I like to marinate and grill chateubriand as kebabs, or add in as a filler with ground lamb. I know here you say, what a waste of expensive meat, but there is no price that can make up for no flavor."

"Not everyone has the knife skills to cut out a flat-iron. And you didn't overcook it. Adequate." Maggie gave Lilian two careless thumbs up in return for the unenthusiastic approval.

"An unusual preparation," Lilian said to Kara. "If it were sweet, I'd say it was disgusting barbecue sauce. But it isn't. Interesting."
"Delicious," Diana said with a smile.

"How did you even think of mixing butter and gochujang with that sharp uncooked garlic? Wow!" exclaimed Brian(?).

Kara ducked her head and flushed.

This time, the three called to the front were Adam, Siobhan and Waylon. It was clear who the bottom two were this time.

"One thing we were looking for in this challenge were your problem solving skills," Lilian said, her tone making it clear that she didn't think much of them. "Who took lead, who stayed back. Who argued. Waylon, you took charge, made a move, and your shortribs were delicious. You will be a team leader for the challenge tomorrow. Maggie, you also took charge, and you worked well with M'gann to take apart the chuck. You will be the second team leader."

Maggie blinked, looking wide-eyed and young. Alex grinned. She looked like she wasn't used to getting compliments. But she really did deserve this one.

"Pick your crews."

"M'gann," Waylon said.

Maggie hissed at him and blew a kiss to M'gann. "I'll miss you gorgeous."

M'gann laughed, hiding her face behind her hand.

Maggie turned to the group. "Alex."

"Kara," Waylon said.

For a moment, Alex's heart sank. She'd wanted to be on Kara's team. Then she shook herself. Seriously? No. It was just annoying because the last three left were not really prizes. Maggie seemed to think so too. "Mike," she said, clearly trying not to make a face.

"Adam," Waylon said.

"Siobhan."

Siobhan looked hugely affronted at being chosen last, and Alex did not feel very positive about the team dynamics for tomorrow.

"Ah well," Maggie said as they were all walking back to the house. "At least I've got you." She punched Alex lightly in the side.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't expect me to ride herd on taco boy or cupcake girl, thanks."

"Don't worry. I've got this."

Alex just hoped that whatever 'I've got this' meant, it didn't mean something crazy.

Kara was in the hanging couch by the pool when Alex had finished showering and made it down. She looked up, smiled brightly, and made a half gesture to a second seltzer she'd already gotten out.

Alex hesitated. Kara had been great today, but she'd let herself be vulnerable around her, and she really didn't want a repeat of that. Alex would really love to make it through the rest of this
competition without crying on television. Hanging out with someone who was as nice as Kara felt like courting public embarrassment. Still, no point in burning bridges before the Germans were coming. She headed across the deck and climbed in next to her.

"That was crazy, right?" Kara's smile was bright with just enough exhaustion behind it to make it clear that it had been a rough day for everyone.

Alex hesitated for a moment, and then went for it. She hugged Kara, putting her arms around her shoulders and pulling her in. Kara made a small noise of surprise and then put her arms around Alex's back and hugged her back. She was a little pink when Alex let her go.

"What was that for?"

"I'm pretty sure you saved my ass in there."

"What?" Kara laughed with her lack of understanding.

"I was just going through the motions. I wasn't even thinking. And then I saw you dressing your board with that fucking miso chili paste, and I was like, wow, maybe I do hate cooking. I'd never think of that. But, I don't hate cooking. I just forget to feel it anymore. You always feel it. I can see it on your face."

Kara ducked her head. "I've just been working as a waitress for the past six months since we shut down the taco truck. Cooking has been only stress relief. It's easier to remember you like something if you don't do it every day."

"Possible. But, you reminded me. So, thank you."

Kara's eyes in the fading light of evening seemed almost a midnight blue, her gaze intent and old. Her hand found Alex's and held it.

Sometimes, Alex remembered, that the way cooking made her feel, wasn't about cooking at all, it was about who she was doing it with.

Andddd, that was totally enough emotional vulnerability for the day. She squeezed Kara's hand and slipped off the couch. "I'm going to see what they expect us to eat for dinner. I hope it's not just the rest of that cow."

#
Lucy rubbed the back of her neck, feeling the twinge of exhaustion start to trigger her old injury. Cat was reviewing the footage from the day and making faces.

Lucy was so ready to leave this job behind. Lois had gotten her a set go-fer job when she was just out of the army and trying to decide what to do, and she'd managed to get herself promoted up the weird side ladder that was assistant-to-X, until she was assistant to someone like Cat Grant. Cat Grant was amazing to work for, she'd learned so much. And she was So Sick of It. She'd been doing this gig long enough that she knew pretty much everything that went into producing one of these shows. She still didn't know if TV was what she wanted to do, but she didn't want to ‘assist’ anymore. She could do it on her own. And now that the things she used to want weren't something she could bear wanting anymore, this was as good a goal as any.

Vaguely, she remembered Alura Z's response to her question about wanting to be on TV. "It's not anything that I planned on, but so little is. You have to keep finding something to do, or it's hard to keep moving forward."

It had been an eventful visit. After the harrowing drive and the moment where the hair on the back of her neck had stood up with her sudden awareness of being Lebanese, she had also been head-butted by a pygmy goat and nearly fallen off the deck into a mass of poison oak.

And yet, in spite of the chaos, and seeing first hand sheer overload of work that running that place involved, Lucy had felt calm up there in the way she never felt in National City. Partly, she was sure, it was because there had been hundreds of miles between herself and Cat Grant.

Absently, she started taking notes on her legal pad. Gardening, equipment maintenance, livestock, cooking, canning. Straight up educational? Comedic? Lucy had been a comedic element, for certain. But the full-size goats had those suspicious demonic faces, always sticking their heads over the wall, giving her the 'Satan is watching you' side eye. And Alura had hugged one of them, as if hugging goats was at all a normal thing to do.

"I hate it."

Lucy started up out of her vague plans to produce a show up on that fucking mountain, and blinked at the screen where Cat had paused it. It showed the punk angry girl hugging the disgustingly sweet one on one of the hanging sofas.

"It's her. I don't like her." Cat pointed to Kara. "She's trouble."

Lucy quirked her lips downward. "You like trouble. You don't like her because she's not trouble."

"I don't like her, because she defuses things." Cat glared. "Look at that. After round one that-- Alex one, she was ready to have a meltdown. She might have even gone after someone with a knife. Plenty of opportunity while butchering a cow." Cat made a face, and Lucy wondered vaguely how someone who actually hated food ended up running the top-rated food network reality competition show. But, as someone who had never complained about MREs, and who couldn't seem to make adequate ramen from a packet, Lucy figured she knew how. "But instead she's hugging people. Revolting. I should just put them all in cardigans and sell the footage to the BBC."

Lucy made a note on her legal pad. Try to sell to BBC America/PBS.

"I don't know," she responded to Cat, disagreeing gently. She hit play again, showing Alex
extracting herself from the couch and looking shifty as she sidled away. And then there was a shot of Mike, holding a beer, frowning, as if he was puzzled. "You were thinking he'd be the one to start looking around. But what if it's the opposite?"

"Hmm," Cat said. "You want the nice one to cheat."

Lucy shrugged. "Or at least spark a confrontation about the possibility."

"Problems I see: One, too much gay on the program for the midwest; Two, making the only nice white girl a cheater tanks our relatability stats; Three, taco boy is likely too much of a numbskull to suspect his girlfriend of cheating with another woman."

Grimacing, Lucy countered hard. "Then we make him suspect. And we make sure he comes off as hysterical and jealous. We'll see how it develops, but--" Lucy flipped through her dossier. "If we need it, we can make them both ping straight in interviews."

"You can make plaid button-down and tattoos girl ping straight?"

"Looks like she got arrested with a guy about five years ago. I'll poke to see if she's had boyfriends. You talk about one boyfriend and no one thinks you're anything but straight." That was information from personal experience. "Also, ten bucks I can get Kara to say she's 'like a sister' in an interview."

Cat snorted. "No deal. I know you. You missed your calling as a lawyer."

Lucy grinned. "Anyways. I'm thinking after the judging tomorrow, shuffling the room assignments?"

Cat nodded, tapping her lip. "Put them in the bigger room, with the bitch, um, Siobhan. She was bottom two this afternoon, which means danger zone." She grinned like her namesake. "Let's see how much she would do to be sure she stays."

#

Day 1 Phone Privileges:

Lucy: Hey, you didn't use your phone this afternoon and it's been blowing up all day.

Alex: Oh. :phone starts to ring: Hello? Oh. Hi mom. um. Sorry. I didn't have my phone with me. Well, uh, actually. So, I didn't tell you. I got fired, and then I applied to be on a TV show, and um, I'm in the middle of filming the first episode? Don't tell anyone, okay. There's a contract. I can tell you more after they courier you an NDA.

:Alex holds the phone away from her ear and makes a pained expression:

Alex: Yeah. Sorry I didn't call.

Waylon: Guess who's number one! Ah, babies. Hey hon. Yup. Number one with my shortribs in the second round. It's looking good so far. Ah, put my babies back on.

M'gann: Ah, no thanks Lucy. I don't really have anyone to call.
Mike: No really, I am going to be on TV mom! No. I didn't get arrested. No, I'm not doing porn again. Mom. I'm on a reality TV show! Cooking! Mom. No, I'm not cooking naked. Have you ever even seen the food network? No. The Naked Chef is not about a guy who cooks naked. Mom. Oh god, please don't tell me these things, Mom.


Kara: Yeah, it was… an okay day, really. People say they like my cooking. faint shouts of: Of course they do, silly! Everyone here is really nice. I already feel like I've made friends. (something difficult to hear) I know. But it's good to know I can make new friends. Say hey to everyone in Metropolis, okay? Love you both.

Adam: Mom. This isn't fair. No, I know I said I wanted to succeed and fail on my own merits, but this is stupid. You were supposed to help me. I know I missed Carter's birthday. Are you serious? Is this some kind of vengeance?

Maggie: Hi babygirl! You want to facetime? Ro and Juan treating you good? Yeah, yeah. You know I'm rocking it. Got the toque for tomorrow too, just so you know? Ah? Doubting me again? You're the worst.

You want to meet everyone here? :cocks her head at Lucy, Lucy shrugs: Sure. Why not?

#

Maggie's kid was doing the rounds as people were sorting out the boxes of takeout that had arrived for dinner. Kara was always awkward about talking to kids--she loved kids, but they were a little unpredictable, and she probably invested too much in wanting them to like her. But Jaime turned out to be ten, no-nonsense, and well prepared. She was conducting interviews in preparation for a school project that she was planning on wrecking the competition with.

What is something important about you that you don't think is going to come across on the TV?

“Um.”

There was really only one thing she could think of, faced by this tiny budding journalist.

“I used to want to be an investigative journalist, but it turned out that I was kind of shit at it.” Kara slapped a hand over her mouth. Oh no. She'd been hanging out with chefs for a day and a half and she was already swearing in front of small children. Maggie, hanging over her shoulder, snorted and waved a 'nevermind' at her.

Why?

“I get nervous talking to strangers. So, um. I think you'll be great at it.”
When the phone moved on, Kara sank back onto her couch, exhausted. M'gann came up, carrying two drinks.

"Seat taken?"

"Not at all!" Kara shuffled to the side to make room.

M'gann gave her a considering look. "I was trying to decide what sort of drink you'd like. I bet men buy you sweet things a lot, right?"

Kara wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, when I hang out in bars. But they're not my thing. Any sort of plain sugar or corn syrup base is too strong of a flavor for me and not interesting enough. Raw sugar or honey or palm sugar is better, but I'm not all that into sweet things."

M'gann nodded and handed her one of the drinks. "Figured."

Kara took a sip and blinked. It was not too sweet, lemony sour and thick with peach and fizzy with no metallic alcohol flavor. "What is this?"

"Muddled peaches with lemon and mint. Seltzer instead of vodka."

Kara took another sip and closed her eyes with pleasure. "Seltzer is much better than vodka."

M'gann grinned. "I agree, but it's harder to hit the price-point with virgin cocktails."

They leaned back into the couch, sipping their drinks and watching as Maggie chased down Alex with her phone, Alex looking absolutely appalled at the prospect of talking to a ten year old. Kara peeked at M'gann who had that calm steadiness that she maintained throughout the whole competition.

"Thank you for helping me this morning," she said. "I was freaking out."

M'gann smiled and nudged her with her elbow. "No problem. It didn't hurt me any."

Kara laughed. "It did not! You were super! And, those saffron noodles. Just the memory made her mouth water. She shook her head. "It took me ages to learn how to make noodles. They were either undermixed and lumpy or over-kneaded and tough as nails. Yours were like silk."

M'gann shrugged. "In this case, my secret is pretty simple. Make it in the food processor. The knives will mix it and stop the gluten from developing."

Kara gaped. "Really? And you're just telling me that?"

M'gann grinned. "You tell me about your pizza sauce in return." She glanced around. "Also, self-taught solidarity, right? I know you're a little freaked out because you've never worked as a chef, but most of us don't have fancy degrees like Adam and Alex. You learn cooking on the job, and if you love it, you go out and learn more whatever way works for you. And whatever, taco truck or Michelin starred restaurant, cooking professionally is cooking professionally. Don't sell yourself short."

"Thanks." Kara, feeling a little star struck, looked down at her hands.

"I'd hire you, if you didn't mind working in Cathedral Park. However this turns out, I'm sure you can get a gig."

"Thank you." Kara tipped her head. "Why would I mind working in Cathedral Park?"
M'gann looked at her. "Oh, yeah. You're new to National City, aren't you? Cathedral Park is a pretty low-income ethnic gayborhood. My bar has a latin drag show, a taqueria called *Mariposa*, and two sex shops as neighbors."

Kara felt her face going red and felt embarrassed that she was embarrassed. "I wouldn't mind if your customers wouldn't mind me working there," she made an awkward gesture to herself.

M'gann patted her arm. "They'd love you. But you better get more swearing lessons from Alex, or you're just going to be lobster colored the whole time."

Kara covered her face and did her best to recede into the couch.

#

Lucy roused everyone with a bullhorn at 7 in the morning. "All right, team leaders! Get your crews down to the studio! You've got less than eleven hours to set up a restaurant! And you don't even have a menu yet!"

"Fuckkk," said Maggie and rolled out of bed.

It was 8:30 by the time everyone was up and dressed and out of hair and make-up and at their stations in the studio. Their stations had been moved to make two islands, one for each team. Kara found hers on Waylon's side, and tied on an apron, doing her best to look professional and ready to take orders. Working with Mike in the truck had been more like a dance with a lot of impromptu bumping into each other, but she'd never really felt like she was part of a hierarchy. But now Waylon was in charge, and she was ready to go. In an insane challenge like this, it was nice to know who the leader was and feel confident in following their instructions.

M'gann was already there when she got in, prepping small bowls of shallots and garlic and sharpening her knives. Kara glanced around and started sharpening her knives also. Adam sidled in late, but their whole team was still there before Maggie's. Alex had stumbled in, looking like she hadn't slept all that well, and was leaning against a wall, catching a nap. Finally Mike and Siobhan showed up, being herded by Maggie who was already looking like a ball of fury, and Kara grimaced, grateful for her team, and a little guilty that she was so happy to not be on the same team as her boyfriend.

Mike just looked like he hadn't rushed, because he *never* did. Siobhan seemed to have spent a full hour making sure the tech got her make-up perfect. And it was *perfect*. Kara peeked and then looked away, feeling a little flushed at the deadly sharp cat-eye wings.

Only when they were all lined up did the door at the back of the dais open and let in Lilian, Diana and the other judge. The small ball of terror in Kara's stomach bloomed into a full rose of it. She gripped the handle of her chef's knife and swallowed, waiting with baited breath for their instructions.

"Your challenge today is: Steakhouse!" the third judge announced. "Each team must develop and prepare a menu for a high end steak restaurant. But all of the meat you have is from what is left of the side of beef. You will be feeding at minimum twenty-five diners each. If you run out of anything and it's still being ordered, you will lose points. If anything gets sent back, you will lose points. Your diners will rate their meals as they leave. The team with the most points wins the challenge."

"The first step is the first step in any restaurant. Buying meat. Since both teams need meat and there is only one side of beef, you will have to bargain for the best cuts."
"Then comes menu design. People come to a steakhouse looking for steak, but you don't have enough good cuts of steak to feed all of them. So you need to tempt them with your alternatives. Make their mouths water."

"Prep, cook, wait tables, everything is done by your team. You have nine hours, and some very tough beef. Go."

"Circle up!" Waylon announced. His team jumped to attention. "All right. What do we got. Let's put together the menu. I want to grill the shit out of those ribs, long slow smoke."

"I could do a pot roast," M'gann said. "Or some of those cuts would be great for Brazilian Barbecue."

"I like idea number two."
He pointed at Adam. "Uh, strip steak."
Waylon rolled his eyes. "You're on salad." He pointed at Kara.
Her mind went blank. She stared at the table, frantically searching among the contents for something she could identify and knew what to do with. "Um, suet? Suet pudding?"
Waylon laughed, and M'gann covered her face to hide a smile.

"Try again. Meat."
Kara shook herself. "I could braise the shoulder, maybe, Yucatan style? Seville orange and chilis. Shredded, like pulled pork?"

"Right." Waylon nodded, clapping his hands together. "Sounds great. Let's bargain."
But Maggie's team wasn't ready yet. "No time to wait for them to sort their shit out," Waylon said. "We've got to get this butchered."

"What?" Adam protested. "But they should help."

"It doesn't matter who does the most work," M'gann said. "It matters who wins. Something you should be thinking about, Mr. Danger Zone."

_right_. Kara nodded and picked up her freshly sharpened knife. "Tell me what to do." #
Alex wished she hadn't talked to her mom last night. It was clear that in her mind, going on TV was a last ditch effort of desperation. And maybe it was. How much cred could you really have as a chef if the whole nation saw your fuckups on television? And she had already had one major fuckup. *Alex Danvers, oh yeah, I saw her on TV. No heart in her cooking. She'll probably quit and go into accounting.* Mom would like that, wouldn't she?

If you need money, Alex--

Oh yes, Alex could go to her mom for money, but it came with strings attached. She couldn't show weakness. Bare her underbelly to the beast that was her mother, and those teeth would go in and never come out. Apologize to Dr. Alvarez or no more money, make canapes for Sheila or no more money. She was better off starving.

Her mom never acknowledged things about Alex that she didn't like. When Alex had told her when she was unhappy in grad school, she dismissed it, never asked if she was doing better, just pretended she'd never said anything was wrong at all. When Alex had come out to her, she'd taken the news with only slight disapproval, but she never mentioned it again, ignored it, as if Alex had said something about the weather. She still asked if she'd met any men recently. And when Alex had graduated from CIA, her mom never mentioned that either, never asked her to cook anything or made any comment when Alex offered her something she'd made. The cooking was another thing her mom didn't like about Alex, and because she didn't like it, it didn't exist.

*You didn’t become the daughter we wanted you to be.* She heard her mom’s voice in her head every day. *Your father would be so disappointed.*

There had also been a text message from Max, saying he'd hired her replacement, and told all his cronies what a headcase she was.

Fuck. She needed to win this thing. If she didn’t, she’d never work as a chef in NC again.

She had a lot of nightmares. The worst one, which she woke up out of at 4AM, and didn't go back to sleep until minutes before Lucy and her bullhorn roused everyone at 7, had started just fine. She had a restaurant. 92 seats, a full bar, a kitchen that gleamed with grey steel and white tile. Everyone in the restaurant looked rich and moderately pleased with the food. Good enough, right? Alex saw some friends at the bar, thumped them on the shoulder, sent their special requests right into the kitchen. She didn't cook herself anymore if she could help it. That was what you paid other people to do.

Someone bought her a drink, and the deep reddish amber of the whiskey was perfect, the scent divine. And the best thing was, there was no reason she had to stop. One drink, one bottle, it was all the same. No one was relying on her to do anything. This whole set-up would keep on rolling without her. There was nothing of her in it. There was nothing in it at all. It was empty.

She glanced up into the mirror behind the bar and saw herself.

She was Max Lord.

What a fucking nightmare.

Alex couldn't get back to sleep. She kept rolling onto one side and telling herself, you have to win this, you have to charm those investors, you have to start that restaurant, please your customers, because if you don't, you'll have to go home, beg for help from your mom, and work at the Village
Inn restaurant in Midvale, making chicken nuggets and well-done steak for the rest of your life.

But what if you do win? Another voice reminded her of the dream. If you do, it said, if you get those fat cats to give you money, start a restaurant that is the latest trends at the highest prices, you’ll just be going through the motions. You’ll burn yourself out on oyster foam and tasteless filet mignon until you start drinking again. Because nothing matters, because you don’t have anything left inside.

When she dragged her exhausted body down to the studio she didn’t feel any better. The make-up tech tched at the circles under her eyes and once again tried to cover up the tattoos that showed if she rolled her chef’s coat up to the elbows. She swatted him and kept his foundation gun away from her arms.

In the studio Waylon’s team had gathered and were ready and raring to go. M’gann and Kara were knife sharpening, their strokes and movements matching strokes like a dance. Everything Kara did was just a fraction of a second behind, and Alex realized that she was imitating M’gann, learning from her.

A bitter taste of something like jealousy coated her tongue. Kara loved it. She was young and enthusiastic and she wouldn’t burn out like Alex had. If she weren’t so nice, Alex would probably hate her.

But then Mike and Siobhan showed up, herded by a vengeful Maggie, and Alex settled on hating them instead. They deserved it way more.

Maggie scooped up the clipboard and pencil and pointed it at her team. "Okay, what the fuck are we going to make besides steaks."

"I can do something with the brisket," Alex suggested.

"Awesome. Mike?"

"Uh, carne asada?"

"No way," Alex said. "Is that the only thing you know how to cook? This is our first contact with investors. We can't just be running steak and tacos, or why don't we just fry some eggs to heap on everything and call it brunch for dinner."

"Chill," Mike said, quirking his lips downward. "I thought California girls were supposed to be laid back."

"Shut up," Maggie snapped. "Both of you. This is my team. And I don't care, if it's tacos it's tacos."

"No way," Siobhan said. "Alex is right. These are high end investors. We have to have a cohesive vision."

Maggie stared. "A what now?" She shook her head, and put up her hand. "I understand. Don't you dare explain. We are brainstorming right now. I just want suggestions of what we can make. You got any?"

Alex snorted. "You're asking the girl who made tenderloin tough for suggestions on how to cook beef?"

"Fuck you," Siobhan snapped. "I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh fuck me with a fucking Cuisinart, a vegetarian?" Alex reeled. "What are you even doing here?
What am I doing here? This is a joke."

"They're already butchering," Maggie said flatly. The whole group looked over.

"Fuck."

Maggie strode over to Waylon. Alex trailed after her.

"What are you doing?" Maggie asked.

"Getting going," said Waylon. "We have some long slow cooking ahead."

"Halvsies on the loin?"

"I cut you choose?"

"Fine."

Waylon narrowed his eyes, his mouth curving up in half a grin, and buzzed the loin right through the shortloin, separating the tender top part from the tougher bottom and the flank steak, in very different proportions.

Maggie looked at him, the muscle in her jaw flexing. "You dickbag."

Waylon grinned. "You choose. Fair's fair, right?"

"Ugh!" Maggie grabbed the bottom with the flank steak. It was still nearly as large as her torso.

"Wait!" Alex protested. "You're letting them get away with the good stuff."

"Yeah. You trust these numbskulls to treat it right?" Maggie gestured wildly with the loin and nearly lost it.

"Fine! I'm grabbing the brisket."

"Hey!" Kara slapped her hand down on top of Alex's, trapping it before she made off with the whole slab of brisket. Alex stared at her. Betrayal by the sweet one. Fuck this. "Waylon! Do we need some brisket?"

"You already made off with the best steaks!"

"But less of them!" Kara snapped back. "I can do great things with brisket."

"So can I, and someone on my team needs to make something edible."

"Make her share," Waylon said, and Kara grinned, leaning slightly on Alex's arm. Dammit, she was uncannily strong. She placed her knife right in the center of the brisket, about three inches away from Alex's hand.

"Let me cut or lose some fingers."

"You have a fucking dark side, cabrona."

"Suck it," Kara said, her face lighting up in a grin. "And fuck you." This time, her inflection was perfect. She released Alex's arm, patted her cheek, and then gave her a push, sending her stumbling back. Alex righted herself. Kara had sliced the brisket into two nearly even pieces. She spread her
hand open, gesturing for Alex to take one. Alex glared, checked the distribution of meat to fat, grabbed the one she deemed preferable, and then grabbed the rest of the chuck roll. Kara scooped up the shoulder clod and they both scurried back to their team islands.

"That little--"

"Hey," snapped Mike. "Don't talk shit about my girlfriend!"

"She took half our brisket!"

"Oh seriously?" Siobhan rolled her eyes. "All you have to do with someone like her is bat your eyelashes and say please, or did you use up your fake-nice cards with getting her to do you that favor she did you on the couch at lunch yesterday?"

"What?" Alex asked, incredulous.

"What?" Mike asked, horrified. He spun on Alex. "What did you do with my girlfriend?"

"Nothing! You fucking saw us! She made me lunch!"

"Why was she making you lunch?"

"I don't know!"

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Maggie roared. "Shut the fuck up, all of you. We don't even have a fucking menu!"

The day didn't get better from there. It was so hard to get to work when Mike was giving her glares and dirty looks from across the island, Maggie was snapping and laying down the law, but still letting the team's weaknesses direct the menu. Mike was making fucking carne asada. Alex was trying to manage to get the brisket and a roast in, and clean and prep the steaks so they could air dry for as long as possible. There was cartilage and fascia everywhere. No one knew a thing about butchering besides Maggie and Alex. Honestly it felt like no one knew a thing about cooking besides Maggie and Alex. And across the way Alex could hear Waylon's team laughing and joking together.

It wasn't fair.

Alex was sweaty and gross and her sleeves looked like she'd committed a murder. Her hair was up in a tiny ponytail on the back of her head with a bandana over it, and she pulled the bandana down to her forehead to wipe the sweat out of her eyes.

A whistle. Alex glanced around. Kara, looking cool and collected and happy, grinned at her.

"Looking hot, jetona!"

Alex flipped her off. Why was M'gann teaching her kitchen Spanish? She was like a dumb puppy, saying whatever anyone told her to. Mike stuck his head out of the walk-in, giving her a ferocious look. Alex turned the finger on him, following it up with a 'fight me' gesture. Where the fuck had he gotten the idea that she wanted to make a move on his girl? She just wanted to be left alone.

There was not a single break as they wrote out menus, laid tables, divided tasks, prepped mise. Mike always seemed to be on break though, and he'd only get to work when Maggie smacked his arm and gave him a specific task. He couldn't think himself into the system. Not that Alex was doing great at that. She kept trying to think of herself as the system, but there was way too much for one person to do. Siobhan stepped up, once they got her away from the meat, and added a bunch of very appealing salads to the menu. She also took over writing out the menu cards in a gorgeous script.
For a moment, Alex thought it was all going to work out, and then she read the menu card and shut her eyes.

*Pepper and Wine Braised Brisket*

*Sierra or Denver steak with chili and pineapple*

*Carne Asada Tacos with Fresh Guacamole*

*Ropa Vieja*

*Steak and Potatoes: Sirloin, or Strip Cut, Mashed, Fried or Roasted*

*Eye of Round Roast with Truffle Crimini Gravy*

It was all over the place. Fuck. She was what was all over the place. Maggie had taken a straight up, straight forward sort of plan. Something with a bit of color to it, where no one would be uncomfortable to order tacos if that was what they really wanted. Alex had only heard the word high-end and had not been able to break away from fucking white tablecloths and crystalware. She was screwing everything up.

*Oh shit,* the roast had been supposed to come out an hour ago.

She removed it, swallowed, and gave it a press. It had the feel of well-done. Alex put her face in her hands and tried to breathe.

She looked up, Maggie was looking at her, looking at the roast, as if she'd already sussed the problem. Their eyes met. Maggie's eyebrow arched in a 'what are you going to do about it?' gesture.

Alex looked at the clock. They had less than half an hour before the first customers started arriving. "Siobhan," Alex said, her voice coming out strangely calm. "I need to make a last minute change to the menu. I'm sorry."

Siobhan rolled her eyes. "What?"

"No more round roast. We're doing stuffed biscuits in mushroom gravy instead."

"Oh, we are, are we?"

But Alex wasn't listening. She was sprinting for the dry goods cupboard.

The brisket went first. But once it was off the menu, when Alex took a short break from cooking steak to peek out at the dining room they'd set up, half theirs half Waylon's, all of the diners seemed relaxed. Their people seemed to be having just as good a time as Waylon's, except for whichever table was being waited on. Siobhan, though fine as a waitress, was a little intimidating, while Kara, dropping things and making faces on the other end, got laughs and gratitude. (And gratuities! This was a meal with no prices and people were still leaving tips.)

Shredding the roast, dredging it in gravy, and filling biscuits with it had been her best move the whole day. She ate three of her own between grilling steaks.

*Everything is better stuffed inside bread.*

Alex rubbed the tattoo on the back of her arm. Her best friend had said that. Right again.
It was eleven thirty when the last diner left. They were exhausted, sweaty, greasy and wrecked.

"We'll tally the points and announce the results tomorrow," Lucy said, yawning herself. "Now go to bed."

They dragged themselves, inch by inch, to the house. Alex stopped on the deck, stripped off her chef's jacket and pants and in a sweat soaked A-shirt and boyshorts fell face first into the pool.

A roar of laughter came from the followers. Then others were stripping off and cannonballing in. In the half-light from the motion sensor alert on the pool deck, everyone was anonymous dark shapes bumping into each other in the dark. A mass of hair swirled like seaweed around her fingers. A hand found her lower back. Alex closed her eyes, sinking under water. A second hand found her waist, and behind her, the other person sank also, settling down deep into the pool. The grip was firm enough to hold her down as the pressure of the water forced the air to seep from her lungs, but soft enough to say it would release if she struggled.

Alex hung there, suspended in water, tethered by the grip on her waist. Her chest grew tight, the pounding of her own heart the only thing she could hear. It turned into a roar. The only sensation was the warm grip just above her hips. The water seemed to be pressing down on all of the bits of her that were splaying out, running off in confusion. It tucked them back inside, tidying her up, organizing her.

She blinked her eyes open, staring up into the dark water. Exhausted and held down like this, she felt drunk. Slowly, she reached back, finding billowing cloth, she caught it, twisting her hand beneath it to run across bare skin. The grip on her waist tightened and then released, shoving her upwards toward the surface.

Alex broke out of the silent water into splashing and noise. People were starting to get out, head up to showers and bed. Alex caught the edge of the pool and sucked air back into her lungs. They stretched painfully at the invasion.

Another figure surfaced, and glanced back toward her, the light glinting on Kara's wet skin, her hair glistening. Alex stared for just a moment too long, then grabbed the ladder and hauled herself up and out.

When she emerged from the shower, she stumbled a little on the threshold to the hall. Up against the wall, both still pool-wet and dripping into a puddle on the floor, were Mike and Kara, making out.

Alex clamped down hard on the weird feeling in her stomach and headed into her room. She was going the fuck to sleep.

#
The announcement ceremony the next day began far too early. Alex dragged herself out of bed and down to the studio, sure to only hear bad news.

And the news was bad. Although they had scored adequately, most diners rating them high 7s, Waylon's team was through the roof, with mostly nines, great scores on the food as well as extra points for atmosphere and table service.

More points were taken off for Alex's brisket and Mike's carne asada running out. Waylon had run out of a few things too, but he already had so many more points that they hardly hurt him.

"Although it is clear that one of your teams was more successful than the other, at working as a team especially, Maggie's team came through at the eleventh hour and did a respectable service. No one deserves to go home because of their performance last night."

Alex would not have been so generous.

She might even have not been so generous to herself. She glanced around, catching Maggie's eye. Maggie mimed mopping her forehead in relief. Alex tried to express an apology in her gesture. She had been so annoyed with everyone else, but she'd been more of a problem than anyone. Siobhan was also looking relieved.

She saw Mike and Kara were holding hands. He'd been even more disgusting than usual, all over Kara, even when it was inappropriate and she was looking uncomfortable. If Mike was staking a claim or some bullshit like that because he believed Siobhan's stupid suggestion-- Alex set her jaw and turned back to the judges. None of her business.

"I am afraid only seven of you will be returning to the competition next week." (Technically, it was two days from now, but it was next week in TV time.) "From your performances in the past two days, we have decided that the one who is going home is . . . Adam."

"What?"

Though logically it made sense, Alex still felt a sledgehammer of relief hit her in the chest. Not her name. It wasn't her name.

#

Adam had stormed upstairs and there was shouting going on from the producer’s room. Lucy, after announcing that they had the rest of the day off, but they were expected back, bright and early, on the day after, looked askance up at where the noise was coming from, and then sidled off to grab security just in case.

From the grapevine, Alex heard later, Adam was the producer’s estranged son, and he'd asked to be on the show as a way to get his mother to pay him back for abandoning him. But Cat Grant didn’t like to be used. So that had ended badly.

Anyways, it wasn’t any of her business and Alex left the studio as quickly as she could. Even after sleeping reasonably well the night before, she was still fucking exhausted.
“Hey,” she said, as she caught up to Maggie on her way back to the house. “I’m sorry. I fucked up so hard last night. You did have it under control, and I didn’t listen to you.”

Maggie gave her a wry grin and shook her head. “It’s cool. I needed to shut you down harder at the beginning. You’re harder to manage than a basket of mongeese.”

Alex grimaced. “I’m usually more coachable than that. I thought I knew how things should go, and it turned out I’d totally misread the situation.”

“Hey. We made it through. You can let it go now. No point in beating yourself up about it.”

Alex grimaced. “But beating myself up about things is my favorite past-time.”

Maggie laughed. “That doesn’t surprise me at all. But for my last command as team leader—” She smacked Alex hard. “—get the fuck over it.”

“Yes, chef.”

#

It was probably the adrenaline from the competition, because even though they had the rest of the day off, Kara couldn’t relax. She spent the first few hours by the pool, but Alex didn’t show up, and Mike was being weirdly clingy. She told him she was going to read, or nap out of the sun for a bit. He nuzzled into her. "Can I join you?"

Kara looked around. Maggie was not there either, probably in the room then. "No. It's not empty."

"Mine is," Mike said. Waylon was on the lounger by M’gann and they were chatting quietly.

"Mike. I just want a nap." She also really, really didn’t want to be caught on camera having sex with Mike.

He made a petulant face, and she extracted herself from his arms.

Maggie was in their room upstairs, facetimeing her daughter. "Hey," she said softly, when she saw Kara. "Did you see the room swap?"

Kara frowned and glanced at the paper she’d walked right past. Apparently she’d been switched with M’gann and was supposed to be in the big room.

"Do you know why they did it?"

Maggie shrugged. "Because they can? Makes no sense. But give me a hug before you leave, roomie."

Kara did, then curled up on the bed beside Maggie to say hi to Jaime. Jaime asked all about the competition last night, and Kara found herself talking with her hands about ribs and brisket and the new knife skills M’gann had taught her. Yesterday’s challenge had been her favorite, because she was just expected to listen to instructions and help out. She was good at helping. Waylon and M’gann had both been there for her, telling her if she had a good idea, answering questions if she didn’t know something, and congratulating her when she did something well. They’d all been able to help each other. Stronger together.

“You’re adorable,” Maggie told her.

Kara blushed. “I’m just . . . really enjoying being here, with everyone.”
And she was. She still felt like an impostor, but even though she was the least experienced chef in the room, she’d been welcomed. She’d been told she had a talent worth developing. She hadn’t expected to find a sense of home and community here. But she had. She’d value that forever.

When she slipped into the bigger room with her bag, she spotted Alex, sleeping arms spread, face down, draped over the top bunk. Kara considered her options. Bottom bunk under Alex or top bunk above Siobhan.

She picked the top bunk above Siobhan. It felt like the right move. And the light was better there for reading. She spent the afternoon up on her new bunk, reading her book, while Alex slept.

She looked over once in awhile, but watching someone while they slept was weird, and so she looked away quickly. She’d known Alex for three days, and she still didn’t quite know what to make of her.

Alex didn’t scare her anymore, not since the first evening. Kara liked her, her in-your-face swearing, and furious self-directed anger, and her honest admiration whenever Kara made something she liked. For all her hard edges, she’d been so soft in her arms on the second day.

But when she looked at her like this, passed out and young, she couldn’t help feeling unsettled and a little angry and sad. It wasn’t fair to Alex. She was jumping to reacting before she knew the facts.

Alex had been super grumpy yesterday. She’d known another Alex who was always a total grump in the mornings. Kara bit her lip, wishing Alex would wake up. She wanted to ask her--

But asking would make it real. And then she’d have to face the fact that either she was wrong, and she’d been foolish, imagining a serendipity to the universe, forgetting that it was cold and unkind. Or worse, she’d have to face the fact that someone who’d been so important to her had let her go and then forgotten about her, like she’d never mattered at all.

It was better to just have this Alex now, rather than judging her in terms of all her baggage about a different Alex. And even if they were the same (she remembered the pizza sauce. Her face in sleep was so young and so familiar), maybe this time she could make Alex like her enough to want to stay her friend. Maybe now she’d be good enough.

#

Episode 2 Pre-Interviews:

Alex: I just need to stay focused, and think. My head isn't in the game yet. I rely on my skills but I'm not thinking about the bigger challenges, or what they mean. Dips her head for a moment, looks up: No one ever told me I ought to be creative. My mom was very focused on doing things correctly, being right. I didn't turn out to be the kid she tried to mold me into, and I know I'm one of her failures. But that kind of training sticks. I know people say it's easy: just have fun with it. But it isn't easy for me. I . . . need to be in control. Because if I'm not, then it feels like maybe a drink wouldn't be so bad, maybe I just won't show up for work, maybe I'll just give in.

I can't give in.

Waylon: I had a great week last week, but I know we're diving into some new territory and I can't ride on those laurels. Every week could be my last, and I am not ready for it to be my last. In it to
M'gann: I'm not entirely sure who my real competition is yet. Waylon is good, but he was able to play to his strengths in all three competitions. Alex is cocky as all get out, but unless she pulls herself together, she's going to crash and burn. Maggie is a solid all-rounder, and she managed to keep that clusterfuck of a kitchen crew from imploding all over the studio, so I'll give her serious points for management. And who knows, Kara might turn out to be the dark horse here. No confidence, but she does what she knows how to do well, and her control of flavor-- she could ride on that alone to the win. :M'gann grins: Don't show her this. Our only chance is if she doesn't realize how good she is. I'll feel bad if it comes down to it, but I won't hold back if I need to take her down.

Maggie: Honestly, that was exhausting. I've been in chaotic kitchens before, but that was just stupid. :shakes her head, looks down at her phone: Sorry. My kid has the flu and I'm getting updates, but it makes it hard to focus.

I feel like my team pulled through for me at the end, and I'm glad they managed. But you better bet that in my kitchen, you give me that kind of nonsense twice and you are out on your ear. There is too much to focus on to deal with ego too.

I've never really a kitchen before--you know, except for days when everyone else flakes out and misses their shift. It was kind of nice to be the boss and to know that I can be the boss if I need to be. I hadn’t felt confident about applying for head chef jobs before, but after that, I know I can do it.

Siobhan: I am so glad we are done with taking apart that cow. Honestly, I felt like vomiting the whole time. And please, I know how to cook a steak. I have done it plenty and people don't complain. But I was rushed and panicking and I had to touch a cow's spine. Anyways. I survived.

I will do whatever it takes to survive.

Kara: I'm sorry that Adam's gone. I mean, I didn't really know him very well, or like him all that much, but I'm sorry that anyone's gone. I feel like there are so many people here that I want to get to know better and it makes me sad that they're going to slip away one by one every few days.

Oh, yeah. I'm excited about the second challenge. :Kara frowns, looking at her hands: I just hope people are in a better mood. It was hard to watch Maggie’s team struggle, when ours was running so smoothly. I know this is a competition, but we're really only competing with ourselves, trying to be better and do things right. We should all be able to be friends.

Maybe I’m being naive. I just feel like when you've lost people, it's even more important to make new connections and hold onto them.

Mike: I am even more determined to win this week. Adam's gone and now I want more of those culinary degree types to go, cut them down to size. Gotta show them what the rest of us can do. Taco truck, represent!
Oh, yeah, I did go to a culinary school for a few months, but it was boring, so I dropped out.

I think what people don't realize, is that the prize is mine. :glances over in Kara's direction: I will do whatever it takes to keep what's mine.

#

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap on Episode 1

Next Week on Knives and Fire: National City, it's . . . Fish Week!
"Welcome, survivors," Lilian said, fierce and amused. "Worthy or not, you're still here. But, for many of you, it won't be for all that long."

Diana swatted her shoulder, then turned her god-like smile onto the assembled chefs. "Today you have two more chances to show us what you can do. And join me in welcoming our new judge, Zen Roberts, or, as more familiarly he is known, Fish Head."

The man with a shaved head and rather sticky-out ears waved. "It's great to be here. I've got some super exciting challenges planned. Let's get started! To get a sense of you, your first challenge is entirely technical. You may remove the towels."

On each station was a covered dish. Kara reached out and pulled off the towel. In a narrow bowl, a whole fish, eyes and scales and all, small, about 2 pounds, was sitting in a bed of ice, looking at her.

"Serve me this fish. You have one hour."

The now familiar clutch of panic gripped Kara's stomach. She breathed in and out, okay. A fish. M'gann had immediately grabbed hers and was slitting it down the belly. Gut it. Right.

Kara picked out a knife, small and sharp, and stabbed the fish in its round white tummy. Its eyes regarded her with sad resignation. Saw saw saw, and its insides were revealed to the world. Trying not to grimace, Kara put her hand inside and removed all the soft fleshy things that were probably guts. M'gann was now scraping determinedly with the back of a knife, de-scaling. That was doable too. It was a small fish, and kept slipping out of her hand. But she thought she'd gotten all the scales off.

It was so small. M'gann was fileting, which looked very technical, and Kara looked at her fish. It looked back. She wanted to cry.

Kara had expected the cooking to be hard. But it was everything else that was pushing her right up to the edge. Mike was whistling as he beheaded his fish, and Kara felt sick as she looked at him. He'd been so handsy all yesterday, and she didn't know why. She missed working with him in the taco truck, and after months of waitressing while he tended bar, she thought she'd be happy to be cooking with him again, but she'd felt relieved when they were put on separate teams. Her team had seemed a lot easier to be on than his. She could tell that some of it was Mike’s fault. He wasn't behaving right. He'd always said he was too independent to work in a big kitchen, and maybe it was that, but he also wasn't great at helping. He wanted to be the one responsible for the whole thing, or at least be the boss, instructing and guiding. He didn't know how to support people. And with Maggie looking like she was going to tear her hair out, that wasn't just a quirk, it was a flaw.

When he'd kissed her goodnight last night, he'd done it right outside the bathroom door, and he'd grabbed her ass and wouldn't let go until he'd forced his tongue into her mouth. When he'd finally let her go, she'd been humiliated to realize that Alex was in the bathroom doorway, in her black A-shirt and boxers pajamas, hair wet from the shower, unable to get out.

And then Mike had smirked at Alex and walked away, as if he'd done it on purpose.

Alex had ignored her all evening, and Siobhan gave her dismissive looks, so she took her book and ended up on M'gann's bed with Maggie's feet in her lap, talking to them both until she was tired enough to go to sleep. She liked them both, even if they treated her a bit like a kid. Last night, she'd
been feeling rough enough that M'gann's soft advice and Maggie's fingers stroking her hair were exactly what she'd needed.

Kara's fish was still looking at her, and she didn't feel up to cutting off its head.

How was she going to cook it? It looked like a nice fresh-tasting white fish. Maybe steaming it, with ginger, garlic, and sambal? She could steam it whole and not have to filet it.

If you couldn't overcome your flaws, hide them.

Alex stared at her neat fillets, the tiny fucking pin bones had been a mess to get out, but they were clean now. Her bendy filetting knife waved in the air. Skin them or just brown that skin in the pan? She looked around.

Mike was charring his in the grill pan and chopping limes, for tacos, no doubt. Was he really that uncreative or was he just playing to his strengths? He looked up, met her eyes, and his narrowed slightly. She glared back at him. He gestured protection over his pan and then flipped her off. She turned around, not wanting to make a scene.

Maggie had her deep fryer going. M'gann's pan sizzled as her fillets cooked in butter. Kara--had left the head on and seemed to be re-scaling it with ginger root? She looked up right at the wrong moment and offered Alex a tiny smile. Alex glared at her too.

Being too friendly with Kara had been a mistake. Of course Mike was a jealous dickbag. He seemed the type to take his insecurities about the competition and make them into insecurities about his girlfriend. It felt like she couldn’t even look at Kara without Mike slobbering on her to stake his claim. It made her sick to think about--and not because she was into Kara. It would have made her sick with anyone. Why did seemingly sane women put up with that kind of garbage? Maybe they were messed up enough to like being treated as a prize rather than as a fucking human being. It made her angry, and she was angry enough as it was--mostly at herself, for fucking up the team competition so hard. And Kara-- Alex stopped that line of thinking. There was no fucking way she was getting involved in someone else’s relationship drama on national television. She needed to cook, not worry about her competitor’s love life. What the fuck was she going to do with this fish?

Waylon had the whole fish on the grill. Siobhan was looking vaguely disgusted, but already had hers sizzling in a pan. Alex stared down at the small limp white fillets. If she wanted to eat this, what would she do? She swallowed. She felt sick to her stomach and had for most of this entire competition. It was hard to think of what she wanted to eat when she didn't want to eat anything.

The last time she'd felt hungry was when Kara's pizza had come out of the oven. She'd fed the cleaning crew too, and they’d been really pleased. Alex bit her lip. If she was in charge of family dinner for her crew, what would she make?

Alex bolted for the vegetable cupboard--onions, potatoes, spinach, fresh rosemary. Sliced new potatoes were parboiling as she fried a mound of onions in olive oil. She dropped the potato coins in the deep fryer until they were gold, layered them with the onions and spinach, added rosemary, salt and pepper, more olive oil, and the chopped up fish. She laid another layer of potatoes across the top, overlapping them like scales.

The whole pan went into the oven.

She had at least ten minutes before it should come out, and a scant few minutes more than that on the
clock. She trekked across the studio to grab a cup of coffee. When she glanced back, Mike was returning to his station with a bunch of cilantro. He caught her eye, giving her a narrow, flat look.

Fuck him. This kind of bitterness was a great way to make her want to make a move on Kara. Her eyes slipped over to the girl who was removing the barrier of ginger root from her steamed fish and doing something technical and delicious-looking with hot oil and raw garlic. She had a focused expression on her face and pushed her glasses up her nose with a fishy finger, grimacing at the smell of it. Yeah, there was no way she could make a spite move on someone like that.

"One minute!"

Fuck. Alex scrambled back to her station, clipped her rosemary sprig into a nice garnish--Fifteen Seconds!--grabbed a towel, opened her oven, and snagged the metal of the pan.

The towel had been wet. Drenched. The water turned to steam, and scalded the shit out of her hand. "Fuck."

Her hand jerked up, knocking the tureen against the top of the oven, hot oil sloshing out of the side as the contents shifted, her beautiful potato scales cracking down the middle and submerging under the liquid. The oil hit the bottom of the oven and started to smoke. "Fuck!" She hurled the damp towel away, and then cringed, doubling over her hand. She fumbled for another towel.

All of them were wet.

She spun. Mike was standing at his station, watching her, entirely expressionless. Alex rose until she was standing straight. She ignored the announcements and directions on the table. She walked right up to Mike, getting in his face. His eyes went slightly wide with nerves, but he didn't back away. Alex smiled like a shark and then made a sharp jerk forward. He flinched. She grabbed one of his towels, and walked away.

Ignoring the steam burn on her hand--she'd had worse--she took the pan out of her oven. The presentation was a wreck.

She shut her eyes and waited to be called up.


But Diana's mouth quirked up in a smile. "Tastes like Portugal. Perhaps a touch of white wine, or something a little sharper would help make up for the fact that it's not bacalao."

"I don't think it really foregrounds the fish," said Fish Head.

Fuck you too, Alex did not say, and went back to her bench.

Mike was watching her, that same expressionless look on his face. Alex set down her pan and balled her hands into fists.

They went into raptures over Kara's.

Kara, Alex and Maggie were called up for the final. Kara had the gall to look astonished when she was called out as the winner. "Leaving the fish whole was the right move," Fish Head said.

"I just-- didn't know how to fillet it."

The judges laughed. Alex seethed.
Maggie just seemed distracted and didn't even react to the condemnation of her tempuraed fish.

Alex cradled her burned hand, and listened to them discuss every choice she'd made and how it was wrong. But at the end, Diana tipped her head to the side and smiled. "You surprised me. I like that. Your previous work, though technically perfect, was not surprising. This time, a little less technically perfect, but much more surprising. Now go have the medics look at your hand, stubborn child."

Kara gave her a shocked look, and Alex only felt more bitter. She hadn't even noticed her boyfriend sabotaging her. And Alex hadn't noticed either, because she'd been too busy gawping at Kara and worrying about her shit romantic choices. Fuck her. Fuck this whole game. The medics put burn cream on her hand and wrapped it up. She didn't feel like leaving the studio, so she grabbed her now cool pan and sat in the corner, eating everything that was left of it.

It tasted exactly how she'd meant it to. It was delicious and gentle on her stomach, and it tasted real. Diana had called it surprising. Well she was going to show them surprising this afternoon. And she was not going to let any of these assholes get in her way.

#

Kara thought she was supposed to feel good after winning the challenge. But it wasn't how she'd wanted to win. She'd made a decision because she wasn't as skilled, didn't know as much as the other contestants, and it had turned out to be the right one for the kind of fish. A . . . porgy, the man--another famous chef person she didn't know--said. And standing up there with Alex--who had burned her hand and never even said anything!--and Maggie--who was looking stressed and unfocused--just made it worse. She didn't want to win like this. Maybe she just wasn't cut out for competition.

Mike walked with her all the way back to the house, looking tense, like he expected her to accuse him of something. She wished he would just say whatever the matter was, rather than look shifty and wait for her to use her non-existent telepathy.

"You're good," he said, finally, the words stumbling out of his mouth as if pushed.

"Thank you?" Was that what was bothering him?

But he looked cross at her response. "How did you learn how to cook fish like that?"

"I . . . read a lot. But, actually, the steaming with ginger I learned from a student of Professor Olsen's who stayed with us for a few days, Shado."

Mike shook his head. "Huh. When I met you I thought I'd have to teach you everything. You didn't even know how to grill a steak."

Kara crossed her arms over her chest. And had he expected her to stay like that? Ignorant and skillless? No, she realized. She was just supposed to stay a step behind him. "Does it matter?" Kara asked. "Maybe I'm better at fish than you."

Mike looked like she'd slapped him. "You're not."

"I beat you today, didn't I?"

"You were lucky. You said so yourself."

Kara grit her teeth and shook her head. He was probably right. She wasn’t better than him, but that wasn’t the point. "Why is it important?"
Mike stuck out his jaw and gave her a narrow-eyed look. "I just don't know how committed you are to the taco truck. Say you win this thing, how do I know you won't take the money and start your own place, buy a truck and compete with me?"

"I love the taco truck!" Kara protested. It had been a home when home hadn't fit anymore. "I'd never--"

But just because you loved something, it didn't mean you never let go of it. And Mike was hard right now. If he stayed this hard to be with . . . she couldn't keep the truck without keeping Mike. But she didn't want to lose Mike either. She just wanted him to act like his old self again.

She swallowed. "We're a team, Mike. We signed up for this together, and we win or lose, together. If one of us wins, we both win."

Mike smiled and took her hand. He looked approving, as if she'd said just what he wanted her to say. It felt like she was being manipulated. A bad taste rose on the back of her tongue.

"I love you, Kara. You're the best taco mate a man could have."

Kara smiled tightly. "Yeah. You too." She glanced back toward the studio, no sign of Alex coming out. "Are you going to make tacos again this afternoon? Do you think you might want to try something else?"

"Whatever," Mike said, waving a hand dismissively. "Nothing better than tacos."

#
Kara spent the break between challenges lying on her face on her bed wondering if Alex was going to show up. She wanted to check on Alex’s hand, make sure she was all right. She didn’t hear Maggie in the hall either. She hoped nothing bad was going on. At some point, she must have fallen asleep, because she was woken up by Siobhan, punching her and telling her to get up or she’d miss the start of the second round. When she made it into the studio, she found Alex and Mike facing off in the corner by the coffee. They didn’t see her come in.

"You really think you can threaten me? You can’t hurt me. Fuck you. I hurt myself worse than that every week at work. You'd know that if you'd ever really been a chef, rather than just a flyboy taco slinger."

"You're a joke, you know that." Mike's tone was sneering. Kara had never heard him sound like that before. "With all your training, all your cocky 'molecular' shit and French words and wine, you've been in the bottom every challenge. You pant after my girlfriend and you pant after this prize, but you're never going to get either."

"Your idiot savant girlfriend doesn’t know the first thing about cooking and she's still better at it than you. But how many times do I have to fucking tell you? I don’t give a shit about your girlfriend. I'd be grateful if she just left me alone! And fuck you, if you weren't scared of me, taco boy, you wouldn't have fucked with me in the last round. So either suck it up and play fair, or fight me, but you don't have the balls to do anything but play tricks do you?"

The scene felt like a punch to the face--contact, her head snapping back, whiplash, pain. She’d never seen Alex look so dismissive and disgusted, nor Mike so red-faced and angry. Why were they fighting? It was like a joke, a cliche. She glanced around, looking for Lucy to see if maybe she’d put them up to this, if the trash talk was her idea. But Lucy wasn’t around.

Had Mike really threatened Alex? Was that what Alex really thought of her?

Mike had his fists up. Alex, gauze wrapped around her hand, balled hers. Kara stepped forward. She had to stop this before someone really got hurt.

"Excuse me," she said. "How about we save the fisticuffs for when we're not about to be on camera?"

They startled out of their circling mongoose poses. Alex went expressionless, pale and tight lipped. She turned and stormed back to her bench. Mike sneered at Kara, spun on his heel and stomped back to his.

Kara’s gorge rose, her stomach turning. Everything was going wrong.

She’d come here to save the taco truck, and maybe make some new friends in National City, but it was all spiralling out of her grasp. Mike was acting all strange here, angry and competitive. He wasn’t the sort to get into fights with people. He was turning into someone she didn’t know. How could she go back to running the taco truck with him once she’d seen this side of his character? And then she’d lose that too. And Alex-- she’d been so curious about Alex. She thought she could get through her bristly exterior and find someone she liked inside. But instead-- idiot savant, doesn’t know the first thing about cooking, I don’t give a shit about her, leave me alone. She’d been trying to impress Alex, befriend her. It was clear how well that hadn’t worked.
Of course the day she’d won a challenge under false pretenses was the day everything would start to fall apart.

Already exhausted, she took her place at her bench. Doing well in the competition was feeling more and more meaningless.

#

"One thing that's super awesome about fish is that they have fatty acids that are great for your heart. Now, if you want heart healthy fish, what you want are oily fish. So this afternoon's challenge is to give me a heart healthy meal based around oily fish. For you, today, on this cart, are trout, of salmon, sardines, eels, mackerel, herring, and tuna. Seven kinds of fish, and seven of you. Kara, because you won the last round, you get to pick first."

This was not a prize. This was torture. That seemed to be her lot today. Kara went up to the table of fish and looked at the ice-backed display. Big slabs of fish and heaps of sardines and curls of eel were laid out on what looked like two-day old snow. The salmon and tuna were identifiable, but taking either felt like cheating. She’d already won undeservedly once. Kara swallowed, reached out blindly, and scooped up a medium sized whole fish with a pretty pattern on its back.

She stood awkwardly a little back, holding its chilly scaly shape and hovering, just in case anyone wanted to swap.

"Waylon and M'gann." Waylon grabbed the eels, and M'gann took the tuna.

"Mike and Siobhan." Mike didn't even look at her as he went up and grabbed the salmon. Siobhan took the trout.

"Alex and Maggie." Maggie had a bench closer to the front, and grabbed the only large fish left. Alex stared down the ice tray of sardines and then huffed out a sigh and picked up the whole tray.

"Make me something wonderful," Fish Head said.

The noise of banging pans and oven doors filled the air, and Alex turned around with her tray of sardines. Kara lifted up her unidentified fish slightly, offering it in trade. “If you want this instead--”

Alex just glared and walked at her. "Get out of the way."

*Leave me alone.* No. She wasn’t getting away with that, not again. If that was what Alex really wanted, she’d have to say it to her face. As Alex moved to pass her, Kara stepped to the side, blocking her path. She’d had enough of this, always being sent away, not knowing why she was rejected, not knowing what she’d done wrong. Alex stopped, an inch away from running into her.

Her mouth was tight and her hands were shaking enough to make the sardines quiver.

"Get out of the way."

"Fuck you too!" Kara snapped back. She raised her fist, the fish flopping from her grip on its tail. "'I don’t know the first thing about cooking?' ‘You wish I’d leave you alone?’ I was there for you. What did I do to deserve any of that?’ She whirled, the fish bending, swooping after her, and then *schlop*, contact.

She froze. Alex was gaping, hand to her now-glistening cheek, her hair all askew.

Kara’d hit her. She’d hit her with the fish.
The afternoon had been a shitshow from the start.

Alex’s palm stung as Fish Head announced the challenge, but she couldn’t stop clenching her fist. Dammit, she’d let Mike get to her again. He thought he could threaten her? He thought she was scared after that nonsense with the towels? She didn’t have time for this sexual jealousy bullshit. She’d got in her own way enough, she didn’t need anyone else helping. If this was the cost of being nice, she was done with that.

If he wanted to throw down, she’d fight him. She could lay the fucker out, even southpaw. And she was ready to do it. So what if it got her kicked out of this bullshit competition? Maybe Lucy’d be pleased. Extra drama, right?

Fuck this whole game. She wanted to fight.

But Kara had interrupted them.

Kara. Kara was the root of all of her problems. Alex had let herself be seduced by her pretty smile and her awkward haplessness when it was becoming clearer and clearer that it was all a game. Waylon was playing 'big tough southern dude', Maggie was playing ‘mild-mannered single mom’. The only difference was that in their off moments, they let the role go. Kara had the big-hearted amateur naif role down to the bone. She didn’t let it slip. But there were signs. She was too good. No one could be that good with no training, right? No one who was actually a good person would date a bag of dicks like Mike. Alex had been a sucker, and she hated being a sucker.

And there she went again, staring at the display of fish like she couldn’t even recognize them. But of course she took the mackerel. That was a chef’s fish, not an amateur's fish.

Alex watched, the pain in her hand growing, as every good option was taken. Maybe Mike was right. Maybe she was the joke. Lucy’d picked her to be the one to have her comeuppance for arrogance and hubris. Everything was set up for her to lose.

Bitterly, she picked up the fucking sardines.

Kara was in her way, all big-eyed and anxious, offering her the mackerel as if there was any way Alex could take it and not look like a total jerk. Leave the good-hearted amateur with the junk fish? Alex would look just great to the audience. No one would blame Kara if she fucked up the sardines. She'd probably skate by in the middle no matter what. And no one would forgive Alex even a single mistake.

"Get out of the way."

But Kara still wouldn't move, still holding out the mackerel, its dead eyes staring fishily at Alex, and Alex couldn't bear this anymore. She couldn't deal with Kara and her blue eyes and her hurt expression, the one that looked so much like her ex-best friend, reminding her of what things had been like before everything was ruined.

"Get out of the way."

And then Kara’s face was red and she was yelling, and Alex froze, hearing her own words spat back at her. Visible hurt and righteous fury, and then Kara was turning, and the mackerel was in the air, and this was a joke, this had to be a joke. She could see it coming, but she couldn't move fast enough to get out of the way, and it hit, cold and firm, the oily fins splaying out across her cheek.
"Smackrel smackdown!" Maggie yelled.

"Oh my god," Kara said, "I'm so sorry."

Alex just gaped at her.

The unexpected blow had knocked something loose inside her head. *Fuck*. She was wrong, wasn't she?

Kara looked desperate, her eyes wet. "I'm really sorry. I didn't--" She frowned, and looked at her fish. "This is a mackerel?" She shook herself. "I'm sorry. I mean, I'm angry, but I didn't mean to hit you."

Alex reached up and touched her face, still utterly bewildered. "Uh, yeah. It's a mackerel." She wanted to laugh. She'd been making up all this bullshit about Kara lying and playing a role, but you couldn't fake that. She didn't even know it was a mackerel.

Kara clutched the fish to her chest and looked like she was going to cry. "I'm sorry." The way her shoulders hunched, the way she made herself as small as she could—it was so familiar, her just orphaned foster sister desperate to not be trouble, terrified that her sometimes violent panic attacks would get her sent away.

“No!” Alex reached out, then hesitated before she touched Kara and withdrew her hand. She knew better than to touch someone who was upset like that without permission. “No. *I'm* sorry. I-- I shouldn’t have said those things. I didn’t mean them.”

The memory of her words choked her. She'd never say stuff like that to Kara's face. She'd never think things like that when looking at her. But *goddammit*, none of that had been meant for Kara to overhear.

“Then why *did* you?”

The entire room was watching them. Alex felt pinned, as if each of their eyes were an arrow. She couldn't do this, she couldn't say what she needed to say with an audience. She grabbed Kara's wrist and towed her to the walk-in.

Kara gave a small yelp of surprise but didn't resist.

In the chill, surrounded by bins of vegetables, Alex took a deep breath and set down the tray of sardines. She put both hands into her hair, knowing she probably looked like an idiot, with strands sticking up in tiny mohawks between her fingers. But she *was* an idiot. "I'm an idiot. I didn't mean any of it. Mike has been driving me nuts for days now, because he thinks I want to make a move on you. I was just trying to convince him that I didn’t. I *don't* think you know nothing about cooking, I *don't* want you to leave me alone."

Kara crossed her arms, her jaw extending stubbornly. The fish ended up tucked like a stuffed animal in her elbow. It was adorable, and Alex felt even more awash in guilt.

“It’s no excuse.”

Alex hung her head. She lifted her burned hand for a moment, then dropped it again with a sigh. Telling her about how Mike had caused the burn now would just be making excuses. There were no excuses for this. “I know.”

Only the sounds of everyone else cooking filtered in through the walk-in.
Alex let out a tiny breath. “I didn’t-- I didn’t expect it to be like this. I’ve been such a fuck-up, over and over again this week. And you’re right. You’ve been there for me. And in return I treated you like dirt. I blamed you for Mike’s behavior, when it is no one’s fault but his own. And I’ve been jealous, because-- because I used to like cooking, like you do. And I just don’t remember how to enjoy it anymore.”

It sucked so hard to face it. But once the words were out, she couldn't deny them anymore. She was jealous. She’d acted like a jerk out of jealousy. There wasn't anything pretty or defensible about that.

“You can’t be jealous of me.” Kara shook her head. “You’re right. I don’t know anything about cooking. I don’t even know if I want to be in this competition anymore. Everything just feels fake and meaningless. Maybe I should just leave.”

“No!” Alex shouted the word, and then flushed with embarrassment. That would be the worst outcome. If she made Kara leave because of what she’d said, Kara, who wasn't faking it at all--

“You can’t leave. You’re so good. You’re getting better every day too, scarily so. And I don’t want to be here if you aren’t.”

Kara took a step back, confusion on her face.

"I know I've been an ass. But I think-- I think being around you makes me better. You remind me of someone I lost and thought I’d never see again.”

Kara went tense, wide eyed.

“You remind me of myself, before I fucked everything up.” Alex grimaced deeply. How pathetic could she get? “Oh please let there not be cameras in this walk-in.”

But it was worth it. If she could just convince Kara not to leave.

She looked up, silently pleading.

#

Alex looked up, and Kara's breath caught. It wasn’t fair. A grumpy sullen rude person like that shouldn’t have such stupidly soulful eyes.

What she'd said had hurt so much. And saying it was because of Mike, that wasn't a good excuse. It wasn’t.

Except . . . this wouldn’t be the first time Mike had been irrationally jealous. She’d lost friends in Metropolis because they didn’t like how suspicious he was. She’d lost friends because it was easier not to go out with them than deal with Mike’s passive aggressive accusations and insinuations when she got home. If Alex had overreacted to being harassed by him . . .

But she was so disappointed in Alex. How could you trust someone who said one thing to your face and another behind your back. And now Alex was begging her to stay, telling her she was good, she was needed. She wanted to believe it. But how could she?

"I've been so wrapped up in myself. And I didn't even realize it until you . . . hit me with the fish." Alex put a hand up to hide her face. "I'd convinced myself you were a secret plant, with like, dark cabal chef training or something. I just . . . I hate not being good enough, and it makes me think crazy things sometimes."

"A secret plant?” This was absurd. How could Alex think she wasn't good enough?
Alex crossed her arms and ducked her head. "I feel like I shouldn't tell you this, because you're my competition. But you might be a genius."

Kara snorted. "You're joking."

Alex puffed out a breath of air, shifting the strands of hair that had fallen over her face. "Unfortunately for all of us here, I'm not."

"Getting hit with my fish rattled your brain."

Alex let a laugh burst out of her. "Only in a good way."

Kara blamed mirror neurons or other instinctual reactions, but she smiled also and rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. "I hit you with a mackerel."

Another brief expression of amusement flickered across Alex’s face. She tipped her head to the side and opened her hands. “You could do it again, if you want?”

“What?”

“Well, last time was an accident. But you should do it on purpose this time. I deserve it for . . . judging you by the company you keep, rather than for what I really know about you."

Kara swallowed down the lump in her throat. Maybe, maybe she could trust this.

“Come on.” Alex stuck out her chin. “Smack me again.”

Kara hefted the fish, getting a sense of the weight of its head. If she hit Alex with the fish, she'd have to believe her apology. Punishment and expiation.

She wanted to believe it.

Carefully, but with a sharp flick, Kara cracked the mackerel across Alex’s cheek.

Alex yelped, and rubbed her face, then picked a stray scale out of her hair. "That is such a gross feeling."


Alex looked at her, and for a moment, there was something in her eyes that almost seemed like recognition. She squeezed Kara’s shoulder lightly. "You get cooking also. I'd hate to trounce you unfairly."

It was mackerel. Kara hefted the fish and smiled at it. She had a really great recipe for mackerel.

#

Alex kept touching her face. Getting hit with a fish was . . . not a feeling she was used to. Mike had made her so angry, but the fish to the face just seemed to knock it right out of her.

She’d been so unnecessarily shitty to Kara, and jealousy was more than half of it. Kara was talented, and lucky, and didn’t fuck herself over with stupid ideas about what people wanted to see. Alex was also grown up enough to admit to herself that Kara was very attractive, and she may have gotten a little worked up over the fact that she deserved so much better than Mike.

She didn't mean herself. Sure, she was better than Mike, but not by much. And no matter what
everyone was insinuating, Alex still wasn't into her like that.

She liked Kara, and she hadn't been wrong to like her. Coming last in any of the challenges hadn't felt in any way as terrible as it had when she realized Kara might quit the competition because of her. And when Kara had yelled at her, had repeated the angry callous words that Alex had so thoughtlessly said, the worst had been her final addition. *I was there for you*.

Alex had been so self-obsessed this entire competition. She'd leaned on Kara and not even realized that she owed her for it. Well, she knew it now. For as long as she managed to stay, she knew what her job was. She needed to look after Kara, like Kara had looked after her.

Coming back into the studio after having that realization felt like stepping into a different world. It no longer felt like a vaulted cathedral, with judges and producers in the robes of the Spanish Inquisition. The other competitors chatted and laughed with each other. The atmosphere in the room felt almost upbeat. Alex ignored Mike, but found herself making eye-contact across the room with everyone else. When someone passed by they exchanged a few words with Alex, offered a taste evaluation, or gave her a hand to support something wobbling. It felt suddenly collegial and friendly. Alex wondered if this had been going on all along, but she'd been too caught up in herself to notice.

She found herself glancing over to look at Kara every once in awhile, no longer caring what Mike would think. He'd done his worst already. She caught Kara's eye as Kara was fumbling with some dried tamarind pulp, and Kara gave her a small smile. Alex returned it.

"You loser," Maggie said from behind her.

Alex started. "What?"

"She hit you with a fish and you're grinning at her like a lovesick idiot."

"I am *not* ."

Maggie bumped her shoulder. "She hit you with a fish. If you're not married in five years I will eat my hat. And I'm expecting an invite."

"Shut up, you loser. She's taken."

"Doesn't count if he's a douche."

Alex wasn't going to argue with that. She shook her head. "I'd be lucky if she agreed to be my friend." She looked back over to where Kara was now gutting and scaling her mackerel as if she'd been doing it for years, rather than having learned it today. "But I'll do whatever I can to deserve it."

Maggie shook her head and put a hand on Alex's forearm. "Babe, I'd laugh, but that's just pitiful."

#

Even in the midst of competition, cooking calmed Kara down. She had to make a few substitutions with the recipe. The lack of torch ginger flowers or tamarind peel was not insurmountable, and she found Vietnamese coriander in the herb stack. Without that, she'd be in trouble. But it was going well, starting to smell right--mostly like the fermented shrimp paste. At the apartment, Mike had thrown out her can of fermented shrimp paste the last time she'd tried to use it because he couldn't bear the smell. She was still a little angry at him about that.

"Hey, babe." Mike's voice and his hand on her ass startled her out of her cooking hypnosis. For a moment, before she recognized his voice, a wash of panic ran through her, making every hair stand
She stepped ungracefully away, turning to face him. "Do you need something?"

"I realized you were right earlier," Mike said, rubbing the back of his head, like he was embarrassed. But that was his pretend-embarrassed gesture. When he was really embarrassed, he just got mad. "I've got to mix it up a little. The salmon is going to be perf for tacos, but I realized they would go great with that lemony sauce thing you do. What's in that again?"

Kara opened her mouth, ready to recite the ingredients, but something felt wrong about this. Why was he asking in the middle of a competition?

"You can't ask her that," Waylon said, grabbing Mike's collar as he passed by, and pulling him away from Kara's bench.

"Get off me! Why not? You all are helping each other out."

"Not with recipes. Get off her back. Girlfriend or not, she doesn't owe you anything here."

Waylon gave him a push back towards his station, then released him and went on his way. Mike turned back toward Kara. "Seriously, just tell me what's in it."

In the corner of her eye, she saw Alex drop her towel and ball her fists, starting towards Kara's bench.

Alex had said she might be a genius. Mike wanted her recipes. He'd been angry with her when she'd done better in the first challenge than he had. Kara straightened up, lifting her chin. Maybe Alex was going too far, saying she was a genius, but that was a good lemon dressing. At the very least, she had confidence in that.

"No," she said. "If you taught me everything I know, you should know it. And if you don't, then maybe I am better than you."

Mike's mouth dropped open. "You said we were a team. You promised me, win or lose together."

"Not during the competition! I didn't mean I'd let you cheat."

Mike's lip curled. "Fuck you."

He stormed back to his bench.

Kara stood in front of her half finished recipe, flooded with adrenaline, shaking. She'd never told him no like that before. He'd never sworn at her like that before, either. But he couldn't really think she'd cheat?

It wasn't cheating to him. He'd taught her everything she knew, right? So everything she knew belonged to him.

Kara tried to go back to cleaning the chilis, but her knife hand was shaking. She was going to cut herself. She wiped her eyes behind her glasses with her towel. A trace of capsaicin burned her eyelid. Her eyes watered more at the pain.

"Hey."

A soft voice and a hovering spoon dragged her out of the pending flood of tears. Alex, looking awkward and a bit unsure, held out the wooden spoon holding a scoop of her sauce. "Give me a
taste check? Salty enough?"

Kara swallowed down the emotion that had gathered in her throat, and tried to focus on the sauce. She took the offered taste, and considered. "It could use a little more contrast. Maybe lemon and worcestershire sauce?"

Alex grinned. "You're a genius." And Kara found her smile again.

#


Maggie left the studio halfway through the time-limit. She came back, talking to Lucy, and frowning. But she presented her herring, fried and crusted in crushed mustard seeds and cumin. It was well received.

Alex had smoked her sardines and then layered them into another au gratin pan with shredded tuscan kale and red onions with a thick fish-based brown sauce over the top. Diana had given her another slightly amused contemplative look and gone "surprising" again. Lilian made a face. "You really made me eat kale on my own show? And worse, it's palatable." Fish Head gave her a thumbs up. "Hearty and heart healthy!"

Alex carefully did not say anything about how much butter was in that sauce.

Waylon's grilled eels were pronounced amazing. M'gann had left her tuna very simple, cooked rare and sliced over a bed of salad, the whole thing tossed in a lemon and pepper dressing. It was good enough that no one complained about it being too simple.

Siobhan's trout, baked in garlic butter, then flaked and layered onto biscuits, also dripping with garlic butter, was clearly appreciated, but "not really heart healthy." Lilian and Diana exchanged a put-upon look behind Fish Head’s head at that.

Mike's salmon tacos were considered well made but not ‘interesting’. Mike's face turned red with anger.

Kara had made a soup, an asam laksa, spicy and tamarind sour and full of mackerel, and the faces the judges made were puckered and confused but interested. "It is not quite what I had in Malaysia, but it is as good a version I have had in a long while," Diana said. "I don't like it," Lilian said, "but I can separate my own palate from the skill, and it's well done." Fish Head just shook his head. "I can honestly say I have never had anything like that before. And it's super heart-healthy. Well done."

Mike, Siobhan and Waylon were the chosen three. Mike looked like he was going to kick over a table when he got his dressing down. Siobhan just rolled her eyes, they'd liked it. She knew that. ‘Not heart healthy’ was a joke. Waylon shook his head at being pronounced the winner.

"Okay!" Lucy announced when they were done. "We are driving to the fish market tomorrow, so we are out of here by six thirty. You hear me? The van leaves at Six Thirty!"

Everyone groaned.

Fish cooked fast, so there was some time for reshoots before they had to gather down by the pool for dinner. After explaining that no, she hadn’t de-scaled the sardines, thank you very much, and she wasn’t going to pretend to descale them just so they could have some filler shots, Alex walked with M'gann back to the house. She wanted to talk to Kara, to check on her and apologize again, but Kara had booked it right after the filming ended, and Maggie had also disappeared. Alex liked M'gann, but they hadn't really talked much, and she was clearly a lovely person, while Alex had been a total bitch for about half the time here, which had come to a head with a fish to the face. Kind of embarrassing, that.

"Do you know why when you're more relaxed you tend to make casserole?" M'gann asked.

Alex winced. "Please don't call it that."
"Hotdish? Baked stews? *Casse American*?" M'gann teased her.

Alex stuck her tongue out. Then regretted it. What was she, five? "I don't know. I always liked making family dinner for my crew, and for that you want something tasty that will stretch to feed a crowd without a lot of work. Grilling a single cut of meat is fine, but it's just going to feed one person. It makes them feel special, but it doesn't support the community." Alex shook her head. "It also just feels more like assembly than cooking."

M'gann nodded. "I might have to hit you up for some of your recipes, after this is over," she said. "When I put the restaurant together, I want to have the steak and fancy plates, making my patrons feel special, catering just to them. But I also want to inspire a sense of community there. And having a selection of family style *Casse American* sounds like a good way to do that."

Alex blinked. "Of course. I'd be happy to show you some of my favorites."

M'gann squeezed her arm. "I'm glad you're feeling better," she said, and slipped off into her room. Alex stood in the hall for a little longer, wondering what that feeling was in her chest. She smiled to herself. Oddly, her hands itched for the feel of dough. It was having someone she admired appreciating her cooking. It was a good feeling.

#

"Did you hear?" Siobhan said, coming into the room. "Maggie's leaving."

"What?" Alex sat up.

"Her kid's sick and she doesn't want to stay for tomorrow."

"Won't they let her come back?"

"Not if she misses the competition tomorrow."

Alex's heart sank. She'd just been starting to realize that she wanted to get to know the people here. Adam was no loss, but Maggie was cool, and every few days they were set to lose someone else. She wanted more time with everyone. (Except Mike. She hoped he choked.)

Alex stuck her head into Maggie and M'gann's room. Maggie was all packed, and sitting on her bed, curled up with Kara. Kara's eyes were red, and she was apologizing for crying. Maggie was laughing at her. Kara spotted Alex coming in and extracted herself, giving Maggie one more hug. "I'll let other people say bye."

"Bye, smackerel," Maggie said, thwapping her on her hip. "Go get'em."

Kara gave Alex a teary smile as she passed, and Alex watched her go, hating seeing her cry, but also envious that she could just cry about something like this and not be too ashamed to let herself. She turned to Maggie and glowered. "Sneaking out already? Traitor."

"Can't believe I'm going to miss seeing you with your head out of your ass. I've just gotten used to the squashed, constipated look."

Alex reached for her and bundled her up into a hug. She really was tiny. "Fuck you. I liked you. And if I don't crash and burn in ten minutes, I'll poach the fuck out of you for my restaurant."

"You'll have to fight M'gann. She's promised me the same thing."
"I can take her."

"And if you make me make one fucking foam, I am out the fucking door."

Alex snorted. "Yeah, I'm over that."

Maggie’s arms were tight around her, and Alex was incredibly aware of just how long it had been since she’d had people she’d allowed herself to touch like this. Once her dad had died and Kara had left, her mom . . .

She hadn’t known how to reach out. Her mom hadn’t either.

She pressed her face into Maggie's hair, and swallowed. "Tell your kid, when she's feeling better, that the thing that's not going to be on the show is that I don't know how to talk to my mom, and she doesn't know how to talk to me, and Jaime is so lucky to have you."

"You fucking sap. If you cry all over me too, I am telling Kara."

Alex scrunched her nose, pulling away, and shrugging a bit to try to get back into the usual feel of her body. "I'm not into Kara."

"Whatever." Maggie punched her side. "I saw your face when you first tasted her salsa. You were a goner."

Alex groaned. "It was really good salsa."

Maggie laughed at her.

"Give me your number, I'll make Vasquez check up on you."

"Don't mom me, you bitch." But Maggie gave Alex her number anyway.

#

Even though Kara knew they had to get up early the next day, she couldn't make herself go to sleep. She hated it that little Jaime was sick enough to have to go to the hospital for dehydration, and that Maggie had to leave. She hated it that everyone was going to leave her again.

She hated it that Mike leaving didn’t seem as bad as it had been before. It had been one of her biggest fears, right after moving to National City, that Mike would have taken her all the way across the country, and once he got here, been beguiled by California girls and better dreams, and left her, in a place where she had no one else.

But that wasn’t true anymore. If she was in the lurch, she felt that she had people she could call on now.

She'd bonded so quickly with everyone here. Not Adam, and Siobhan was a difficult nut to crack, but Maggie and Waylon and M'gann were the nicest most welcoming people she'd ever met. If she could keep their friendship, staying in National City didn't sound so terrifying.

And then there was Alex. Ever since she’d realized that there was a decent possibility that she was her Alex, she’d been drawn to her. When she’d been made to believe that Alex didn’t feel the same pull, it had been devastating.

Kara hadn’t realized how much Mike was affecting Alex’s behavior until today, when during dinner, Alex had made a point of staying by her side, of waiting on her, and exchanging stubborn-jawed
glances with Mike. She wasn’t going to back down to him anymore, and it hurt to know that before she’d felt like she had to.

It felt like a weird obsession, but she’d noticed her that first day, waiting in line for call backs, pretty and terrifying, and then she hadn’t turned out to be terrifying. She was just messy. Kara wanted to know why she was so awful sometimes, wanted to make her talk about herself and her past and how she thought about food. She wanted to know more. Maybe it was just because her name was Alex and she smiled like her Alex had. Maybe the sense she had of I'm meant to know this person actually meant something.

Alex rolled over in her opposite top bunk and sighed out like she was awake.

"Trouble sleeping?" Kara murmured, soft, so she wouldn't wake Siobhan.

Alex was silent for a moment. "I just keep thinking that I haven't fed my starter in days."

"Where is it?"

"I put her in the studio fridge."

"Her? "If she needs feeding, we should go feed her."

"Um, we?"

Kara slipped down the ladder and found yesterday's jeans. "Let's go. I want to see your starter. And we have to be up early tomorrow. It will be easier to sleep with peace of mind."

She heard Alex sit up, and then she was joined on the floor, Alex pulling pants on over her boxers and grabbing a black hoodie for the cold of the fridge. Kara pulled a flannel on over her chemise and forewent a bra. They crept out of the room, down the hall, down the stairs and out the door. In the light from the motion sensor on the pool deck, Kara saw Alex grin.

Kara reached out and tangled her fingers into Alex's, like they were thirteen-year-olds planning some mischief, and they ran to the studio. The door was locked, and Kara dropped down to her knees, pulling a bobby pin from her hair. "Don't worry, I've got this."

Alex laughed. "You're crazy. You can't--"

But Kara could manage a shitty door lock. Getting through the padlocked gate around the whole set would be tricky, but this was nothing. She popped it, and opened the door, sweeping her arm out to invite Alex in. "Ladies first."

"What, did you lose your lady cred after picking a lock like that?" Alex grinned. "Badass."

When Alex removed the tupperware from the back of the fridge and opened it, the mass had congealed on the bottom with a yellowish liquid starting to gather on top.

"Hey baby," Alex cooed. "You've been sleeping. You look so hungry. How are you feeling?"

Kara stared. The gentle affection in her voice and the soft look on her face was so at odds to the scowling, tight-jawed look she'd had for the past few days, it was like she was a different person.

"We're going to get you a little snack, aren't we?."

Kara peered over her shoulder to peek again at the starter. "We could bake something?"
Alex glanced up. "Don't you need to get back to bed?"

"Well," Kara shrugged. "The levain needs to grow for at least eight hours, right? We could just put it together and leave it in the fridge until we get back from the fish market tomorrow."

Alex's fingers gently stroked the outside of the tupperware. "I do want you to see her do her thing." Then she grinned. "Go get a mixing bowl. Let's make some sourdough."

Kara cheered softly, and squeezed Alex's arm, then hurried off to grab a bowl and a dough scraper from the side.

They had just fed the starter with rye and whole wheat and inoculated the levain, stirring the flour mixture into the batter-like liquid and watching it as it started to bubble, when the inner door opened and Lucy stumbled in, her hair sleep messy, and a giant ARMY sweatshirt reaching down to her knees.

"What the fuck?" She glared at them. "What are you two doing?"

Kara froze, glanced at Alex, who also looked like a deer in the headlights, and replied, "Um, baking?"

Lucy stared at them, then at the mixing bowl, and the starter that was bubbling happily on the bench and smelling delicious--still sweet, but with just a tang of sour beginning to emerge. She rubbed her eyes. "Seriously? You fucking nerds." She shook her head. "Lord save me from enthusiastic chefs. Clean the fuck up after yourself when you're done. And don't you dare miss the van. Six-thirty."

"Yes sir!" Kara said, saluting. Alex laughed at her. Lucy glared and stomped off, back up the stairs.

Alex looked at Kara when the door shut. "Do you think she has a room up there, or does she just sleep in the office?"

Kara shook her head sadly. "These TV types are a mystery."

When the bowl was covered up and left to ferment, and Alex had put the lid on her starter with a gentle, "sleep well, darling," they stowed everything back in the walk-in. Kara slid her hand through the crook of Alex’s arm.

"Thank you for letting me meet her."

"It's no problem." Alex smiled. "If you ask nicely, I might even give you a cupful."

Kara scooped her up in a huge hug, making Alex yelp and stand on her toes. "Thank you so much."

"It's just a cup of starter," Alex mumbled into her shoulder. "And I haven't even said yes yet."

Kara let her go.

Alex ducked her head. "Thank you for giving me another chance. I didn’t even think about how you were always there for me, even when I was being a total self-absorbed mess."

“I’m sorry Mike was an ass to you. I don’t . . . I don’t know what’s gotten into him."

Alex puffed out a breath. “Not everyone is great with competition. I’m sure not.”

Kara sighed. "I'm not even sure I should be here, really. I know we were broke and an infusion of cash could save the taco truck, but . . . so could Mike asking his mom for money. He hates it, and she
always uses the opportunity to tell him he's wasting his life. But we don't need this like some people do. I wish they'd let Maggie com back."

“Yeah.” Alex grimaced. "I don't sympathize with taco boy, but I really don't want to ask my mom for money either. I wouldn't, because she couldn't afford the amount I would need, but it's listening to the litany of how I screwed myself over that I really would rather avoid."

Locking the studio door behind them, they walked back up the slope toward the house.

"I don't have a mother to ask," Kara said, not looking at Alex while she said it. "No dad either. But I'm sure they'd think the same about me. I just keep messing everything up." She frowned, looking up to find Alex staring at her with an unexpected intensity. "But I don't understand why your mom would think you screwed yourself over. You're a trained chef, working in high end restaurants and stuff."

Alex shook off the strange expression and grinned. "Well, I'm not a molecular biologist for one. And I got myself fired for breaking my boss's wrist just before I came here, so I am pretty deep in the screw up category."

"You broke his wrist?"

"I didn't want him grabbing my ass."

Kara was conflicted about this. "I was right to stop you two from fighting, wasn’t I? I feel like Mike is lucky that he still has all his fingers."

Alex rolled her eyes. "Tell me what's the most useless part of his body. If he messes with me again, I'll take that first."

Kara laughed.

Alex hesitated, closing her burned hand, something unsure in the smooth-boned lines of her face. She let go of Kara, opening the door and leading the way upstairs towards the hall that led onto the bedrooms. Right outside, she turned toward the door, and then turned back. "You could do better than him, you know."

"Maybe," Kara said, looking down at her hands. "But I've already lost so much that I don't want to just give up on things. Hard doesn't mean it's not worth it."

"Don't let him bring you down, though. You're a great chef. And if he can't deal with the fact that you're better than him, you cut that dead weight so you can fly."

Make-up free, her soft black hoodie all speckled with flour, Alex didn't look scary at all anymore. She looked concerned and gentle.

It disarmed Kara, and not in a way that felt good. It took down walls that functioned as levees. "I thought chefs weren't allowed to be sweet."

Alex narrowed her eyes and prodded Kara in the center of the chest. "Don't you dare tell anyone I said that."

Kara grinned, the teasing allowing her to rebuild those walls, to breathe. "Maggie was right about you, hard shelled but all squishy inside. You're a crab."

"You better bet I am," Alex said and pinched her side. Kara yelped, and then they both ducked,
shushing each other and looking around to make sure they hadn't woken anyone up. By mutual decision, they slid back into the room, and Siobhan, with her facemask and earplugs in, didn't even stir as they went back to bed.

#

Lucy Lane pulled up her feet in Cat's chair, pulling down her sweatshirt over them and reviewed the footage on the night cameras from the studio, opening up the remote feeds from the house hallway as well.

She watched as Kara and Alex finished up putting together whatever they were making, talking and laughing in low voices--Kara easily reaching out to brush some flour off of Alex's sleeve, Alex taking it with a kind smile and a joke in retort.

Cat might not like it, but there was a story here. Lucy wanted to see where it would go.

Back in the hallway outside their room there was another gentle exchange. *I've already lost so much.*

Lucy pulled out the dossier she was keeping on Kara Olsen, previously Ziehl. Even that name had been hard to find. Kara talked about her life like there was nothing to hide, but records of her parents and her life before the accident that had taken them were nearly impossible to access. It was like she'd gone into WITSEC.

Lucy had called up her military contacts. They'd led her to the Diplomatic Corps. And then in the mail she'd gotten a file that had been declassified only a few years before. It had contained some very interesting information.

Next week should be quite the episode indeed.

#
Episode 2: Part 4

Day 4 Interviews

Alex: What the fuck? You're asking me to do one of these now? It's six in the fucking morning. Fine, seven. Go the fuck away. I'm trying to nap until we get there.

Day 4 interviews postponed until after lunch.

*

The National City fishmarket was a huge complex of warehouses and stands down on the docks. Artisan fishermen with their catches came in on their small boats to sell their wares, as did giant mechanized trawlers, seiners, and line vessels. Chefs from the city’s restaurants came down early to pick out their fish specials and so did grocery stores, local fishmarkets, and chain restaurants. It was mostly chaos, but the group of six, plus Lucy, who kept having to go and protest to various machine operators and complain about the noise, was led around, having the points of interest explained to them.

Alex, still yawny and a little morning-grumpy, trailed along at the back of the group, listening, but not energetic enough to ask questions. Still, she kept note of price ranges and interesting tidbits of information that could be put on a menu to sell more specials. It had been a weird night. First she hadn't been able to sleep at all, and then she'd fed her starter with Kara at midnight.

It wasn’t just a weird feeling anymore. This was Kara, her Kara. It had to be. The way she’d mentioned not having parents, the quiet weight of loss that was holding her down—and even moreso, the look on her face when she smelled the starter beginning to activate. Alex had made her first sourdough starter in those few months that Kara stayed. She’d fed it as often as she could until she’d gone off to college and her mom had thrown it out. It was Kara. She just had to tell her.

But the thought made her stomach turn over in swoops. What if Kara didn’t remember her? Or if she’d repressed those memories along with all the trauma that came right after losing her family? But the real reason she couldn’t bring herself to say the words was because it felt like a lie. Hi, so, it turns out that you stayed with me for a few months when we were young teenagers. It’s me, Alex. Don’t you remember? But Alex wasn't that girl anymore. Hey, so, I'm a recovering-alcoholic unemployed chef with more burns and scars on my hands than most people have on their entire body, and an emotionally stunted failure of a human being. But before all that happened, I thought of you as my best friend.

It was no surprise really, that she hadn't recognized Alex.

Last night had felt like another world, a moment where Alex didn't have to play 'Alex', she could just be. And be honest. She'd been honest enough with Kara to tell her to dump the asshole, but she hadn’t told her that Mike was responsible for her burning her hand. It felt like an ultimatum, that by telling her, she’d be saying ‘dump him or lose me.’ Still, she wasn’t sure if she could bear watching Kara give him another chance.

Why was she still with him? Kara was the sort that people should flock to. If she was settling for this jerk, clinging to him, what had gone wrong in her life?
Ahead of Alex, Mike and Kara were walking side by side, Kara attentive and engaged, and Mike obviously bored. Their guide gestured to the side, pointing out a rather horrible looking giant spiny brown fish with a gaping mouth. "The monkfish is often on lists of the ugliest fish in the world, but the tailmeat is considered delicious."

The fish was a slimy greenish brown like the mud at the bottom of a lake with a flat head and body as if it crawled along the seafloor rather than swum. Its mouth, almost the shape of a puppet’s mouth, gaping open, revealed tiny sharp teeth like spines. The two eyes, set too close together on the top of its head, goggled oddly, and its two fins, set at the back of its nearly circular body, almost looked like ears, framing the long—supposedly delicious—tail. The body was bigger than a human head, and it was completely revolting.

Mike looked at the fish and snorted. As the guide moved on, he lagged behind the group. Alex didn’t realize what he was doing, until he’d reappeared, hefting the huge weight of the fish—it must have been at least fifty pounds—on his shoulder, holding it under its massive bony jaw, and manipulating it so the mouth opened and closed, making it look like it was alive.

He wobbled it up behind Kara. "Hey, give me a kiss?"

Kara turned, a furrowed line in her brow, and Mike pushed the monkfish right in her face. Alex, suddenly fully awake, jerked forward, going to grab him. But Kara's response was first in line. She froze, spotted the monstrous toothy mouth of the monkfish looking like it was about to take a bite, and just as it brushed her face, slugged Mike hard in the stomach.

His feet slipped on the wet floor and he went flying back, crashing into the ice display, the monkfish landing on his stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

"Oh shit!" Kara exclaimed. "I'm sorry! I just reacted! You know I've done Taekwondo since I was fifteen."

Mike shoved the monkfish off, ignoring the furious shouts of the stands’ proprietors, and picked himself up out of the ice, his face flaming red. His hands balled into fists. He looked like he was going to say something unforgivable. Before he could, Waylon stepped in front of Kara and put a hand on his shoulder, brushing ice off his back. "You're a mess, man." He glanced at Lucy. "Which way's the mens' room? I'll take my boy to get cleaned up."

Lucy, her posture alert and ready in a way it usually wasn’t, pointed down the long hallway. "That way," she said. "Meet us as Rico's in the front building, we're heading there right now for lunch."

Mike's mouth pinched tight, but he didn't resist as Waylon guided him with a firm grip on his back, away toward the bathrooms.

Kara was shaking slightly, staring at her hands, guilt thick on her face. Alex knew that look, knew the prelude to a panic attack when she saw it, and immediately stepped in front of her, leaning close but not touching her. "Kara, Kara," she said softly. "It's Alex, okay. Is it okay if I touch you?"

Kara's throat flexed, she looked up, her lip quivering, only half seeing Alex. Alex slowly curled her hand around Kara's balled fist, barely letting their fingers brush. Kara's other hand thrust out, grabbing her by the shirt and pulling her in. Alex looped her arms around Kara's shoulders and held her. She heard Kara suck in a rough grating breath, then she slumped into Alex's embrace, clinging to her shirt, burying her face in her neck.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she was mumbled. "Don't be angry. Please don't be angry with me."
Alex rubbed her hand up and down Kara's back, wondering when this had become part of it. Before she'd had flashbacks to the explosion, to losing her family, but the fear of someone's anger . . .

Alex wished, she wished so hard, that they'd kept her anyway, even after her dad died. Her mom was hard to deal with, and she'd fucked Alex up a bit, but she hadn't hurt her, not in a way that would lead to something like this.

The stiffness slowly returned to Kara's body and her hands released Alex's shirt. She drew back, her face red. "I'm sorry."

"If you never say those words again, I'd be happy," Alex said, and squeezed both her arms. "Feeling better?"

Kara nodded. "Sorry I got--"

Alex held up a finger of shushing. "I hear it's time for lunch?"

She kept her hand lightly on Kara's waist as Lucy started getting everyone's attention and directing the group toward the front building.

Alex and M'gann kept Kara squashed between them, well away from the other end of the table with Waylon and Mike. Even Siobhan built up part of the barrier to keep Mike and Kara apart.

Kara was quiet during lunch, a small furrow in her forehead. She stayed close to Alex, their shoulders pressed together, and would give answers to questions the producers asked but not long ones. M'gann kept meeting Alex's eyes across Kara, and Alex worried. She worried like she hadn't in a long time about anyone else.

After lunch, when they had an hour of free time before they were supposed to meet down at the end of the front building, Kara pulled away from Alex and went over to Mike. Alex lurked in the background, not wanting to be too far away if Kara needed someone.

"I apologize for hitting you. I really hope it didn't hurt too much."

"No way, babe," Mike said, a bright grin crossing his face. "It's fine. I know I startled you. That monkfish sure was ugly though."

Alex clenched her hands into fists.

"I'm super glad there's no hard feelings though."

Kara looked like she'd been juked around by an opposing player. She'd thought this conversation was going one way, and now it was going somewhere else. "I-- of course not. You were just joking around. And if you're not mad . . ."

Mike grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "I'm so not."

"Oh, well. That's good then. We're good?"

"Of course we're good." He reached up, touching her face. "You're a gem Kara, I would never let you go."

Kara smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes, and to Alex it looked like the saddest smile she'd ever seen.

#
Siobhan: Honestly, I am so tired of all these people. Can we just get to the cooking competition already?

Waylon: Just doing my best to stay focused. It's a great fishmarket. I'd sure love to get my fish supplies from here.

M'gann: You know, I almost forgot that we were cooking this afternoon. Team competitions, right? That will be interesting.

Mike: I am ready and raring to go. My ice bath earlier was just what I needed. I'm going to show the world just what I can do.

Kara: Oh. Um. Right. :rubs forehead: I'm just feeling tired today. I hope I don't bring down whoever is on my team.

Alex: Shut up. Ugh. No, fine. I am having a bad day. First Maggie had to leave and that's not fair. And then-- :shakes head. Then she slowly raises it: It's funny really, because I actually knew Kara from before, a long time ago. And she was . . . important to me. I just-- I know she's having a hard time today, and some people aren't making it any easier. I didn't make it easier yesterday. But-- I'm trying now. I want to try now.

#

I don't want you anymore . The words hung heavy in Kara's mind. They'd been creeping up for days. For longer than that, if she admitted it to herself. That day she'd finally gone out and gotten the food truck license, that had been a moment. She'd thought, ‘how much would I have to save up to buy him out?’ known it was impossible, and paid for the license, knowing he'd never pay her back. She loved the taco truck, loved feeding people and cooking for a living.

She didn't love Mike. Not anymore.

His charming smile didn't make the affection rise up in her chest anymore. His joking antics didn’t make her laugh, they made her tense and panicked and paranoid. The thought of going back to the apartment, of living with him again, seeing him every day, sleeping with him every night, it exhausted her.

She couldn't say the words. She wanted to say them now. She was ready to say them. But they were choked off in her chest. She didn't want to hurt him.

No, a more certain voice in her head contradicted, You're scared of how he will react .

#
The six contestants gathered in the large food court area at the bottom of the main building. There were three empty counters, staggered in different places around the food court, each with a sign saying Oyster Bar hanging above them.

Diana, Lilian and Fish Head had arrived, along with two more camera crews. There was also a small security squad who set up a cordon so that no one would mob Diana and Lilian. Mostly Diana, Kara thought. She smiled and waved to people, while Lilian just glared like she could kill you with a thought.

"Welcome to the National City Fish Market," Diana began. "Today we have a very fun challenge for you. Although our dear friend Maggie having to drop out was very sad, we are excited because now we can form three equal teams."

"Today's challenge," Lilian continued, "will involve your first contact with actual customers. You will be put in pairs, and each pair will be responsible for running an oyster bar. You will have an hour to set up, write up your menu and get your bearings, and then you can open shutters."

"No food poisoning please!" Fish Head announced. "If you're in doubt, throw it out. Remember, people come to an oyster bar for the shellfish, not for your fancying it up. Let the shellfish speak." He waved his hands like a theatre director. "The winner is decided by takings. Don't forget to think about managing the front of the house too. You have full supplies and a sample menu with prices included to work off of. The winners will be decided based on the take."

"All right," Lilian said, rolling her eyes at Fish Head's dramatics. "You will pick your partners in order of yesterday's success. M'gann?"

Kara froze. She would be second. If M'gann chose Waylon or Alex, as she probably would, then Kara would have Mike as an option. And if she didn't chose him . . .

You're afraid of how he'll react.

M'gann looked around the other five contestants. She met Alex's eyes for a brief moment. "Mike," she said.

For a moment, the only thing Kara could process was that Alex looked relieved. Then she put it together. She wouldn't have to pick Mike. They'd made it so she wouldn't have to pick Mike.

Mike grinned widely and trotted over to M'gann. "I knew you thought I was awesome."

"I hope you know how to shuck an oyster."

"Kara?" Diana asked.

"What? Oh, um. Alex."

Alex smiled, bright and sunny. Relief filled Kara's chest. She'd get to spend the rest of the afternoon and evening with Alex, with Mike nowhere in sight.

"That leaves Waylon and Siobhan. The camera crews will direct you to your oyster shops. Enjoy!"

Alex reached out and put her hand on Kara's arm, stepping near to her. "Ready?"

The warmth of her hand stabilized Kara's upside-down feelings, just as her hands, her embrace, had brought her down from the wild rise of panic that had boiled up after she punched Mike. Alex had always been able to bring her back to earth. Did she remember doing it, or was it just some natural
skill that belonged to her, someone who might come off as grumbly and abrasive, but knew how to
care?

"I think I am." Kara let herself smile, and Alex's eyes brightened.

Their oyster bar was a clean white counter that led to a narrow kitchen, backed by a sizable fridge
and freezer. It had been loaded with fresh shellfish of all sorts, though mostly oysters in their rocky
rippled shells.

Kara paused. "Um, it might be time to tell you that I don't know how to shuck an oyster."

"Oh," Alex pursed her lips, "I'll show you. But I don't want you stabbing yourself on accident, so I
should probably shuck most of them, and you can handle the front of house?"

Kara nodded. She had practice shifting back and forth between cooking and taking money at the taco
truck, it wouldn't be very different here.

"So," Alex rummaged around in a drawer and found a funny looking stubby knife with a hilt and a
dishtowel. Then she took out one of the oysters. "This is an oyster knife. A pretty straightforward
way of shucking the oyster is to put it on a towel on a hard surface and then hold down the wide end
with the folded over towel. The weird thing about oysters, compared to other shellfish, is that you've
got to open them from the back end." With the knife, Alex pointed to the place where the two shells
curved together to form a hinge. "This is pretty much the only place on the oyster you can get your
knife into. So you take the point of this knife and you wedge it into the crack. You want to go in
pretty far, but don't just stab. That's a great way to get yourself in the hand, or if you actually get it in,
to stab the oyster. Once it's in, you turn the knife, like so," Alex demonstrated the quarter-turn
rotation, and Kara heard the pop as the joint cracked open. "And then you lift, and as you do, scrape
your knife against the top shell of the oyster. As you get the shell off, you're also detaching the oyster
from the shell. It's attached on both sides, so--" Alex peeled off the top shell, slicing at a few strands
of oyster that were still attached. "--now you need to scrape it off the bottom too." With a few twists
of her knife she'd done so. "Then tidy it up, don't spill the brine, and voilà."
Alex held out the
shucked oyster. Kara took the chilled shell in her hand. Then there was a quick rummage for a
lemon, Alex cut it into wedges, and squeezed one into the oyster Kara was holding.

"For you."

Kara grinned and tipped it back, the oyster massive and gelatinous, slithering wetly over her tongue.
It tasted like sea water and lemon and something indescribable. She chewed, just enough to fill her
mouth with that bitter, almost liqueur-like flavor, and then swallowed it down. "Oh, that's good."

Alex was watching her, smiling. "Yeah, I could never run an oyster bar. I would eat all the profits."

Kara bit her lip. "Can I try opening one?"

"Sure." Alex tossed her the oyster knife.

Kara picked out an oyster from the stack. It seemed reasonably large and weighed about the same as
the others. She set it on the towel, fixed it in place, and went exploring in the crack with the knife.
She thought she found a solid notch, and twisted but the knife popped out again. Alex didn't
comment, so Kara wedged it in again, firmer this time, but careful so it wouldn't skid up and take out
her hand. She twisted, and heard the crack. "Yesss." She wiggled the knife in, levering off the top
shell, doing her best to scrape along the underside. And got it off. A little of the shell broke and fell
into the oyster. "Oh no."
"No harm done, just pick it out and wipe it off." Kara did so, wiped a few other places, and then remembered to detach it from the bottom. She'd seen this part so many times, and felt like a pro, scraping it off. She handed it to Alex, proffered and then provided a squeeze of lemon, and then watched as Alex tipped her head back and let the oyster slither off the shell and into her mouth.

"Mm."

Kara's face felt strangely hot at the sound Alex made, and the flex of her throat as she swallowed.

"Perfect."

"Ahem." Kara glanced around, Lucy was leaning on their counter, watching through the open window, with an eyebrow raised. "Just checking in on everyone. You two have your menu ready, or have you just been feeding each other aphrodisiacs?"

Kara's already hot face felt even hotter. "We, um--"

"We were just going to get to that," Alex said, glaring at Lucy. "We were just making sure we were on the same page about shucking oysters."


"That's what we were doing," Kara protested. Cracking oysters.

Lucy shook her head and pointed at Alex. "Don't rub off on the nice one."

Alex put up her hands in self defense. "I have done nothing!"

Lucy flipped them both off and slipped away.

Alex pulled out the sample menu and Kara spread out the blank form and tested the pen. "Okay, so what are we doing here."

They went through the menu, discussing what would be easy, tweaks to make things tastier, pricing choices that could increase their revenue. Kara liked the way Alex listened, nodding and making notes on the menu, accepting her as an authority on pricing, and having confidence that the sauces and salsas she said she could make would be just right.

They wrote up the menu, stuck it up outside, with an annotated copy for inside, and started prep. Working in a small space with another person was always a test of compatibility. Some days, working in the truck with Mike had been easy, like a dance they'd practiced for years. Other days, they were always crashing into each other, and snapping when something wasn't right. With Alex, it just seemed to work.

"Hey, can I have--" led to an onion being tossed, or a bottle of worcestershire being passed with hardly a miscommunication. "Try this," and "Maybe we should put the tray of cut lemons over there," never seemed to spark a fight. Also, Kara really liked it that when she called back, "Ten oysters, two orders of mussels, and five more oysters for Hangtown Fry," Alex's natural response was, "Yes, chef!"

It was hot in the small space, especially with the steam rising from the water for the clams and mussels. Alex tied up her hair in her bandanna again and took off her shirt. The tank-top she wore underneath exposed the tattoos swirling around her upper arms. Kara didn't have time to look, busy handling the front of the house, the deep fryer, two frypans, and the plating, and would have felt awkward about staring anyway, but she kept glancing over anyway. She wanted to look closely, see
what the colors and lines depicted. They kept making her who was Alex now? How could she be the same when she'd changed, changed down to the skin? But then Alex would cast her a smile over her shoulder, or frown, concerned, as she shucked another oyster, and it was exactly her Alex, returned to her.

Business hit hard since the moment the shutters opened. A lot of people knew that the show was being filmed and they were there for the novelty of it, and the chance to be on TV. Some were planning on trying all three bars, and coming back to buy more from their favorite. Others picked the menu with the cheapest items. Half the people felt obliged to express their opinions about Kara and Alex’s chosen menu and pricing. Kara smiled through it and, though it was difficult, didn’t tell anyone to shut up.

A few hours in, one of the cameramen came by and said that he'd heard people talking about their sauces, so good going, and could he have a plate of oysters with lime and salsa fresca, and also a heap of fried clams with the tamarind dipping sauce.

When Kara had a breather, she brought Alex lemonade. When Alex did, she came and tied up Kara's hair so it was off her neck but still out of the way. They worked together like they had been doing it for years, like they had never stopped.

There was no time to talk, no time for more than a quip or a joke. Just slinging oysters. It had everything Kara had loved about the taco truck, seeing her customers take their food with eagerness, react to the taste of the first bite. Precision and repetition resulting in something wholly good.

Finally, Lucy showed up. "You can close in fifteen. Then drop your register drawer off with me at Mangiani's. You can take a breather while we count up."

When they finally pulled the shutters closed and did the immediately necessary tidy up, a sense of peace and warm, sated exhaustion filled Kara's bones. It had been a good day in the end. She offered Alex a high five, and Alex took it, grinning at her and laughing, as if she also could feel just how satisfying it was to do good work and go home tired.

They settled into a private booth at Mangiani's as the money was counted, sipping soda water. "You don't drink," Alex said, and then looked mortified.

"I don't like the taste of alcohol."

Kara could see in her eyes Alex was waiting to get the question back and was scared of it. Somehow, she was sure the answer wouldn't be pretty. She asked something else instead. "When did you know it was me?"

Alex's eyes went wide. "What?"

"I knew, well, I suspected it was you, since you made the comment about the anchovies in my pizza sauce. I just, I didn't know if you remembered me."

"I-- of course I remember you." Alex was reddening slightly. "I didn't really put it together until last night though. I mean you--" She waved a helpless hand. "You changed."

Kara grinned. "I did grow like three inches after I left your house."

Alex wasn't smiling though. "What else happened after mom sent you away?"

Oh. Kara ducked her head. She'd said something, during her panic attack, hadn't she? "I had a rough few months, but then I ended up with the Olsens, and they were great. They adopted me when I was
sixteen. What about you?"

Alex watched her for a moment, soft and sad. "I missed you. And I missed my dad. And I fought a lot with my mom."

"I bet you did." Kara hesitated, and then slid out of the booth and in on Alex's side. She reached out, and Alex caught her and pulled her into her embrace. Her hands on Alex's bony shoulder blades, Alex's chin tucked against her neck, the pressure of arms around her. This was what she'd wanted, what she'd been missing for so long.

Alex shook under her hands. "I missed you so much." Even the words, whispered, shook as the air carried the sound of them.

"I can't believe I found you again."

#

When Lucy came and found them after the results had been tallied up, they joined the other four for the announcement of the victors. The others had been hanging out at the bar, drinking. Mike had a bandage around his hand, where he'd stabbed himself when he'd pretended that he knew how to shuck oysters and didn't. When Alex and Kara emerged from their secluded booth, M'gann gave them an exasperated head-shaking look. Kara immediately put her arms around her, grateful for the way everyone had stepped up to protect her today. She gave Alex a fierce glare, to encourage her to join the hug. Alex's eyebrows shot up in a who me? expression. Kara still glared and Alex wrinkled her nose, then gingerly stepped in to put an arm around M'gann also.

"Group hug!" announced Waylon, who scooped all three of them into his giant arms. Siobhan looked disgusted, and Mike looked around, confused, and then limpeted on, game for whatever they were doing.

Lucy sighed. "Okay, guys, stop hugging or Cat will actually vomit, let's do this and go home so we can sleep, okay?"

The announcements went quickly. Alex and Kara had won, with Waylon and Siobhan only about a hundred dollars behind. M'gann and Mike were at the bottom, the medical intervention having definitely slowed them down.

And best of all, because Maggie had had to leave, no one else was going home.

At that news, Kara yelped with glee and threw her arms around Alex's shoulders. Alex laughed, half picking her up and spinning her around. "You dork."

"Your dork," Kara retorted, and Alex's grip only tightened, her grin going even more pleased.

"Yeah."

#
They had the next day off.

Alex didn't quite know what to do with herself or with her feelings that day. They'd won the challenge, and she'd reconnected with Kara after nearly fourteen years. Things just felt good. She slept in, and there were brunch fixings downstairs, and so they made waffles and omelettes and bacon and sausage and just hung out. Siobhan turned out to be the one who could make and dress the crispiest lightest waffles, and only grinned when asked for tips, never giving up her secrets. Waylon flipped omelets with the precision of his flipping steak, and Alex, for once, was happy to let herself be fed, plate on her knees on one of the couches, very hot very strong coffee at her elbow, and Kara with her feet tucked up under herself, half leaning against her side, as if she wanted to stay in contact, make sure she was really physically there. She left Alex to wake up slowly, talking animatedly to everyone else—though not Mike, who hadn't come down yet, and only looking to Alex on occasion, checking her plate and that her coffee was full.

Whenever there was something particularly nice, Alex found herself setting up a forkful of it, and nudging Kara until she'd turn and let Alex feed it to her. It felt normal, like something they used to do, and Alex didn't really realize it wasn't until Kara had gotten up to go wash the syrup off her face, and Siobhan had leveled her spatula right at Alex's throat.

"Seriously?" she asked.

Alex blinked.  

"I know I had my earplugs in, but if you fucked her while I was in the same room, I am never, ever, going to get that image out of my head."

Alex's mouth dropped open, her hands went up. "What? No! No way. I'm not sleeping with her. We're just friends."

Siobhan scrunched her nose. "Have you ever had a friend before? Because that disgusting feeding each other shit I would be embarrassed to do with my girlfriend. Ugh. I'd rather go down on her in public than do that nonsense."

Alex's face was hot and it was now very obvious that that was a weird as fuck thing to do. To compare, she imagined feeding Vasquez off her own fork like that, and wanted to die of embarrassment. Throw a corn chip at her, sure. Feed her a forkful of waffle and strawberry and cream, never. "I just-- ugh. All right. Noted."

Siobhan snorted. "Good. You were making me want to puke. And, like, sure, you'd be better for her than that fratboy upstairs, but she kinda pings as straight, right? I don't know how she managed to weasel her way into a hardcase like you, but she did, and you're going to be on the floor when she comes busting out again. Cover your goddamn ass."

Alex sank deeper into the couch. "I'm not into Kara," she muttered. But no matter if it was true or not, after the feeding her from her own fork debacle, she didn't really have a leg to stand on.

#

Kara ran into Mike up in the hall by the bathrooms.

"Hey, babe," he said. "Can you look at my hand for me?"
Kara hesitated. "Um, don't you think you should have the medics do that?"

"Eh, it's no big. I just got the bandage wet and I can't rewrap it one handed."

Kara followed him into the boys' room and sat down on the bed beside him. "Hey," he said, smiling at her with droopy eyes. "It's great to see you alone."

He leaned in for a kiss, and Kara turned her head just enough so that he hit her cheek. This did not dissuade him, and he adjusted, moving in enough to put his hand on her thigh and find her lips. She let him kiss her, waiting for any feelings besides anxious discomfort to rise up in her chest. But there wasn't anything. He started to shift to climb on her, moving to straddle her thighs and push her down, and she put a hand on his chest, holding him off. "Wait, Mike."

"Come on." He batted his eyelashes at her. "I've missed you so bad. I haven't got to touch you in days. This competition stuff has been messy. I just want to reconnect."

Kara's heart felt heavy; even her limbs seemed to be weighed down with lead. "I don't," she said.

Mike froze. "Don't want to fuck, or don't want to reconnect?"

Kara swallowed down the lump in her throat. It was fear. And there was so much to be afraid of. She didn't think he would hurt her, not physically. He wasn't that kind of guy. But he could lash out with words. And he knew enough to target what she was really afraid of, that she was making another mistake, that she was fucking up again, making the wrong decision, and she'd end up alone, like she always did.

"I think we should break up."

Mike turned and sat back on the bed, head hanging, looking like he'd been punched. "Wow."

"Mike." She pleaded with him. He couldn't be surprised, could he?

"No. Really, Kar? Like, I've been feeling it too. This is a rough patch. But dumping me in the middle of the competition? That's just cold."

It was like an icepick to the chest. "I'm sorry. I just--"

"I know what you're feeling," Mike said, standing up, sneering. "You've got a little taste of success now, you think you're better than me and my tacos. Hitch your wagon to a star, right? But guess what, I'm reliable. I'm the taco man. And if you think trading 'favors' with that bitch is going to give you anything that I wouldn't, you're fooling yourself. She'll bring you down."

Kara frowned, her forehead furrowing. "Who? What are you talking about? I'm not dumping you for anyone, and I'm definitely not dumping you because I think I'm a better chef. That-- that doesn't have anything to do with our relationship."

"Give it a rest. You were all over her last night. Must have felt good to win the challenge with your new slampiece. But I've been talking to people. She's a drunk, violent cokehead, and she can't even cook. I bet she told you that I did some shit like get her towels wet to make her burn herself. Well, she's a liar too. I don't need to stoop to that."

Wait, what? "Alex?" Kara's eyebrows shot up her forehead. "You think I'm leaving you for Alex?"

Mike paused, as if her utter incredulity had thrown him off his game. Alex was her friend. And what exactly was Alex supposed to have told her to make him look bad?
The truth clicked together inside her head. Everything made sense now. Alex had said he’d been hassling her, said that he’d been accusing her of wanting to make a move on Kara. But that hadn’t been the half of it, had it? He’d sabotaged her bench. He’d hurt her.

"You're not?"

"Alex?" Kara laughed, but her chest was tight and she felt angry. Really, really angry.

"You like her, and she's clearly a dyke, and you're always harping on the fact that you're pan, even around my dudes, which I hate. Why the fuck does it matter that you like girls and whatever the fuck else people think there is these days when you're with me? You're always casting the line, and my dudes think I'm a cuck sucker."

"You hurt her. She's my best friend and you hurt her."

She was standing up now, fists balled, facing him down. Mike took a step back. "Jesus, you've known her for like five days now."

"It didn't even take you that long to decide she was better than you and lash out like a child."

"And I was right to, wasn't I? Yeah, I wanted her to burn the shit out of her hands so she wouldn't put them on you! But I should have punched her in the mouth instead. Get her jaw wired shut so she couldn't talk shit about me and poison you against me!"

"She didn't say a fucking word against you! She didn't even tell me that you'd tried to maim her. She said I could do better, and nothing else, and she was right. Everything in Kara was fury. He'd admitted it. She could hardly see Mike standing in front of her through the haze of anger. She clenched her fists, took control of herself, and stared him down.

His eyes were wide, he'd taken a step back when she'd started to swear. "Kar . . ."

Kara took a deep breath. She was so disappointed. "I don't think acting like this is really you. I think you're better than this. I don't know what's so wrong that's making you cruel and jealous and paranoid. But it's a fact that you have been cruel and jealous and paranoid this whole time. I need to protect myself. And that means not being with you, okay? No discussion. I am breaking up with you. Don't talk to me again until you deal with your baggage."

She turned and left the room. She heard him call out for her, his feet coming after her. She slammed the door behind her and ran.

There weren't many private places to go inside the compound, but there was a small shiny-leaved western oak tree behind the studio. Kara sat under it, ignoring the pricks of the fallen leaves, and put her head in her arms. That had been awful, that had been worse than awful. How could he do that to Alex?

What had made him so sure she wanted to leave him for Alex? The idea seemed absurd. It was Alex. Her grumpy and impossibly considerate foster sister who'd managed to become her best friend in a matter of weeks. And now she was different, older, just as cross, too skinny by half, always looking a little tired, and still giving the best hugs. There was a huge empty space in between the last time they'd known each other, and Kara wanted to fill it in, wanted to find out everything, trace the path that led her to this point, discover who she'd become, and if they still fit in the way they used to.

Something told her that they were meant to be together, that they should have been together all this time. It had been bad luck that they hadn't been. Maybe their hollows and edges were different now, but Alex still made everything feel okay. She made the hardest moments survivable. But that wasn't
Kara lifted her head, staring vaguely toward the studio, where the levain they'd left to ferment was still sitting in the walk-in. She thought of Alex gently stirring the flour mix into her starter, the grimace on her face when the levain was too wet and got all over her fingers. Kara had held her wrists and cleaned her hands with the plastic bowl scraper. Alex had looked up at her, nose wrinkled at the weird feeling of it, lips quirked up.

Kara had wanted to see that look on her face every day, wanted to hold her hands, and be near her, talk with her, touch her. Kiss her? Her gut tangled into knots. Her chest went tight with unexpelled air.

No. She couldn't think about that, she couldn't deal with that, not right now. Not right after she'd broken up with Mike and everything hurt. She didn't need risk when it came to Alex. She wanted steadiness and friendship and trust. Kissing her would screw all of that up. And there were no signs that Alex wanted her either. So it was fine.

They were fine.

Now, she just had to remember how to breathe.

#

Kara didn't come back from washing her face, and Alex felt her chest seize up with worry. She wasn't in their room when everyone went up to get changed for the pool, and Alex made a trek around the house to see if she was anywhere. She wasn't. Mike stomped out of his room and glared at her before announcing that he was going down to see the medic and get his hand looked at. Kara wasn't in his room either.

Not sure where else to look, Alex curled up in a lounger by the pool and silently recited the procedure for making the five mother sauces and their primary derivatives in her head to try and stay on top of herself. If she wasn’t back in an hour-- in half an hour-- in fifteen-- Finally, Kara emerged up from the direction of the studio and came over to her chair.

"We forgot about the levain," she said softly.

There was something raw in her face, and Alex reached out, taking her hand. "It'll be super sour by now."

A tiny flash of a smile on Kara's face. "Yeah."

"Did you take it out?"

Kara nodded. Alex grinned and tapped her lightly on the arm. "Without me? I want to watch you break into the studio again."

The smile was wider this time. "I didn't have to, the cleaning crew was in. It looked like it had gone too far, so I refreshed it."

"Let's give it a couple hours to ferment again, and then we can beat it into shape in the mixer and let it do its last rise before baking."

Kara nodded. She looked around at the various people gathered by the pool, and her shoulders dipped a bit. "I guess I should go get changed." She sounded reluctant, like she wasn't ready to be alone. Alex stood up and put her arms around her, giving her the hug it looked like she needed.
Tension drained out of Kara's form and she melted against Alex.

Siobhan gagged loudly from the other side of the pool. Alex glared at her, but didn't let Kara go until she was ready.

For dinner that night they had grilled hamburgers on fresh, pungent sourdough. Kara and Mike stayed on opposite sides of the pool. Afterwards, they built a fire in an old cast iron wheelbarrow and put leftover waffle batter and jam in pie irons, cooking them over the embers for dessert.

Alex and Kara stayed in the hanging couch--their hanging couch, M'gann had taken to calling it--and did not worry about the morning.

#
"It's super great to have you here." Lucy met Alura as the hired car dropped her at the entrance to the studio. Alura smiled to see her, and Lucy did her best to maintain some sense of professional demeanor. But she kind of hadn't expected the long white trenchcoat and the braid, half-undone from the plane ride. It wasn't a style, but there was definitely an effect. Lucy heard her sister's voice in the back of her head, yeah, hon, keep telling yourself that you're not into cougars. Fuck her sister's imaginary voice anyway. Yes, she'd been a little star-struck when she'd first been hired by Cat Grant, but she was way over that now. She didn't have a type.

Anyways, business. This was business.

"Thank you for meeting me. I hope you've gotten over your encounter with Albrecht."

Lucy narrowed her eyes. That was too big of a name for such a tiny goat. "I had a bruise on my shin for a week," she said. "Keep your wildlife away from me."

Alura laughed.

"Okay, so let me show you the studio and the judges dressing room, and we can go over your challenges, and-- have you had breakfast? Do you need coffee? It's all laid on in the studio, so we can grab some while we're checking in. And then we'll send you to hair and make-up, and we should be ready to start filming at nine-thirty."

Most new people would have been bewildered by this litany of scheduling, but Alura just nodded. "Do you have any tea?"

"Sure."

As they went over the challenges, and Lucy gave her a brief overview of the contestants and how they'd been doing so far, a creeping feeling of guilt starting to build in her chest. She knew that you got some really good responses from blindsiding people, Cat had taught her well, and this could be really good, or it could be awful, and she didn't know whether she was making the right decision here.

"And then there's um, Kera." Lucy purposely mispronounced the name, and felt like a terrible person. "Self-taught, worked with Mike on the taco truck, but she's rising up past him, it looks like, and shedding the dead weight as she goes. She's got another few episodes at least."

Alura nodded. "I do hope you don't expect me to judge in line with your predictions?"

"What? Oh. No. Of course not. You judge what's there. And then when you, Lilian and Diana decide who to cut, we tell you if it will ruin everything or if Cat's made some weird backroom deal where that contestant gets to stay one more week in exchange for a favor."

Alura grimaced. "Sounds like the diplomatic corps."

Lucy shrugged. "Pretty fucking similar to the Army too."

When she pulled shit like this in the Army she'd thought she was doing it to get the bad guys to break. In reality, she no longer knew if her judgment had been good. How much innocent blood had she left in her wake? She didn’t know. It was why she couldn’t stay. But even here, where the stakes were so much lower, she had to be careful. Power trips were dangerous. You just had to look at Cat
Alex didn't know who this new judge was. They introduced her as Alura Z, of Food for Thought, which was unhelpful, as they didn't even say if it was a restaurant or a food page section. And apparently this was locavore week? Alex tried not to roll her eyes. They were in fucking California, and National City was like two hours from Mexico. This was where the imported food originated.

Oh no. She was actually hardcore, wasn't she? They'd locked the walk-in and everything on the table was actually grown inside NC, like in abandoned lot gardens and stuff. Alex grimaced. Sounds great, cook your veg grown in the smog capital of California.

Alex glanced back, not entirely sure if Kara would match her cynicism, but wanting to express it to someone. But Kara wasn't looking at her. She was staring at the judge, her eyes wide, her face white as a sheet. She looked like she might faint.

"Go!" announced Lilian, and Alex had no idea what it was they were supposed to be cooking. As everyone else went to the table, she ducked backwards, heading to Kara's bench.

"Hey. Hey. What is it? Are you all right?"

Kara looked at her, her eyes wide and hands shaking, but not in the panic attack way. "I--" She shook her head, then shook it again. "It can't be."

Alex reached out, just touching the back of her hand, but Kara jerked away. "I'm just-- But." She put her hands over her mouth, looking like she was going to puke. "No. I have to cook, right? I have to cook."

"Do you think you can? If you need to take a break--"

"I'm fine." Kara took a deep stiff breath and started walking up to the table. Alex trailed after her, helplessly. Kara passed the table, and stepped past the judging circle and past the line of spotlights that pointed up toward the dais, ones that made it hard for the judges to see the contestants. Then she looked up, straight into Alura Z's face. Alura looked back, a tiny flex in the skin around her eyes, and then a gentle bland smile. Kara sagged. She spun around and started sorting through vegetables with unrepressed fury.

Alex leaned over M'gann's shoulder. M'gann had paused in her own sorting of beans to stare at Kara. "What the fuck are we supposed to be cooking?"

"Uh, something vegan," M'gann said. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "She didn't tell me."

" Fucking crazy bitch," came a mutter from Mike on the other end of the table. Alex grabbed the neck of a crooknecked squash and not looking, hurled it backhanded at his face. He yelped, knocking it down before it hit, then scowled at her, picked it up and strode off with it and an armful of corn and tomatillos.

Alex didn't really know what the fuck she was doing. She was mostly on automatic, and Automatic Chef Alex apparently just fried onions and chopped garlic. Lots of garlic. She threw some bulbs into the oven to roast too. Whatever she ended up making, more garlic couldn't hurt.

Agh. No fucking butter. And dammit she'd wanted a layer of ricotta in there too.
She looked at the clock. They still had hours. Fuck it, she was making focaccia.

As she was heading over to the dry goods, she looked over to where Kara was steam puffing something. And crying silently.

The wash of helplessness overwhelmed her again. She had to make the focaccia, and then maybe a thick mushroom spread, with the roast garlic, and fill it with quick breaded and fried butternut squash slabs, crunchy on the outside and soft and sweet on the inside. A vinegary drizzle between them.

*Maybe Kara will like it. Maybe it will make her feel better.*

She didn't even know what was wrong. Fuck.

She plated up two sandwiches, and stared at the second, wishing she could do more. When she got called up, the judges were approving, surprised at the casualness of a sandwich, but appreciative of the complexity of the content. Alura smiled at her. Alex didn't smile back. Whoever this was, if she'd made Kara cry, she was going to suffer.

When it was Kara's turn, Alex could see Diana and Lilian react to her red eyes and streaky face. They were hesitant about saying much. But Alura said nothing about the stuffed corn fritters, just ate them and nodded, so the other two judges had to come up with something. Diana reached out to touch Kara's shoulder, about to ask what was wrong, and Kara went stiff and hard, and Diana drew back, accepting the *no* without question.

They were both in the middle. Alex because her sandwich had been 'a little all over the place.' Also, 'relying too heavily on non-local dry goods.' Alex had rolled her eyes at that. Catch her using lumpy artisan milled flour? Never. She was pretty sure Kara was in the middle because none of the judges wanted her tear-stained face in front of them.

Mike with his squash tacos and Waylon with his grilled eggplant were on the bottom. Siobhan won the challenge with her curried butternut crepes with tamarind sauce.

When Lucy appeared to tell them how long the lunch break was, Alex saw Alura's eyes go sharp and hard. She heard Kara's rough breathing behind her. Lucy let them go, and Alex picked up her extra sandwich, turning, hoping, but Kara was plunging forward, up onto the dais, chasing Alura who was moving swiftly out of the studio into the hall, into the one place with no cameras.

Lucy was staring after them also, a stricken look on her face. "What is going on?" Alex hissed at her.

Lucy looked up at her, her expression anxious. "I think I fucked up."

#

*Mom.*

#

Kara had thought she was seeing ghosts until they'd said the name. She'd thought she was going crazy. She'd thought the world was ending. And then they'd said the name and the world did end, it cracked.

A thousand theories, a thousand ideas blazed through her mind. How could this be? How could her mom be here? How could--

She couldn't look at Alex, because Alex had been her rock when everything was gone, but
everything wasn't gone. She'd been lied to. She'd been *lied* to.

She had to know.

When she saw her mom see her, saw her recognize her, and not react, she knew she had been lied to. And she broke. She'd become very good at keeping going, no matter what. She'd had to get good at it. So she waited, until the competition was over, until they could leave the space where everyone was being recorded all the time. Because she thought she was going to scream, and she could cry on camera, hug on camera, have a panic attack on camera, but she didn't want her rage and pain there. It was hers. She would not share it.

*Mom*.

"Hey!"

In the room behind the studio, Alura turned, took her in. "Kara," she said softly, gently.

The word knocked the wind out of her. It was something she'd long ago accepted that she'd never hear again: her mom's voice saying her name.

The sob rose up in her chest, as violent as a body-localized earthquake, seismic, crashing through her, dislocating her chest from her bones. And then another, and she couldn't stand.

"*Kara.*" Hands on her face, on her arms. And she crumpled.

"You're dead, you're supposed to be dead." Kara beat at the woman's chest, the ghost's chest. "You're not dead. Where were you? Where were you for fifteen years?"

The woman did not try to fend off the blows. Her hands stayed pressed to Kara's shoulders.

"Why didn't you come for me?"

Everything turned into a white fog after that. She emerged only slightly, hearing her mother's voice speaking to Lucy, asking for a private room and a little quiet. She heard Alex's voice, snappish, protective. "No! Don't touch her. I've got her. I've got her."

Familiar arms, scooping her up, then gently setting her on a sofa. Doors shutting. The scent of tea. Kara tried to move her fingers, she took a breath and managed to clench her fists. Slowly, she blinked her eyes open and shifted up on the sofa, coming into a sitting position.

The ghost was sitting across the table from her.

"Mom."

"Kara. Would you like some tea? You're looking a little pale."

Kara's lips tensed. "No, thank you."

Her eyes searched over her mother, older, thinner, lines in the corners of her eyes. The scars drew her attention, they were neat, with the careful lines of plastic surgery. But knowing that even with any expense, the scars were still there, she wondered what they'd looked like before. There had been the cane too, as she left, after fifteen years, still a limp. "Just tell me how you're still alive."

Alura looked away. Kara knew that look, the lift to her chin, the restraint. It was her public face, the one she'd worn when seated by her father, hearing the hard ugliness underlying the polite tones of other diplomats, unable to react, to show she understood the implications. Her mother had never
worn that face with her. "That's a question I don't have the answer to. I don't even know how you're alive. Non’s bomb was meant for our family, and with your father, he succeeded. I had a severe concussion and memory loss as well as other injuries. I was kept in a medical coma for nearly a year. As we could not be sure if Non and his group would come after either of us, you were put under guard and sent to stay with a safe family, and I was reported dead while in medical care. It took two years after they woke me for me to have recovered enough of my memory to function independently. It still wasn't assuredly safe, so I lived under a presumed identity. I heard that the Olsens had adopted you, and that you were happy, and so I did not interfere. Recently, about five years ago, Non . . . became no longer a threat, and I was able to return to using my own name."

Kara looked at her hands, then looked up. "Why didn't you come get me?"

Alura hesitated. "You seemed . . ."

" Why didn't you come get me? " Kara wanted to scream, she wanted to throw the table, she wanted this calmness to stop. "Why didn't you get me when I was sixteen and crying at night? Why didn't you get me when I was seventeen and lost my virginity to an idiot and hated myself? Why didn't you get me when I was eighteen and graduating high school without any idea of what I wanted to do with my life? Why didn't you get me when I was nineteen or twenty or twenty-one or twenty-two or any year or this year? Why didn't you want me back?"

Alura looked confused. "I didn't think you would mind so much."

"You didn't think I would mind? You're my mother!"

"I thought--" She looked even more hesitant, if that was possible. How could this be her mother? Her mother who was always assured, always there to cup Kara’s face and tell her it was all right, to chase away the nannies when she’d skinned her knees and clean them herself, and ask her, well was it worth it? If it was worth it, then why cry? And kiss her and take the pain away. "I thought it would be worse, because I'm not the same."

Kara froze. "What?"

"I don't-- I still don't remember a lot. And I didn't want to see your face every time you wanted me to know something or to understand how to care about you when I didn't. I don't . . . I don't remember how it felt to love you as a child. And, now . . . you're my daughter, I love you. I was always happy to find out that you were doing well. But I don't know if the way I care about you now is enough, or is what you want of me."

"Oh," Kara said, her voice coming out small, her chest feeling like it was split in two. It was possibly the worst explanation she could have heard. I survived , her mother said. But my love for you was killed. The woman Alura Ziehl was alive, but Kara's mom was dead.

"I'm so sorry this came as such a shock to you. I would never have had you find out this way. I suspect . . . I suspect it was intended for drama."

"You could have sent me a letter," Kara said, her voice still shaking.

"I could have. I'm sorry I didn't."

"It's all right," Kara said. "I can't expect you to care enough to do that, since you don't care about me anymore."

" Kara . I do care about you."
"Not enough," Kara said. She stood up and headed out the door.

#

Alex was lying in her bunk when Kara came in, silent and tear-streaked, but moving on her own. She crawled up into Alex's bed and lay there, near, but not touching. Alex didn't move or try to touch her, just lay there, with her.

After an hour or so, Kara rolled over, pressing her back to Alex's front, and letting Alex wrap her up in her arms. She started to cry again, quietly, and Alex held her.

Siobhan came in when Kara had fallen asleep and grabbed her bag. She caught Alex's eye. "Second round has been postponed until tomorrow morning. I'm going to crash with M'gann. Let me know if she needs anything."

She slipped out, and Alex rubbed Kara's back, murmuring in her ear. "Look at that, even Siobhan likes you. Look at how much you have." But she couldn't say 'you don't need her,' because it was her mom. And Alex knew that a mom hole was too big to fill. Even if your actual mom was bad news, the hole was still there, the knowledge of how it was supposed to be contrasted with how it was.

#

"How could you do that?"

Lucy stood frozen as Alura paced past her, cane clicking on the floor, all nervous energy and suppressed anger. "You knew. I know you knew, and you didn't warn me. You didn't warn either of us."

"I thought it would make good television."

"Well did it?"

Lucy shook her head. She'd fucked up. She'd done what Cat would have done and it had bitten her. Cat was going to have her head in ten minutes too. But... she hadn't realized just how much she hadn't wanted to fuck this up until now.

Lucy rubbed the back of her head. "I thought it was going to be good. I figured it would be a joyful reconnection after years of separation, hugging, bullshit that makes Cat cringe but brings the Lifetime crowd running, or, I don't know, some sort of drama, a reason why you weren't in her life. I didn't think she didn't know. I didn't think you wouldn't have told her the moment you got out of WITSEC."

Alura looked away, her mouth pinched. "You had no idea about the decisions I had to make."

Lucy grimaced, way to shift the blame when this shitshow--and delay in filming--was entirely her responsibility. She hadn't wanted to hurt people. That hadn't been the point. "I know. And that was my fault. I should have asked more questions. I should have let you both know ahead of time, at least know something. Cat is going to say that if you're going to be sneaky you have to have perfect control of the situation, and I didn't."

Alura sagged. "A mother coming back from the dead would probably have been great ratings for your show. If you'd caught Kara's meltdown on camera, what good wouldn't that do you?"

"It doesn't matter." Lucy winced. "Actually, there is a camera in that hall. Not a great one, but it's
there just for this kind of storming out. But I won't use the footage. I'd never use it."

"You expect me to trust that a TV producer has scruples?"

Lucy grit her teeth. "If I didn't have scruples I wouldn't have told you about the camera. I wouldn't have turned the ones in the meeting room off. I have a contract with both of you that allows me to use whatever footage I have." But she couldn't have. Kara deserved better than that, having her loss, her anger, her fear all used as entertainment. It might be Lucy’s job, but some things were fair play, and some things were not.

Alura stepped forward, facing her down. "And here you are now, not cowed, not ashamed. You did your job by doing this. You don't have to feel guilty. According to the contracts you did nothing wrong."

Lucy took a deep breath. There were other times when she'd done nothing wrong, and still she couldn't sleep from the memory of blood on her hands. Admitting that had been the hardest thing she’d ever had to do. This? She could take her strokes for this. "I'm sorry," she said. "I fucked up. I made the wrong call. So what are you going to do? Bail? I wouldn't let Cat sue you if you wanted to." Lucy looked away, and then looked back. She wasn’t the only one who’d made mistakes here. "I can admit that I made the wrong call. Can you?"

Alura put her hand to her face, her shoulders sagged. Lucy walked away. It was time for her second dressing-down of the afternoon.

#
Alex hadn't woken up next to someone in years. Even when she had been getting drunk and sleeping around, she'd been pretty great at fucking the hell off before any actual sleeping happened. But here she was, and there was Kara, still in her arms.

She could not feel her left arm at all. Kara was on top of it, and it had lost all circulation and would probably fall off if she tried to get up. Well, unlikely, but it felt like it. She'd also managed to get a bit of Kara's hair stuck to her face, which she hoped did not mean that she'd been drooling. (She'd definitely been drooling.)

It still looked pitch black outside. Maybe she'd better try to go back to sleep. But she kind of wanted to shift around and didn't want to wake Kara.

Her arm really was going to fall off.

Alex tried to shuffle it out from under her bedmate, but Kara was like a rock. Alex squeezed Kara's shoulder lightly, trying to get her to shift. Kara made a small sound, almost like a sob, and Alex froze. Oh no. She didn't want to make her sad. She leaned close, gently stroking her arm, until Kara's breathing evened out.

Her arm was starting to wake up. Pins and needles were stabbing her upper arm and a deep ache burned inside. Kara was still on top of her arm. Alex nuzzled in even closer, a little unsure about the way the curve of Kara's ass pressed into her hips. Platonic cuddling, right? If she just moved a little on top of Kara, maybe she could--

Kara shifted, bumping her back onto her side of the bed on her back. She rolled over, flopping down on her stomach on top of Alex, her chin tucking right into the hollow over her shoulder.

Welp. Her arm was free at least. It was just the rest of her that was squashed under Kara now. Her arm was still asleep and flopped around like an overcooked noodle as she tried to lift it up. She managed to catch it, bending it weirdly with her other hand. Then she placed it on Kara's back in hopefully a natural human position, and held on with her other arm also, then shut her eyes, and went back to sleep.

#

The next time Alex woke up it was light, and Kara was on the pillow beside her, her eyes open, watching her intently. "You're still a weirdo--" Alex mumbled. "--why're you always watching me sleep?"

Kara cracked a slight smile, and didn't resist as Alex burrowed into her, pressing her face against her shoulder. "You're still a total grouch in the mornings."

Alex smiled against her neck. "How are you doing?"

Kara sighed out, but she didn't try to escape Alex's arms. "I'm okay. It was . . . a lot. But I can't--" Her words choked off, and Alex held on as tightly as she could. "I can't change things, or make her have decided anything differently. I just--"

Alex threaded her fingers into Kara's hair, making soft comforting rubs under her ears. "I'm so sorry she left you alone, I'm so sorry."

---
The next words out of her mouth were almost a laugh, but a broken one, half a sob. "Just, how the fuck did she become a food blogger?" Kara buried her face against her. "I know she always-- she was always taking me around to eat in whatever city we were in. She always made time to cook with me, Aunt Astra too, before . . . But if-- if she can't remember me well enough to remember how she felt about me then, why does she remember how she felt about the food?"

"Maybe she doesn't," Alex said, and then wished she hadn't spoken. Kara looked at her expectantly. "Well, people say that scents are the memories most linked to emotion. What if she wants to remember how she felt about you, so she makes the foods to try to bring back the feelings?"

Kara stared at her, her eyes glistening. "You think so?"

Alex reached up and touched her face, gently pushing a soft strand of hair out of her eyes. "I think that if she remembered you even a little bit, she should jump at the chance to find out anything more that she could."

Kara made a sad choking sound and buried her face in Alex's shoulder. "Please stop being sensitive. Swear at me a couple of times. I need to get my act together."

Alex laughed and slipped her hands down to her waist, tweaking up her shirt and tracing her fingers across bare skin. Kara squeaked and thrashed on top of her. "Too early for swearing. I need to get a good run up first."

Kara, wildly offended by the tickling, scrabbled for her hands, grabbed her wrists and pinned them. She hovered over Alex, her hair falling out of its loose sleeping bun and into her face, her chest rising and falling with her breathing, her mouth open, panting, her eyes so incredibly blue.

I want to kiss her.

Alex's heart froze. Kara was her Kara, and she'd been so happy just to have her back, to have the chance to reconnect. And no matter how much she loved her cooking, that didn’t mean she was into her. But if she kissed her now, distracted her from all of the other messy things in her life, made her feel better--

Alex got ahold of herself. You're not into Kara. The words rang false. Kara was beautiful and sad, but if she kissed her now, she’d be lying to herself, calling it comfort. If they were together, if they were already in love, then it could be comfort, but here and now, it was selfishness. And it was shooting herself in the foot. Kara wasn't into her. You didn't kiss straight girls who you wanted to maintain a relationship with. That was always a recipe for disaster. You didn't get your hopes up about someone who didn't want you back.

Alex put away the brief flurry of attraction. It happened. She was only human--and twisted her wrist out of Kara's grip. Kara yelped, Alex went in for her exposed side once again, and Kara shrieked, and trying to fend off the tickling, rolled off of her and nearly off the bed.

"You're the worst!" Kara protested, finding the ladder with her feet.

"I'm the best."

#

For Kara, that morning's competition passed in a blur. They were assigned to make something out of a bounty of peaches and meyer lemons and avocados, which were apparently growing in excess in her mom's yard these days.
She didn't want to know about her mom's yard. She didn't want to know about what life she was supposedly living now, without Kara.

When Kara brought up her grill-blackened spiced peaches and her grill-blackened spiced and marinated rare skirt steak. Alura looked at her, hard. "You always liked sweet things before."

Kara shrugged. "I haven't for more than half my life."

She was just a stranger, someone she thought she'd met as a child once or twice. Not her mom.

Not her mom.

Waylon and Mike were in the bottom, Siobhan winning with near liquid lemon curd encased in a crisp peppery and salty deep fried shell that burst in your mouth. Waylon shaking his head at Kara and saying, "Warn me next time you're grilling straight up against me. Man, girl, those peaches were good."

Mike glowered at Kara from the loser's line. Kara hardly noticed.

#

Day 6 Interviews:

Mike: Your girlfriend and business partner dumping you in the middle of the competition to hook up one of your opponents kind of puts you off your game. I'm just-- not so into it today. At least she doesn't look happy. That would suck.

M'gann: It's been an interesting week so far. I've been learning a lot from the way the other contestants engage with different kinds of ingredients. I know Kara’s going through a lot right now, but she’s still cooking well, and that always reminds me that I shouldn’t give in to self doubt either. This isn’t just a chance to show off. It’s a chance to get better and to become the chef I want to be. I know it’s only the third round, but every day it feels more and more possible, the opportunity feels more real. We can become who we want to be. I hope everyone else is seeing that too. 😊

Siobhan: Honestly, I'm kind of astonished I'm doing so well. I mean, everyone else being an emotional wreck probably helps, but this feels like my week. And this is the kind of plan I have, focusing on vegan and vegetarian cooking, with locally sourced produce. Tagline: Vegan, but not gross. This makes me feel like I can do it.

Alex: I just-- I don't feel like the competition is about me right now. I realize that one of the things I value most about cooking is the fact that I can feed people that I care about. And if I don't have people that I care about . . . what's the point?

Yes, jesus, I’m ‘still focused on the goal,’ but if sacrificing everything important to me is what it takes, it won’t be worth it, and you can take your fucking cash prize and shove it.
Waylon: I'm feeling a little out of my depth this week. I'm a grill man through and through, and I know that you can do good things with grilling veg. But they take a kind of TLC that I'm out of practice with. And if goddamn flavor-genius Kara's going to be grilling exactly what I'm grilling, that's going to be a rough day.

Kara: I'm just sorry that all of my drama is distracting everyone. They've all been wonderful, there for me when I needed them. But that's not the point of the competition. I'm making trouble for everyone. And I don't even know why I'm in this anymore, now that Mike and the taco truck aren't involved. I thought maybe I should just drop out, but Alex said . . .

Kara sinks into herself:
Everyone’s been so kind to me. She looks away, rubs her eyes, and then waves her hand to tell the cameraman to end the shot:

#

"Alex."

Alex started, about to follow Kara who was walking with M'gann up to the house. She turned to see Alura leaning on her cane across the bench. This was . . . unexpected.

"May I speak with you for a few minutes?"

"I--" Alex glanced back toward the door where Kara and M'gann had just disappeared. "Okay, I guess."

Alura took her back into the small private room, the same one Alex had carried Kara into and set her on the couch. She sat, but more like she wanted to get her weight off her pained leg than because it was supposed to be friendly. Alex hesitated, then sat as well, folding her hands formally.

"I hear that you've been looking after Kara."

"Kara's strong. She's gotten through worse than this."

Alura nodded vaguely. "I'm glad to know you care for her."

Alex grit her teeth. This woman was pissing her off, rejecting Kara, not doing her one job and taking care of her, and then coming in here all proprietary, when Alex had been there when she hadn’t.

"Honestly, I don't care what you think. I've done my best, because it's Kara, because I loved her when I was fifteen and I love her again now, but I would never have chosen to let her go.” And she was still so-- so angry that she had done the same thing this woman had, had abandoned her. But not by choice. Never by choice. “My mom sent her away and none of my letters went through, but I tried to hold on, if I’d been able to I would have held on. She was important to me. And if she isn't even important enough to you to try, then she deserves to be free of you."

Alura's head dipped. "You took care of her then too?"

Alex looked away. She'd been a jerk at first, before she'd learned how to deal with a traumatized kid. But she’d picked up the rules pretty quick, faster than her parents who hadn’t had their face nearly clawed off by trying to touch her when she was flipping out about the popcorn maker sounding like an explosion. She’d learned, and for a short time, Kara had become part of her, like a grafted on third arm. Then she’d been gone, her dad had been gone, and Alex had felt like half her body was missing too. She hadn’t been like Kara, shattered but so stubborn, putting every shard of
herself back in place, no matter how much touching it made her bleed, no matter how many times she’d crack again. Alex hadn’t been that strong. She’d just spun out of control, sought release in anything that would make her feel better, but not remind her of the reasons for her pain. "We baked a lot."

"I'd like your advice then, as someone who knew her, and then had to get to know her again. If you hadn't remembered her, would you have started to care again?"

Alex blinked. "I-- didn't remember her. I mean, I didn't recognize her. She got a lot taller, and blonder, and--" Nope, don't mention bustier to her mom. "But, honestly, I think it took me a five minute conversation with her, and trying her salsa, and I was hooked. She's won over everyone here, even Siobhan. If you're scared that you won't love her when you get to know her again, I really don't think you have to worry. She's the most lovable person I've ever met. Way more lovable than me, for example."

"And do you think she'd forgive me for long enough to try?"

Alex hesitated. I've already lost so much. "I can't answer that. But . . . I think asking her is worth it."

#

For the second competition of the day, they were broken up into teams. Siobhan and M'gann were the team leaders, and Siobhan, to Alex's consternation, immediately picked Kara. M'gann picked Waylon first, and Alex was picked by Siobhan, leaving M'gann's team with Mike. The face M'gann made at Alex at that would have been hilarious if it wasn’t so despairing.

The studio had been set up into the two warring kitchens mode again, and the doors to the dining room were opened. They were both going to run a vegetarian restaurant. Waylon blanched.

Siobhan was in her element. She decided Kara was her saucier and Alex was her muscle. Alex, just relieved to get to work alongside Kara, did not protest. They designed the menu, prepped the mise, set up marinades and started soups. Kara's mood rose as she got more invested in the menu, and soon she was bouncing back and forth between Alex and Siobhan, tasting and advising, and bringing them her own work to taste and advise on.

When the doors opened and the first diners came in, they were ready.

M'gann's team, on the other hand, was scrambling. Waylon was obeying every order, but he didn't seem confident, and Mike was, as usual, lazy and unhelpful.

The rhythm of Siobhan's kitchen, calling out orders, prepping plates, felt easy and comfortable. They joked--even Siobhan dropped a few dry one-liners--and recovered from the unavoidable screw-ups. If it looked like one of them was getting in the weeds, another would jump in to help out. If someone had a break, they’d prep more mise, keep aware of the whole kitchen, making sure everyone had enough support to do their jobs. Having the judges wandering in and out and checking on the diners, even Alura, though she made a point of staying away from Kara's station, wasn't distracting.

They made a good team.

When the last diner had left and they were mopping up, Siobhan gave them a considering look. "I like working with you two," she said. "You have a good rapport, and it makes for a good kitchen atmosphere. I hope that when you start fucking it doesn't screw it up."

Alex felt herself go red. She didn’t need Siobhan putting ideas in Kara’s head. Her doing it with Mike had been bad enough. But Kara just smiled at Siobhan. "It was great to work with you too."
The results wouldn't be tallied until the next morning. So they returned to the house. Waylon built a fire in the wheelbarrow by the pool, and exhausted, everyone but Mike settled in around it.

Kara and Alex were on the hanging couch, lazily half curled into each other. Alex didn't remember ever being this physically comfortable with anyone. The couch rocked slowly, the firelight flickering, and Alex made tiny strokes on the back of Kara's neck right at her hairline.

What came next, though? She had her friend back, but Alex's life was a mess, and Kara had family in Metropolis. What if she wanted to go home? Would it be weird if Alex wanted to go with her? Could Alex ask Kara to put up with all her baggage, with her inability to deal with loss and failure? And what about when she found a new boyfriend? Could Alex watch that, see that happen, without feeling like a hand was crushing her heart and cutting off air from her lungs?

She'd successfully sat on the attraction. She didn't want Kara, didn't have prurient thoughts about her naked. But this was almost worse, wanting to follow her anywhere. She was supposed to be trying to win this competition, to get enough money to start a restaurant, the sort of high end, super professional place which she knew she could handle, where someone like Kara wouldn't fit. Or, at least, Alex wouldn't want her to change enough to start to fit. But if she couldn't ask her to work with her, how could she give her something that would make it worth her while to stick around?

Would Kara want to stay if she knew the whole of the mess Alex had made of her life?

Kara was nuzzled into her arm, careless of Alex's sweaty stinky undershirt. She was quiet now, soft. The hollow old-soul eyes that she wore when she looked at her mother were exchanged for sleepy ones. Alex didn't know how she could still be so strong, still handle this. But she'd always been so much stronger than Alex could ever be.

Eventually Waylon said goodnight and headed up to bed. M'gann followed him. It looked like Siobhan had already passed out on the couch on the opposite side of the pool.

The moon was large that night and reflected off the water.

"I still can't believe my mom is alive," Kara murmured.

Alex breathed out. Kara wanted to talk about it. Each time, she was blindsided by the fact that Kara trusted her enough to want to talk about it with her. "She spoke to me today. She . . . wanted to know what it was like for me to get to know you again."

"What did you tell her?"

"That it was easy." She tightened her arm around Kara's shoulder. "That you're so easy to care about." She stared out at the light on the pool.

"But you don't know me. Not anymore."

"You don't know me either," Alex said. "And I-- Sometimes I don't know if I know myself. Most of the time I'm pretty sure I don't like myself very much. But when I'm around you, I remember what I used to be like around you, and I try to be her again. She was all right."

"She was." Kara was silent for a moment. Then she asked, "May I see your tattoos?"

Surprised, Alex shifted a little away from her. "Sure."

It was a little dark in the hanging couch, so Alex climbed out of it, removed her undershirt, leaving on the black sports bra underneath, and lay down on her front on the wooden deck under the sodium
light from the motion sensor. Kara settled down beside her.

"May I touch?"

Suddenly choked up, a tight clench in her core, Alex muttered, "sure," and tried to grit her teeth against the arousal.

It didn't help. Kara's hands stroked down the words and images scrawled into the backs of her shoulders and arms. Bits of poetry, lyrics, small sketches. Scars.

"What was the first one?"

Alex swallowed. "The lioness," she said. "Up on my left shoulder."

Kara's fingers followed the lines, of that lion, alone, standing proud.

"After Dad died my mom just . . . stopped paying attention. I was alone. I got it to see if she'd notice. She didn't."

The palm pressing down against her skin was not a comfort. She could feel the distress in it, the sympathy. But it was nothing, in comparison, to what Kara had lost. Nothing. And she'd been so angry, so ungrateful, so out of control. "But I liked getting it. I liked the way that it hurt. So I got more."

She'd liked things that hurt and things that took away the pain, catharsis and relief. It was always easier for her to make a metaphor out of her emotions rather than actually dealing with how she felt.

"What about this one?" Kara traced the lines on the back of her arm. Alex knew them well, and yet no one had ever touched them like this before. "Did you become a Doctor Who fan while I was gone?"

"Ah," Alex let out a laugh that felt like a sigh. "No. The weeping angel-- that was for you."

Kara's hand went still on her arm. She was silent for a moment. "You thought of me?"

"All the time." Alex let her face rest on the wooden planking. "They didn't even leave a forwarding address. I hoped you'd write, I hoped they'd decide we were safe again and send you back. But with your mom and everything, I guess they were scared you'd be found. But I thought about you. And I spent a lot of time in graveyards."

In one particularly. They'd get there soon. No one could catalogue Alex's tattoos without finding one that had to do with her dad. They all had something to do with her dad, deep down.

"What's this from?" Kara hesitated, then started to read the script aloud, her finger following along with the words. After the first line, Alex didn't have to hear it to know what it said.

\textit{I taste autumn in the air}

\textit{You can feel it in your throat}

\textit{Cover me now with a warm overcoat}

\textit{Rain'll be here, it's coming soon}

\textit{But I won't be here to see it before long}
You've been the best company I've ever hoped to find
You cool my nerves, you've eased my mind
But heading off into the setting sun
There's two of us now, there'll be only one

Hearing it choked Alex. She couldn't say what it meant for her. She couldn't speak at all.

Don't leave me again.

It was desperate and pathetic and far too much for this tenuous connection they were rebuilding. But losing Kara and losing her dad were all interlocked, and she couldn't think of one without thinking of the other, and it felt like losing Kara again would also be losing her dad all over again.

"Alex."

It wasn't a question, and to her shame, Alex realized she was crying. She rolled half over, trying to wipe her eyes, trying to hide something, but also reveal it. This was the wrong place for it, she shouldn't be feeling this much in the middle of filming a goddamn reality tv show, something so fake and so absurd. But Kara was hovering over her, staring down at her, shadowed eyes and understanding, and she reached down curving her hand around Alex's cheek, thumb brushing under her eye, smearing a tear over her skin. And then she bent her head and there was a brush of lips against hers, and Alex's heart stopped.

Then Kara was scooping her up, wrapping her up in her arms, putting her chin on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked--"

Alex tried to speak, tried to say It's fine, it's you. If anyone could understand, it's you, but she choked on the words and sobbed again and let Kara hold her.

#
Siobhan's team won the challenge. Kara crowed and high-fived Alex and a bemused but pleased Siobhan.

Alex was still looking a little shaky this morning, and Kara felt bad for making her cry. But the broken bits inside Kara, always afraid that she didn’t matter to anyone, which had recently been stung again with more proof that it was true, were soothed. She hadn’t been wrong to believe that she’d meant something to Alex. She’d meant enough that her memory was inked into Alex’s skin, carried with her, through whatever came next. There were many years between them, many sad things, and happy things, and changes and markings and scars, but it was still her Alex. It was.

Kissing her had mostly been an accident. But neither of them had brought it up, so Kara figured she could write it off as 'things that happen while people are emotional' and not worry too much. But it had been so much easier to face the judgement of this person who was not quite her mother while holding Alex's hand. The week's winners and losers were announced. Siobhan was given an extra accolade for taking the whole week, and then it was time for Lilian to make the going home announcement. Alex's hand tightened on hers.

"Mike. It's time for you to go."

Mike stood there, lips parted, looking blindsided and hurt. He looked around, an expression on his face, and his eyes fell on Alex and Kara's clasped hands. The hurt contorted to anger.

"Sure," he snapped. "Whatever. There's nothing for me here." He pointed straight at Kara. "You give me back my extra key for the taco truck."

Kara froze, Alex's hand tightened on hers. He was taking the truck? She'd put money into it, paying for repairs and modifications, she'd bought his license. Didn't that make it at least a little bit hers?

It didn’t. It was his truck. She’d put too much of herself into it when it had never been hers.

"Of course, Mike."

"Kara?" Her mom's voice still sounded like a ghost's. Kara stilled again, then turned and looked around. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

Alex’s grip tightened on her hand. She caught Kara’s attention and seemed to be asking with a tip of her head and a sympathetic eyebrow if it was okay. Kara nodded. She could handle this.

Alex squeezed her hand again. "Tell me where the key is and I'll give it to Mike. You don't have to."

Kara breathed out. She shouldn't ask that of Alex, but it would be a relief. "I-- sure. It's in my purple bag, the front pocket."
Alex nodded, gave Alura a glare, and then headed out with M'gann and Waylon.

"She's protective of you."

Kara nodded, staring after Alex, at the patterns of ink she could still see curling out from under the fabric of her shirt. Before, the tattoos had worried her. She’d thought they meant that Alex had changed, that she was different, but each one just marked a hole in her that Kara had already known was there. The scars on her mom’s face were different. "I'm . . . so lucky to have found her again."

Alura looked hesitant, as if she had thought of asking a personal question and then decided it wasn't her place. Kara wished she could tell her to ask, to be the mom she hadn't been. But she also knew that if Alura did ask, she'd bristle, because she'd made it not her business for years, it wasn't her business now.

"I wanted to ask if you would, perhaps, come see me, when the show is over. At the very least--Lucy says you are not allowed to be in much contact with the outside world until the pre-finals preparation, but . . . I don't want us to lose touch. I want to try to get to know you, as the adult you've become. That's all I can really offer, but--" Alura reached up, touching the scar on her face, the small thin line that ran along her hairline, the surgical scar. "I would be very grateful if you said yes."

Kara swallowed down the lump in her throat. This was her mother--more accurately, this was what was left of her mother. Like with Alex, there were holes, broken places, missing memories, loss, sadness, things she didn't know. But even a piece was better than none at all.

"Of course," Kara said. Alura reached out to take her hand, but Kara didn't want a handshake or even a squeeze. She wanted arms around her. She wanted her mom's arms around her. She lurched forward and wrapped Alura up in an embrace.

Alura made a soft startled sound, going toothpick stiff, and then, finally, relaxing and looping her arms around Kara, squeezing her back.

It wasn't the playful squeezes and lifting her up, swinging her around, but it wasn't just a stranger's hug either. It was the tight pressure of someone who meant something, of something you hoped wouldn't be goodbye.

#

Telephone Calls, episode 3:

Alex: Hey Vaz, you got that number I sent you? Did you check-- Everything's fine? That's awesome. . . . wait. What? How do you know that? Vaz? Vaz? Are you sleeping with Maggie? Jesus Christ. That was not-- oh fine. No. No! Do not tease me about Kara. Oh my god. I should never have given you her number.

M'gann: Everything going okay, Rafe? Mmm, yeah, you need to get more of the Tequila if they're coming. Me? Yeah. Things are good. Just trucking along. No, I’m not getting my hopes up, which is why you need to not make a mess of things, okay? Who knows what's going to happen next week, this show is crazy.
Waylon: I'm through, babe. Skin of my teeth though. Vegetarian cooking. Jeez. Ha, yes. I *did* use your recipe for that corn salad. M'gann said it was perfect. I probably should have used it in the individual challenges too, but at least we managed to survive the teams even with that shithead slowing us down.

Kara: :stares down at phone, takes a deep breath, starts to press send, then doesn't. She shakes her head: Not today.

Siobhan: Yes, yes! Ha, babe. You totally doubted me. You thought I was going to be out first week. I know. I am that awesome. I love you too.

#

Mike was hurling his clothes into his bag when Alex came in to give him the keys to the food truck. He scowled at her, looking disgusted. "How does it feel to be the rebound?"

Alex rolled her eyes. He was like a broken record. "I didn't steal your girl. We're just friends." More than that, but not in the way he was assuming. Kara hadn't trusted him enough to tell him that she'd known Alex before. Their relationship had been crashing for a long time.

Mike laughed. "I know. When I accused her of wanting to get with you, she was shocked, like it never crossed her mind."

His words hit like a kick in her gut. Alex bit back her reaction. As if anything Mike said mattered. He'd been a dead weight dragging Kara down for far too long, and now he was leaving.

She must have let something show, though, because Mike's smile went cruel. "She's never going to want you like you want her."

Alex ground her teeth. The last time she'd let Mike get to her, she'd regretted it. "It's as if you can't imagine wanting something from a girl besides what's in her pants."

Mike laughed. "But that's exactly what you're imagining, isn't it? Why wouldn't you? Makes you feel all special, a pretty girl giving you all her attention. But you're just an angry, bitter dyke who's fooling herself about having a chance."

Taking potshots at her? Alex didn't care. She'd worked for Max Lord for years. Mike wasn't even near his league at pissing her off and making her feel like shit. "Guess what, taco jockey, you're the one who's out without a chance. Take your fucking keys and get out."

Mike scoffed and snagged the keys out of Alex's hand. "Whatever. No shame in going out on fucking girly garbage vegetarian food. And it's not like you're going to last much longer either. You've been shit from the start. You're gonna wash out before the semis, and then what do you got? I've heard about you. No one in their right mind would give you a job again after what you did to your last boss. You going to run home to your Daddy? Ask him to bank roll you another fancy degree that you can fuck up and turn into garbage?"

Fuck him. Alex's hands balled into fists. She wasn't out yet. And who the fuck cared if Max and his mob cronies had blackballed her. National City wasn't the only place she could work. She wasn't going to fail at this. She wasn't going to lose it all again and prove that she'd never be better than that drunk Jonn had found in the alley behind his restaurant. She wasn't going to let Kara watch her
screw up again and realize just how badly she'd fucked up, how many people she'd hurt, how shit she'd been at dealing with not even half the loss that Kara had suffered. She wanted to be *good* for Kara. If she fucked up here, she'd never have a chance at even being good enough.

Mike's eyes dropped to her fists. He grinned and took a step toward her, sticking out his chin as if he wanted her to punch it. "They're just letting you stay to make it look like this show isn't just a pack of circus freaks. Fancy CIA degree makes Big Bubba, Cupcake Barista, and Drag Show Bartender not seem as crappy as they really are."

"Shut your fucking mouth." She stepped toward him, balled hands coming up to hover around her waist. She wasn't going to punch him first, but if he wanted to fight, if he wanted to talk more shit about her friends, she wasn't going to take it.

"Go ahead," he sneers. "Kara will love that. She'll put up with more bullshit than you can imagine if you're sweet. But you shout, you get angry, you even fucking clench your fists, and you're gone. And I know about you. Everyone says you're a violent, drunk bitch, and if she even saw you right now, she'd leave you so fast."

"You're full of shit," Alex snapped, but a twist in her gut asked if he was right. Breaking Max's wrist wasn't the only thing she'd done. Why would Kara want hands like Alex's touching her? Even she didn't, it didn't matter. No matter what, she would be Kara's friend and help her as best she could. She wasn't asking for anything more than that.

Mike snorted. "It's like you think you know her better than I do."

"Maybe I do."

The smile that spread across Mike's face was mocking, and so punchable. Whatever Kara thought about violence, smearing her fist against his teeth would feel so worth it.

"I've been where you are. I used to think she was special too."

Alex paused. What?

"Sure, she's talented. But she can't hold it together. All you've got to do is hint that the people who are telling her she can do it are just being nice, and she crumbles. She doesn't have what it takes. She's a failure and a fuck up, just like you. She's going to blow it all up and wash out of this competition with nothing, like she did with the last two 'careers' she tried. And then she'll be begging on her knees for a ride back to Metropolis." Mike slapped his thigh alongside his groin. "And you better bet I'll keep her on her knees. It's her only real skill. I just pat her on the head and tell her she's special and she gets right down to sucking my cock."

"Don't you fucking go near her ever again!" Alex swung for him, but before she made contact, a hand grabbed her arm, holding back her strike.

Waylon loomed over her. "You don't want to do that, 'Lex," he said. "You'll get your knuckles dirty."

Alex growled at him. But his giant hand kept a firm grip on her wrist.

Waylon turned his gaze to Mike. "Now get out of here, you little shit, and drive back to mom in your little truck because no one here gives a fuck about you or your mediocre tacos."

Mike scowled, but evaluated Waylon's size, and chose discretion. He swung his bag onto his shoulder and stalked out. He paused in the doorway, glaring at Alex. "This isn’t the last you’ll hear
of me."

“You better hope it is,” Alex spat back.

Mike scoffed and ducked away down the hall.

When his footsteps died away on the steps, Waylon released Alex's hand.

Alex shook it a few times. "I could have broken his teeth."

"And your fist, and good luck chopping tomorrow."

It was a point. Alex sighed. It was better that Mike was just gone. Good riddance. She stared up at Waylon, behind his words she heard the echoes of her dad’s voice, fighting isn’t the way, Alex. I know you were trying to do the right thing, but there are better ways than fighting. Somehow, Alex had never been able to find them. Whatever she was trying to do, she always ended up disappointing her dad. She ducked her head and leaned into Waylon’s shoulder.

"Thanks."

Waylon put his arm around her and squeezed. "No problem, kid."

#
Episode 4: Part 1

After Mike had been checked out and disappeared in his taxi, and Cat had griped about signing the overtime slips for the camera crew, Lucy headed up to the video feed station and flipped on the channels for the house. The remaining contestants had devolved into their afternoon laziness, by the pool or on the couches inside, Siobhan sunbathing, M’gann and Waylon huddled together with a notebook designing kitchens, Alex and Kara, slowly rocking on the hanging couch, Alex’s feet in Kara’s lap, talking about cooking. Everyone besides Siobhan was talking about something having to do with cooking. Did these losers never think about anything besides food?

Lucy checked her watch and made a face. She’d made herself scarce when Alura’s evening plans were being arranged. She’d made herself persona-non-grata with that stunt, and Cat had bitched her out—not for the stunt itself, but because it hadn’t resulted in any good footage—well enough that she hadn’t wanted to see anyone for a good hour, but she’d heard what was going on from the feed station. Alura’s plane didn’t leave until the next morning, and Lilian and Diana had offered to show her around National City. Lucy had rarely had good results when Lilian and Diana offered to show someone around, and Alura had not looked entirely sure of the prospect herself. Lucy vaguely wished she hadn’t burned so many bridges that calling the next morning to make sure the hangover wasn’t too bad would be welcome.

She sighed and leaned on the desk, putting her head in her hands as Alex and Kara’s incredibly boring conversation filtered in through the H5 channel.

"Can you teach me how to make a foam? I’ve never foamed anything in my life."

“You have, actually. Whipped cream is a foam, if you’ve made mousse, that’s a foam. It just means creating a liquid flavor and if the liquid won’t naturally build proteins that can hold a foam, then you add lecithin or agar, so when you force air into it, it will hold its shape.”

“Wait? Whipped cream is a foam? And like . . . marshmallows?”

“Yes.”

“And you could foam like, a heavy stock, or fruit juice, or . . . anything?”

"It's really not that hard."

“So it’s only meant to impress the uneducated suckers like me?”

A grumble from Alex. “No, it’s meant to realize a single flavor in a light intriguing texture.”

A pause.

“Is Cheese Whiz a foam?”

Silence.

“It is, isn’t it?”


Lucy called the contestants down to the studio that evening at five. Everyone looked a bit bemused.
Usually this was an afternoon they had entirely off. The camera crew was there and ready, and Lucy stood on the dais alone. The judges were still out. So far she’d gotten one text from Lilian’s phone, clearly written by Diana, saying that they were at **l’île Enchantée** --one of Diana’s favorite trashy beachside cocktail bars where they always had fresh muddled fruits and did not skimp on the vodka-- and not to worry because they were taking good care of ‘our little judge.’ Lucy closed her phone and tried to avoid eye contact with Kara, because who knew what their regular judges were doing with her mother, and Lucy did not feel like being asked.

"All right, you guys," she said, clapping for attention. "Tomorrow is the first day of baking week. In the morning your first challenge is going to be bread and soup. I don't remember the fancy name and there's a long description, but basically, make soup, make bread that goes with the soup. Is that cleario? Yes? Great. Second challenge is going to be quickbread. So tonight you guys have a golden hour with your phones. You can get anything rising that needs rising, or whatever you want to make in preparation, and if you want to look up measurements and write them on your arms or whatever, you can do that too. The golden hour starts now."

She rang the bell, and held out the tub with their phones in it.

Lucy set the roving camera people to follow the contestants and get close ups on what they were doing, and had her two assistants pop around and ask questions. Lucy did also, but kept an ear out for anything interesting someone might be saying, in case she needed to get a second mic on it.

She liked the golden hour. It was a different dynamic, with no judges watching, and the contestants were more voluble than usual. The fact that they still only talked about food, well, there was nothing to be done about that.

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"I have an idea," Kara said to the camera, eager and lighter than she’d been for nearly the entire competition. "I want to do my zucchini soup with a raspberry vinaigrette coulis and a cheddar chive sourdough, but..." she bit her lip. "Alex!" she shouted across the studio. "Can I get a cupful of your starter?"

Alex looked up, eyes lighting up at the sound of Kara's voice. "You sure you can handle her? She's a badass."

Kara wrinkled her nose. "Pretty sure. I can handle you, can't I?"

Alex made a face, but nodded amiably.

The camera focused on Siobhan behind her, who was rolling her eyes so hard.

Kara turned back to the camera and gave it a sailor moon peace sign. "Score! I'm so excited. Alex is right. Her starter is a badass. I can't wait to see it bubble!"

---

"Do you want to hear a secret?" Kara leaned forward, whispering to the cameraman. "She talks to her starter, like it's a toddler. Honestly, I think she's adorable."

Alex was kneading, looking focused but with a tiny smile on her face. "Yeah, actually, I love baking. It's like chemistry. The reactions, the timings, they’re set. It's not like cooking where if things start to go wrong you can deglaze quickly and fix it. Once it's in the oven, it's in. I can usually smell
when it's time to take something out of the oven though. Harder in here with all these ovens going at once."

**But you want to be an executive chef in a high-end restaurant? Would you bake there?**

"I mean, head chef, that's my goal. That's making it. But--" A flicker of confusion crossed Alex’s face. She seemed to hesitate, as if the reasons why it was her goal didn’t come to mind as quickly as expected. She glanced over to where Kara was working on her dough, her chef’s jacket off, her blue t-shirt mostly covered in flour. "I used to daydream about opening a bakery. It would be nice to combine it with a lunch place, where you could order whatever was coming out of the oven at that moment. Take a loaf of bread home with you. Soup and hot sandwiches and pasties and calzones."

Kara had paused in her kneading and was looking over, her brow furrowed, head tipped to the side.

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Waylon’s mouth twitched downward in concern. "Baking . . . is not one of the things I do a lot. I make a mean chili though, so I'm hoping for a good cornbread tomorrow. I'm getting the chili going tonight. The flavors can have overnight to imbue."

----

Siobhan didn’t seem to care that the camera was always on the wrong side, turning away to grab eggs, milk, butter, narrating in a loud and clear voice as she went. "Plain brioche is decadent," she said. "But if it's with a non cream-based soup, it elevates it from a plain lunch to a fancy meal. It's good to have the overnight rise, since even with regular yeast, not the wild yeast nonsense going on over there--" She tipped her head in Kara’s direction and rolled her eyes. "--the added fat and protein retards the yeast. The butter needs to chill too, and the flavor just gets better the longer it sits."

----

M'gann is also kneading. "I suspect Alex and Kara are going to be going for something crusty and peasant-like with a light center. It's going to be delicious, I'm sure. As will Siobhan's brioche and Waylon's chili. I'm going to go in the other direction, and do something nutty and wheaty. Have the complexity in the bread to go with a smooth creamy soup."

#

"You know," Waylon said as he flipped burgers on the grill that evening. "That little lunch place you planned sounds rocking."

Alex glanced up from making patties out of the ground meat that Kara had mixed with . . . sambal and water chestnuts? "You think so? I thought it did when I was fifteen."

"It wasn't that well developed when you were fifteen," Kara said, coming over with a plate of tomatoes and onions that Siobhan had cut up. "You just wanted to be a baker."

Alex snorted. She’d talked a lot of shit when was fifteen. "My mom was like . . . ‘Alex, darling, I feel like your complete lack of morning person tendencies would nip that in the bud.’ But, I can get up at 4, just don't expect me to talk to anyone until I've had my coffee."

"It's interesting," M'gann said, "when you think about it in combination with your tendency to make casserole or other big hot dishes to feed a lot of people. A lot of those would be nice with a hunk of crusty bread. Expand to dinner once the lunch gets steady?"
Alex shook her head. M’gann was never going to let the casserole thing go.

"We said we wanted desserts too, but not cakes or anything with icing," Kara chimed in. "Big bowls of trifle you bought a scoop of, or flan, or rice pudding."

"Aha," M’gann said. "Both of your baby?"

Kara snorted. "Alex's baby is her starter. Everything else is a niece or nephew."

Alex prodded her with an elbow, not wanting to touch her with meaty hands. It was so strange to think that Kara remembered those conversations just like she did, that this slowly brightening girl could be the same as the sad scared child who huddled in her bed after nightmares that Alex couldn’t tell her weren’t true, because they’d really happened.

Half of the bakery idea had been getting in digs in at her mom, who had been on her about classes and her Intel science project when it was summer, but the other half had been trying to come up with a future that would make Kara smile. Without her parents, Kara hadn’t been able to imagine any future. But if Alex could describe one well enough, sometimes her eyes would change, a tiny light peeking out from from the darkness.

Siobhan, who had for once, joined them in dinner preparations, if only to drink whatever new concoction M’gann had prepared and make dismissive comments about Kara’s knife work, wrinkled her nose. "It's weird you knew each other before," she said.

"It's lucky," Kara said.

"We did watch the very first season of Knives and Fire that year," Alex said. Kara was right. It was lucky. It was amazingly lucky. If Kara hadn’t been a contestant Alex would have been vying with Adam for the first washout spot. She’d have gone right back to that empty, garbage life. A life without Kara in it-- it felt like walking into a black hole.

M'gann laughed. "The first season? The one where Bruce Wayne set the whole kitchen on fire?"

"It was epic."

"But really," Waylon got the conversation back on track. "Why the fuck do you want to be an executive chef, Alex? Why do you want that instead of having a banging lunch place?"

Alex rolled her eyes. Why was he harping on this? It was a kid’s pipe dream. “A lunch place isn’t cooking, it’s assembly.”

“Isn’t that what you said about cooking steak too?” M’gann inquired, eyebrow raised.

Alex scrunched her nose at M’gann. She was way too good a listener. Only good listeners could always throw your own words back in your face.

“You can be creative in a lot of things,” Kara said.


There was a round of groans.

Alex shook her head, and went to rub the inside of her elbow, but stopped, remembering the meat clinging to her fingers. Her eyes flicked to Kara. With Mike no longer around, she had a peace to her, a sense of relaxation and calm that was hard to look away from. She’d made a decision about
her mom too, and seemed happier for it.

Kara was looking at her too, softly regarding, as if whatever Alex did next, whatever plan she put together for her life, it would be a good one, because it was Alex.

'Do it with me,' Alex wanted to say. 'Be my partner.' Opening a bakery with Kara had been a teenager’s idle fantasy. But in the middle of this competition, anything seemed possible. And this evening, baking with Kara, the sweet scent of flour and water turning sour, the thump and stretch of dough under her hands, she remembered the tug that it had on her, the way, that even in the stress of competition, even when everything around her was spiralling out of control, this movement, this focus--measuring, timing, process, step-by-step, getting it right--calmed her, let her breathe easily.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel like she was asking too much, dreaming too big. She had a plan, and abandoning it for something impossible would be a mistake. If she became an executive chef, well respected, running a restaurant that got starred reviews in the Tribune, she’d know that this drowning grasp at a career she didn’t hate, at a life she could survive, hadn’t been a mistake. She’d know that the problem really had been that she didn’t fit into her grad program, and not just that she wasn’t tough enough, dedicated enough, smart enough to make it through. But the prospect of failing at that goal wasn’t half as terrifying as the prospect of asking Kara to go into business with her and having her say yes.

She could no longer deny it. She was into Kara.

With Mike gone, with the pain of her mother’s newly discovered abandonment slowly fading, Kara was settling into herself, finding her feet in the competition. And it meant that this evening, Kara’s eyes had been bright, meeting hers across the dough-strewn counters to share a laugh when Waylon told a joke, her body had been soft as it pressed against her back and peeked over her shoulder to watch her hands as she shaped meat or folded dough, her face laughing, inspired, curious, as she shared tips with M’gann, cooed over pictures of Waylon’s dogs, was confused by Siobhan’s unnecessary sarcasm. And she’d come back to Alex, each time, as if Alex was the safe place, as if she was where Kara always wanted to return to, as if she felt like home.

She wanted Kara.

Not simply, not possessively, but desperately, all the time. No matter how she tried to force it down, she couldn’t stop thinking about kissing the focus crinkle between her brows, or putting her hands under her shirt, to surprise her with a brush against the skin of her waist. She wanted to hold her when she was feeling sad, and laugh with her when she was happy. She wanted her when she came into the bathroom in the morning with her hair all out of place, in blue jeans, and in her glasses, and always in her competition chef’s jacket. That evening, she’d been covered in flour, and Alex wanted to push her up against one of the stations and kiss the smudge of white off her nose.

And she wanted that brush of lips against hers again. Lying prone on the pool deck, Kara's hands on her back, on her skin . . . she wanted Kara on top of her, holding her down, finding her mouth with her own. Even the thought of kissing her--for real this time--sent cascades of nerve-sparks shooting through her belly. What would the real thing be like?

But Kara hadn’t said anything, hadn’t mentioned a kiss, as if it hadn’t signified anything more than a gesture of care. Mike's words lingered in her head. She was shocked, as if she'd never even thought about it.

The memory of the brief kiss the night before hung weighted against those words. Had it just been comfort? Or was it more? A slow discovery of feelings? The idea made her stomach clench.
Whenever Kara looked over at her, a soft affection in her eyes, it made her heart swoop, made her feel sick inside. She could hardly eat.

She knew that if she asked Kara to be her partner without asking, 'be my girlfriend' also, she’d be making a mess of things. Yes, she wanted to keep Kara in her life no matter what, but going into business meant that there would be no space between them. Kara would be bound to her with leases and money and hope. Half good, right? Keeping her close, being there to support her. But the other half was terrible, unable to put any distance between them when Kara became interested in someone else, having to watch as she pulled away and chose another bag of dicks like Mike. If she said yes, and then slowly slipped away because she didn’t realize how much Alex cared, it would be worse than if she said 'be my partner' and Kara just said 'no.'

But 'be my girlfriend' was not something she knew how to say. Her tongue felt thick and her hands shaky whenever she even thought it. It was Kara, her Kara, the Kara who everyone fell in love with. The Kara who deserved so much more than what Alex could offer. (But she'd been happy with a taco truck and someone who she thought cared about her. Even if Alex wasn’t good enough, if she could just make her happy . . .)

Alex hated that feeling of hope, the clench in her chest, when she thought of what it would be like to work with Kara every day, to move Kara into her apartment, figure out a comfortable way of sleeping in the same bed, spend evenings-off curled up on the couch with homemade ice cream and Netflix. It was like the lovestruck part of her brain didn't understand calculated risk, unlikely probabilities and how not to rely on the kind of luck that Alex had never had in her entire life. It wanted to make her feel like it was possible, like that future was real, like, maybe, just maybe, Alex could be enough for Kara, just so Alex would get up the nerve to ask, and then get slapped in the face by reality.

Even if there was half a chance that Kara would say yes, she knew it couldn’t be as good as her traitor brain wanted to make her believe. Its rose colored glasses didn’t see the hard times, the failure, the endless grating disappointment from Alex’s mother, the concern from Kara’s solicitous adopted family who surely would think Kara could do better than Alex and a struggling sandwich shop, Kara getting tired of Alex’s mess and her bad choices and her fumbling and failure, Alex being sure she was holding Kara back and lashing out instead of dealing with it like a functional human being.

Making a living baking and having Kara love her back? It was too good to be anything but a fantasy.

Alex passed Waylon the last tray of hamburger patties and went inside to wash her hands. She came back, accepting a seltzer from Kara, and stood by Waylon, watching his grill technique for tips.

"The bakery would be fun," she said, softly, for only Waylon’s ears. “But who can make a go of something like that? And I’d hate to watch it fail. One time in my life, I’d like to not be a failure.”

Waylon gave her a glance, no judgment on his face. But he shook his head. "If there's one thing I want to teach my kids, it’s that nothing makes you a failure until you give up on going after what you want. You're doing good, 'Lex. You haven't given up on anything. We're just wondering if you really want what you say you do."

Alex went still, her hand tightening around the can of seltzer, her eyes seeking out Kara. What did she really want?

She wanted Kara.

She wanted to be good enough for Kara to want her back.
Only five stations were left, pulled into a semi-circle, letting them all see each other while cooking. The empty spaces, Adam, Maggie, Mike-- each week Kara was terrified about who would go next, and now there was a good reason she didn't want it to be her. Mike would be back at the apartment, and showing up three days later, having dumped him and then failed-- the way he would laugh at her, the way he'd remind her that every time she'd been sure she didn't belong here, every dark moment of self doubt and anxiety had been proven correct, she didn’t think she could take that.

Alex was at her elbow, frowning at her dough that had risen well overnight, shaping it and punching it down for another rise. It felt good to have Alex nearby, but a small hurt was still lingering in Kara's chest. When they'd been talking about the bakery/lunch spot last night, she'd found herself waiting for Alex to turn to her and say, 'do it with me?' And she hadn't.

Not that it was likely Alex would do it at all. She was still pretty locked into her executive chef plan. Even when they were young, she had always had a clear vision of her future, and the discussions of being a baker, or a fighter pilot, or a rockstar, none of them had made a dent in her serious plans to become a molecular biologist. But clearly, losing her dad and whatever other struggles she'd faced had managed to knock down that vision of herself. She’d replaced it with this executive chef plan. It didn't mean she'd be happy.

Kara thought that maybe . . . maybe if they started the bakery together, they could both be happy. But Alex hadn't seen that too.

It made her doubt what all of this meant. She had Alex back, but for how long? There was no way she was going to win this competition, she was taking it day by day, but when it ended, she was back to square one. She had even less than she had coming into this, no truck, no boyfriend, she’d be lucky if any of her stuff was left in the apartment after Mike was done with taking out his feelings on it. Her mom had asked her to come visit, but that was even scarier than facing the nothing alone. She’d have to go back to Metropolis.

She’d lose Alex again.

There was no way Kara could make the offer-- I know I'm untrained, mostly incompetent and a failure at nearly everything I try, but why don't you give up on your dreams and go into business with me instead? Alex might say yes, and that would be a mistake. Kara knew what jumping into working with someone was like. She’d loved the taco truck, and that just meant that when things with Mike had started to crumble, she'd clung harder. Giving him the keys back had reminded her was that the taco truck was never hers. When it had felt like he’d stopped caring about the taco truck, the truth was that he’d stopped caring about her. Because it was both business and relationship, if one end suffered, the other end fell apart also. If Alex wasn’t completely invested in the bakery idea, it could pull them apart, and that was the last thing Kara wanted.

The taco truck had been a failure in the end. Alex had so much faith in her, telling her she was talented, that she could handle this, but the truth was, Kara had never succeeded at anything. Journalism had been a blow, but the time she'd lasted just a month as shift manager at the coffee shop where she’d been fine as a barista had been an object lesson in taking on challenges she didn’t have the skills for. She couldn't bear it if Alex had to watch her fail, she couldn’t bear to drag Alex down with her.

The first step, that was what was missing. She had to figure out how to succeed on her own, how to keep her head above water without fear, before she tangled another person up in her mess again.

But still she didn’t want to leave National City. Not if it meant leaving Alex behind again. This
competition was her chance. If she just made the semi-finals and got the name of an investor, she would have one more chance to prove herself—-with a farmers market stand, a food truck, a café. And even if she failed again, she’d have a little more time to stay in National City, near Alex.

And that would have to be enough.

#
Kara’s bread was on its final rise before baking. It was time to get going on the soup. She ducked into the walk-in. Zucchini, zucchini. Where was the zucchini?

Alex was in there also, picking through the barrel of shallots. She looked up. Her eyes warmed, and her mouth curled into a half grin that Kara had at first thought was teasing or sly, but now read only as pure pleasure at seeing her. Kara was always pleased to see Alex too. "Lost?"

"Zucchini?"

"Ah," Alex frowned, glancing around. "I think I saw some-- up there." She hopped up and started jumping for a tub on the top shelf.

Kara aware that she was about three inches taller than Alex, came up behind her and reached over her head. "Let me."

Alex jumped again, missed, and bumped into her. She looked startled at how close Kara was and protested. "I can get it."

"I’m the one who needs it."

The shelf was very high, and Alex wouldn’t move out of the way. Kara pressed close against her back to get her fingers on the bottom of the tub. Her hand went to Alex’s waist to steady herself. It fit right above her curve of her hip. Kara’s chest went tight. Alex made a tiny gasping sound that caused Kara to lurch and snag the ridge on the bottom of the tub. It slid out, tipped, and fell.

A rain of zucchini along with a single plastic tub descended. Kara yelped and shoved Alex down, covering her to protect her from the falling squash.

At the shove, Alex yelped. "Kara!"

The bin hit Kara on the head and she overbalanced, knocking Alex into the shelving.

The squash had stopped falling. Kara straightened up, pulling a wry looking Alex up after her, and checking her over to make certain she wasn’t hurt. She had a dirty nose from whatever Kara had pushed her into. Kara wiped at it with her apron, and Alex squirmed, resisting, adorable, until they banged into the shelving again with a quiet thunder.

"Stop that," Alex complained. "I told you I had it."

"You didn’t have it at all." Kara laughed. Only Alex would be so cross about not being able to be as helpful as she wanted to be. She crouched to start piling the zucchini back in the bin. Alex dropped down to help her. They heaped them all back in, save for the six Kara needed for her soup.

"I’ll put it back up," Alex said, her jaw stubborn. Her bandanna was still askew from the rain of zucchini earlier, and Kara did her best to repress a smile. But really, there was no way Alex could reach.

"You will not." Kara fought her for the tub.

"I can manage."

"It’s my zucchini."
Alex tugged a little too hard when Kara wasn't ready, and the bin came out of her hands. Alex fell back against the shelving, the zucchini tub pressed to her chest.

"Oh no! Are you okay?" Kara stepped forward, grabbed the tub, shoved it back up on its shelf and moved in, cupping Alex's face. "You didn't hit your head, did you?"

Alex's eyes were wide, her lips parted. Her gaze flicked up to the easily re-shelved zucchini bin and then to Kara's mouth. Her face was so close. "I-- no. I'm fine."

The tip of Alex's tongue darted out to moisten her lips. Kara couldn't look away, if she just-- no. She'd kissed her before when she'd been upset and that had been totally inappropriate. And Alex hadn't brought it up afterwards. She hadn't said whether or not she was okay with it, and until Kara knew whether it was fine or not, she couldn't kiss her again.

She hadn't said anything else either. She hadn't said she wanted Kara to stay.

"Good." She squeezed Alex's cheek, then turned and scooped up her zucchini and headed out back into the studio.

Every single person in the room was looking at her. Kara waved, confused.

Siobhan snorted. "Seriously. No hooking up in the walk-in. If you'd ever worked in a kitchen, you'd know that one."

"I-- okay? Good to know?" Kara went back to her station, not entirely sure what was going on.

#

The comments had been on the whole positive for everyone on the soup and breads. So when Kara was called up to the judging circle with Waylon and M'gann, her heart stopped. She'd thought her cheddar chive sourdough and zucchini soup were good. And she'd just started planning what she'd do if she made semi-finals and got an investor. She'd jinxed herself.

"Kara," Diana reached out and pressed her hands. "Congratulations, your bread and soup combination was delicious. And the raspberry vinaigrette coulis--I wanted to finish the loaf of the bread just with that."

Kara gaped. Wait. This wasn't criticism. She'd won? She'd won the first baking challenge.

Waylon was criticized for using the overnight preparation time on a quickbread like cornbread. The recipe had been too simple, and also too heavy on the jalapeños. M'gann’s bread hadn’t risen well because of all the seeds and nuts in it and was too dense and chewy, though she was commended for its flavor.

Kara staggered back to her bench, still astonished. "I won."

Alex reached out and thwapped her forearm. "Of course you did. You used my starter."

Kara stuck out her tongue.

#

Alex bumped her shoulder before the second round. "I'm going to up my game this time, watch out."

Kara, who was a little overfull from having eaten way too much of Alex's rosemary and olive loaf and sausage-heavy pasta fasol, was rather concerned. If she made something even better than that,
Kara was probably going to eat herself sick.

On her part, she'd thought about quickbreads the night before and made a few recipe notes, but hadn't exactly decided what she was going to make. She thought she might go sweet, a cakey base, made extra light with whipped eggs, streaked with lemon raspberry jam and crumbly chocolate folded in.

Alex was not going sweet. She was caramelizing onions in balsamic vinegar. The smell of her Manchego and onion soda bread made Kara suddenly hungry again.

When the judges came around--this week’s third judge a bandy-legged Frenchman who made dismissive comments about American cooking--they had nothing but good things to say about Alex’s. The fact that Kara had gone for a sweet loaf had made the French judge sigh, but she was a little amused by the fact that Lilian rolled her eyes at the other judge’s comments, rather than simply gutting the contestants for their failures. When they finished judging Siobhan, Siobhan glared at Kara. She'd made something very similar to Kara’s, with an orange base, and after tasting it, Lilian had pursed her lips. "Too sweet," she said. "Kara's made it clear that the chocolate can be a lot bitterer, the jam can be much sourer, and hers is the better for it."

Kara felt slightly guilty about that. But it wasn’t her fault that Siobhan had made something along the same lines.

When it came time for the winner and losers to be announced, Alex was called up to the front. She looked anxious, but Kara had no doubt that she’d killed it on this one. Again, M'gann and Waylon were in the bottom, which made Kara's heart clench in her throat. She didn't want to lose any of them. Not even Siobhan.

M’gann’s butternut gingerbread had been too dense and treacly, and Waylon had tried an experiment with putting shaved meats and vegetables in biscuit dough, which, while “Inventive, and with good flavor”--said Diana, “was underdone since the moisture in the vegetables prevented the biscuit dough from cooking properly,”--finished Lilian.

But when they announced Alex as the winner and Alex turned around and instantly looked for her, a little flushed and terribly proud, Kara’s heart clenched in a different way.

#
Episode 4: Part 3

Week 4 interviews:

Alex: I really never thought I'd say this, but I feel like I've already won so much by coming on this show. I made more friends than I ever thought I would. And I just . . . I really hope I keep them.

Oh, yeah. I'm excited for the team competition tomorrow. Bread is one of my favorite things, and I have no idea how they're going to swing it. If I had to pick a partner? Kara. I just work better with her. Better than myself, I mean. I become a better chef when she's got my back.

M'gann: There's a reason I buy in bread. :shakes head: I really think it's a different skill-set than other kinds of cooking and the people who are good at it should value those skills. :narrows her eyes at the camera: Alex .

Who do I want on my team tomorrow? Well, :grins: I love Waylon, but probably not him since we keep ending up in the bottom two together. Probably . . . Kara.

Waylon: I'll be lucky to make it through this one. First vegan cooking and now bread . Man. But I'm feeling like I'm learning so much from everyone.

I want Kara. She's a sneaky genius.

Siobhan: A lot of this is just a matter of taste, and I like things lighter and softer and sweeter than the sourdough twins over there. But I have an edge. I can bring it to bear.

Ugh, no. I wouldn't pick Kara. Kara's niceness drives me up the wall. I'd rather have Alex. But if you get one the other one is going to be lurking around. They're kind of disgusting. And they still claim they're not hooking up when we all heard them in the walk-in today. Seriously .

Kara: I know I won the round one fish challenge, but this is the first time where I came in, feeling confident, and won because I knew what I was doing. It felt really great. Baking is something that makes me feel like me. I don't know what . . . other people are doing after this. But this is the sort of thing I'd like to be doing in the future. :laughs: yes, I'm moving away from tacos. But I will always love tacos.

Oh, on my team? I really love everyone and I don't know what the challenge will be, but if I had to pick anyone I think-- :her mouth opens, forming one shape, and then she winces: --Siobhan.

What do you mean she's the only person who didn't pick me? You mean everyone else picked me? Really? Why would they do that?

#
The sun was still up when they were let out of the studio, and there was a motion to go in the pool. Kara had voted in favor, but when Alex emerged from the house dressed for swimming, she wished she'd thought more about it. It had been hard enough not to kiss Alex in the walk-in when she had a dirty nose and the compensatory overconfidence that came from not being as tall as she thought she ought to be. But seeing Alex in her burgundy halter-style bikini top with boy-cut bottoms, her hair still up in that tiny silly ponytail on top of her head, strands falling down out of it around her face-- it was hard to look without wanting to touch.

Kara sunk all the way under the water to try to cool her red face. She surfaced to see Siobhan watching her, with a raised eyebrow, smirking. Oh man. She was not being subtle.

Alex splashed in and emerged, messy and wet. Waylon and M'gann joined them and a game of tag ensued. Siobhan, skulking out of range in the largest expanse of clear water, pointed out cheaters and turned the tide as she pleased. Kara yelped when someone grabbed her leg and then shrieked happily as she pounced on Alex, Alex grabbing her feet and carrying her on her back across the shallow end. Her arms around Alex's water-dappled shoulders, her cheek pressed into her wet hair, she stopped thinking about anything else. She didn't think about her mom or Mike or the future or the competition. Just here, now, water, friends. Alex did a forward somersault, dislodging her from her back into the water. Kara struggled up and lunged for Alex who unexpectedly dodged. Kara splashed back through the surface on her face, recovered, lunged again. Kara was ready for another dodge, but she was not ready for Alex to snag her around the waist and spin her up against the side of the pool, pinning her there.

Alex, cocky and pleased with herself, all wet skin and very little coverage, pressed up against her, and Kara's hands found themselves on her waist. She couldn't look away from Alex's eyes, dark and warm. Maybe that was why she'd liked Alex from the beginning. No matter how grumpy or resentful she could be, she never looked at Kara like she was an imposition, was a tiresome fuckup. Even her mom didn't want her. But Alex did.

She just wished Alex wanted her a little more.

#

They ended up whispering to each other across the room for so long that Siobhan got up and stomped over to her bag to get her earplugs. "No funny business," she said, wagging her finger at them. "I do not want to wake up and see either of your asses. I am sure they're very pretty, but then I'll have to tell Leslie and she will laugh at me for ever."

Alex, starting to get used to Siobhan's explicit threats, rolled her eyes.

But for the first time, Kara went pink. Alex's stomach turned unsettled. She'd never seemed to hear the words before. Siobhan was always suggestive, but Kara only ever reacted to the content. She ignored the implications. Did hearing the implications this time mean she'd been thinking about Alex in a different way than before?

Being friends with a straight girl was always a delicate proposition. Alex wasn't as in your face about being queer as, say, Maggie was. But that just made it more difficult. Not bringing it up could be taken as lying by omission, just as bringing it up too often could be 'making everything about it.' Not that her assumption that Kara was straight wasn't highly speculative. No matter what Mike had said about her being surprised when he said her name, he'd been just a little too sure that she'd be responsive to Alex's interest. And then, well, there was the kiss. But no one had mentioned it, so clearly it hadn't meant anything. Right?
Still, there were rules, ingrained deep into Alex. No sleeping in the same beds as other girls, no touching their skin in places normally covered by clothes, even when they were in a bathing suit, no staring into their eyes while you think about kissing them. She’d been batting zero for three on those, and the intimacy was starting to give her palpitations.

It was Kara, so touching was pretty much required. But all of the cuddling on the hanging couch, and the near naked fooling around, and the intense eye-contact-- her heart could not take it.

It would be easier to whisper if they were in the same bed, but they weren't thirteen and fourteen anymore. So Alex whispered good night, and Kara whispered it back, and Alex felt like a lovesick teenager at a sleepover with her crush.

#

"Welcome to the last challenge before the quarter final." Diana, beautiful and poised as usual, swept an arm out in greeting. Alex sighed and wondered if she'd just been too stressed out to be attracted to anyone while working for Max. Probably, also most of her crew were ugly fucks, and she and Vasquez were not each other's type. And now she was surrounded by really attractive women. Everyone on this show was stupidly attractive. And if she did the math--also queer. Siobhan had a girlfriend, M'gann lived in Cathedral Park--no one lived in Cathedral Park without being some flavor of queer--Alex was Alex, Maggie had not been subtle in the least, even Lucy pinged hard. And like, fine, women who worked in kitchens were either not into dudes or also willing to cut off their balls, but just percentage-wise, the chances that Kara was even the faintest bit bisexual was dropping like a stone.

"I would congratulate you all on getting this far," said Lilian. "But honestly, this is the last phase that doesn't matter. The four of you who move on to the quarterfinal and then the three in the final have a chance to meet investors and realize their dreams. The one of you going home tomorrow, however, just loses." Lilian grinned as she said it, and Diana cast her an amused look, laughing into her hand at the dramatics.

Alex felt her face heating up. They couldn't be-- Could they also be? Shit, she needed to stop panting after Kara. She was starting to see gay things everywhere.

The third judge, a foreign pastry chef who Alex didn't recognize, enthusiastically clapped his hands.

"Today's team competition is going to be a true team competition, because you will all be working as a team!"

Lilian rolled her eyes and Alex snorted. Well that made sense for trying to split up five people.

"You will be running a Parisian style café. I assume at least some of you have worked as a barista at one point or another. This café will involve at minimum: espresso drinks, viennoiserie, panini and baguette."

Jesus christ, Alex thought.

"You have three hours before opening. We will be watching, so we will know what you are responsible for and know what succeeds and fails. There is no team leader."

Oh no.

The five contestants converged on the sheets of sample menus. No leader meant they were expecting chaos, they wanted it.

"Right," M'gann cut everyone off. "First thing first. I can run an espresso machine, anyone else?"
Kara put up her hand. "I was a barista for nine months."

Siobhan crossed her arms over her chest. "I worked as one for six years."

Alex and Waylon glanced at each other. Alex had never touched an espresso machine, and everyone complained about her coffee. She was staying out of it.

"Who has experience making croissants?"

Again, both Siobhan and Kara. Kara making a face, "I mean, I've just tried a few times and they came out okay the last time at least."

M'gann nodded. "Siobhan, you're in charge of the viennoiserie, Kara is your assistant. Alex, you are in charge of the regular bread, Waylon is your assistant. I am going to sort everything else out, so that when you have a break for rising or baking, I will grab you for other tasks. Right?"

Alex hesitated, unsure if she was supposed to protest that M'gann had taken charge, but all her instructions seemed reasonable, and they needed a leader, so she nodded. "Right, what breads do we need?"

"We should probably keep it simple," Waylon said. "Three breads, including baguettes, all of them good for paninis?"

"We can make some baguettes fatter so they can be put in the press."

"Um," Kara said, returning from hunting around the kitchen. "We don't have a press. I've made them on a grill pan before?"

M'gann put a hand to her forehead. "Okay. We're not there yet, but Kara's on the panini station, since she's apparently done everything with an old tin can and a cast iron saucer."

"I can't do a real sourdough in this amount of time," Alex said. "But I can do a beer based sandwich bread with a little flavor."

"Focaccia good for panini," Kara said. "It's flat, so it doesn't wobble around."

"That's easy," Alex said. "Waylon can do that."

Waylon did not look certain he could do that.

"I know we only have three hours," Kara said. "But if we put in a pork shoulder now, we could have carnitas before lunchtime."

M'gann puffed out air. "We're not making tacos."

"We could do cubanos." Kara pushed ahead. "Cubanos, Banh Mi, and a portobello melt?"

"That sounds great," Alex said. "Banh Mi for the baguettes so we don't have to panini them, and we can also do pulled pork, and ham and swiss, and something fancypants with prosciutto and fig jam?"

Kara grinned, nodding.

"Right," M'gann said. "I'll prep the pork shoulder. You get everything rising and then we reconvene to finalize the menu."

Alex had never really thought there would be a day when she'd be deep-frying pickles and enjoying
But Kara had been assigned to finalizing the sandwich menu after it had brought it around to everyone to get their input. Somehow, she’d decided that every single sandwich needed a different aioli or dressing, and when the bread was finally coming out of the oven, Alex found her sweating over half a dozen mixing bowls.

"What the hell?"

"They have to be different!" Kara was looking panicky and red-eyed. She scooped up a stray blob from the counter on her finger and stuck it into Alex's mouth. Alex froze, then winced at the sharp lime--no, seville orange and achiote chili in the aioli.

"Wow. Yum. Okay, calm down."

Kara cast her a savage glare.

Alex grabbed her shoulders. "Breathe. And then tell me what still needs to be done. The bread's up, the carrots and radishes are in the fast pickle. Waylon is crisping up the carnitas."

A choked sob cut her off. "I haven't gotten the barbecue sauce done for the pulled pork."

"Waylon can do that too."

"But I wanted--"

"Trust him."

Kara took a breath. "And I haven't even started deep frying the pickles."

"What?" This was nonsense.

"For the cubanos."

"You don't need to deep fry the--"

But Kara's eyes were too wide and too blue and too panicked to ignore.

"I will deep fry the pickles."

Obvious relief swept over Kara’s face. "Okay. I will just finish up these aiolis and the matching herb-butter and--"

"And tell me if you need anything else. Okay?"

Kara sagged slightly in her arms, just for a moment. "Okay." Her hand curled around Alex's arm. "Thank you. I can handle this now. I'm so glad I get to do this with you."

Alex smiled and was trying to think of a not embarrassing or juvenile way to say the same back, when a towel stung her ass and she spun, to find Siobhan wagging her finger.

"Get whipped later," she instructed.

Alex rubbed her butt and scowled. "Fuck off, enfadoso." She gave Kara's hand a quick squeeze and headed for the deep-fryer.

This is what it would be like, Alex was realizing, to run that lunch place. She'd get the bread in earlier, she'd need someone else to do coffee, but coffee would make it work for breakfast too, which
was important for the takings. Things like pork shoulder and smoking their own turkey breast could be done in the evenings once or twice a week. She wouldn't let Kara freak out over inventing eight new aiolis every day. They'd set the menu, mix them in big batches, store them. She'd do a single new one as a special every day. But there would be enough to do, making sure the hot dishes stayed interesting, figuring out what was popular enough for every day and what was too expensive and needed to be used as a draw--

And there Alex went again, assuming she'd say yes, assuming Alex would ever do more than daydream about this. But it was a good daydream.

Patrons were coming in now, buying fresh croissants and pain au chocolate. Siobhan and M'gann managed the front of the house and ran the espresso machine. The first few sandwich orders were coming in, and Alex switched into support mode, prepping the mise, organizing the setup so Kara's complicated flavor pairings were clearly labelled as Kara furiously put sandwiches together and Waylon hurried to finish the last preparations for the carnitas and pulled pork. Then there were too many orders, and Alex and Waylon were also assembling sandwiches, swearing at each other when they were both going for the same squeeze bottle and swearing more when the customer wanted some sort of absurd replacement.

"You want it gluten free, fine, it's gluten free!" Alex covered a hunk of carnitas and ham in swiss cheese, piled fried pickles on it (she'd done them in rice flour), microwaved for thirty seconds and drizzled the plate with mayo and mustard from the squeeze bottles.

"I know you're being an asshole," Waylon said. "But that looks really good."

She flicked a pickle that had escaped from its breading at him.

Kara rapped the back of her hand with a long spoon. "Stop it."

Alex stopped.

Waylon snorted. "Siobhan was right."

Alex knew her face was red, and she went back to building sandwiches. She was not whipped, thank you. She just . . . wanted to be good enough. And maybe she didn't have a chance with Kara, but with the way Kara knocked their hips together each time she passed, the way she tried her pickles and gave her an elbow-tap of approval, the way she looked to Alex first whenever she needed help, maybe she did.

It was worth a try.

#

They were allowed to close up at five, and then sent off to shower and rest until eight, when the results would be announced. Waylon gave them all hugs on the way back from the house. "I think we did great running that place," he said. "And . . . I'm the weakest link."

Kara clung to his neck and he mostly carried her down to the studio. Alex felt her eyes stinging. When the news was announced, as Waylon had predicted, she struggled to not cry on camera. Everything was making her too emotional these days. She hated it.

But she also didn't hate it. She hadn't felt like she needed a drink in days. She'd been way too busy, and when she was tired of people she still wasn't tired of Kara, who could talk a hundred miles a minute or lie in her lap being silent and either way be exactly what she needed.
And that feeling of being sad that Waylon was leaving, but also being hopeful that everyone would stay in touch, and that Alex had a chance to keep being this new person she was starting almost to like lasted until Lucy called her aside after the filming was over.

"So, I have some news."

"What?" Alex went tense. Was it her mom? Vasquez? Alura?

"Your former employer, Max Lord? He's suing you."

Alex stared at her. "What?" she repeated, feeling like an idiot. But this didn’t make sense. "He threatened to. I didn't think he'd actually be enough of a douchebag to do it."

"Yeah, well," Lucy wrinkled her nose. "Someone has been in breach of contract it looks like. No points for guessing who. He found out you were on the show. Someone must have told him that you were close to making the quarterfinals and how our schedule works. He's used his connections to get the court date to appear on the same day we're filming the quarters, and if you don't show, he'll probably win."

Alex smiled tightly. "Fuck that fucking pinche cabron. Goddammit." She threaded both hands through her hair. "I should have broken his jaw not just his wrist."

Lucy raised an eyebrow. "No. I think that would not have improved the situation. What you should have done, though, is explained to me in what manner you'd left your last place of employment so we wouldn't have been blindsided by this."

"The fucker grabbed my ass, so I broke his wrist and he fired me. Is that clear enough now?" Alex tugged at her hair. Fuck Max. Fuck all of this. She should never have worked for him. That one stupid fucking mistake could ruin everything. "So you want me gone?"

"What? Of course not." Lucy pressed her lips together. "Look. Cat approved the strategy I planned. I'm going to be a bug in the judge's ear until we get a continuation, and if I can't get it thrown out entirely, at least get the date postponed until after filming is over. Then, we have two options for maintaining the narrative. Cat is fine with you being the crazy gunner chick who blows up and punches people. She loves that footage of Waylon grabbing your arm before you deck Mike." Lucy grimaced. "I don't so much, because I'm fucked two ways if I let any of what he says about Kara make the airwaves. I'm also not a fan, though, because if we go hard on you being violent and generally irredeemable then we have to cut the other storyline that's developing."

Alex felt like she was about to puke. Violent and generally irredeemable, that was exactly who she wanted to play on TV. But if it was who she’d revealed herself to be, just like Mike had said, it wasn’t like she had a choice. That was who she was.

"What other storyline?"

Lucy just smiled tightly. "Doesn't matter. But I want to keep it a live possibility. And it kind of depends on you not being an asshole."

"And how am I supposed to fake that?"

"I need you to talk about what happened on camera, and I need you to be vulnerable and scared. I want you to make at least M'gann and Kara feel sorry for you. Siobhan . . . you won't get, and that's fine. Also, if you can, don't let it turn into a sexism in the workplace convo, I know it's relevant, but Cat hates that. Viewers drop like flies, she says."
Her chest tight, Alex tried to breathe. Béchamel, Velouté, Espagnole . . . even her mantras were slipping away from her. Talk about it? She couldn’t talk about it, not without talking about everything else, not without explaining just how much of a fuck up she was. There was no way Max would leave any stone unturned, and that meant her whole record would be on display. Everything. And Lucy wanted her to cry about it, and try to get people’s sympathy--try to get Kara’s sympathy, when this part of her past was something she’d never wanted Kara to have to know about.

"What do I get?" Alex put her hands on her hips, her voice coming out grating, as if a coffee grinder was turned on in the back of her throat. Her eyes stung, and she hated herself for even showing that much weakness. That boded well for the ‘Alex has feelings’ episode. "What do I get for making myself pathetic on TV?"

Lucy shrugged. "You get me to handle this bullshit instead of having to pay for your own lawyer. Let me know if it’s worth it."

#
Alex was quiet around the fire that night. Kara was sad too, saying goodbye to Waylon, but Alex kept staring at her hands and not making eye contact. She’d avoided the hanging couch and was curled up on her own in a lounger with no way to get close to her save sitting right in her lap. Kara considered the possibility, but the idea that she'd react in confusion and distaste hurt too much for her to try.

She didn't talk nearly the whole evening, but did give Waylon a final hug as he headed off to bed for his last night in the house. M'gann and Siobhan followed him up. Alex returned to her lounger and Kara hovered, unsure if she should let her be alone or try to talk to her.

She sat quietly in the shadowed corner of the hanging couch, watching Alex, and not drawing much attention to herself. Finally, Alex got up and walked steadily and determinedly over to one of the coolers. She flipped up the lid.

It was the alcohol cooler.

Fuck. Kara clenched her hands, stop her? Interrupt her? Hope she changed her mind?

Alex stared down into the depths of the cooler for a while, then she shut her eyes and kicked down the lid, stomping it closed. She sank down on top of it and put her head in her hands. "Fuck."

Kara crept out of her hanging couch and moved closer. Alex heard her footsteps, glanced up and then groaned again. "Fuck. Of course you fucking saw that."

Kara settled down on the cooler next to her and put her hand on her leg. "Are you okay?"

Alex sighed, not leaning against her, staring down at the hand on her leg until it made Kara feel uncomfortable. She withdrew and her fingers missed the rough warmth of Alex's jeans tight over her thighs.

"You seemed fine earlier."

"Lucy had some bad news."

"Is everyone okay?"

Alex nodded. "My old employer is suing me. And I did kind of assault him. So I'm pretty fucked."

"What?" Kara stared. "You mean the man whose wrist you broke because he touched you inappropriately?"

Alex looked like she was going to smile, then didn't. "Grabbed my ass, I said, I think."

Alex looked like she was going to smile, then didn't. "Grabbed my ass, I said, I think."

"That's sexual assault. You had every right--"

"It was him being an asshole, which I already knew he was. It was nothing new. I just twisted too hard, I guess. I thought he'd be a man about it and shut the fuck up." Alex snorted. "He probably needed something to blame his sudden overspending on. I'd been running that place for him like it was a public service. Suing a Knives and Fire contestant is great press for his shitty restaurant too."

"This sucks. Is anyone doing anything about it?"
Alex nodded. "Lucy thinks she's got it handled. But I just--" Alex's eyes were wet, and she was staring at Kara like she was staring at something she desperately wanted but could never have. Her eyes were wet. "I've done things, and I didn't get blamed for most of them, but they're not good things. I should have realized before I signed up. I didn't think about what the press would be like for this, I didn't think that it would all be in my face again. And I don't want to handle it. I didn't handle it well before. I should never have come here, it was a mistake from the start, but now that I'm here, I can't-- I can't imagine-- and it's all just reminding me of how much I've ruined, how I don't deserve--"

Kara couldn't watch this. "Alex, you--" She leaned in, catching Alex's jaw, shutting her mouth, holding her still, and sealing her lips across Alex's. A short gasp of surprise broke the seal, and Kara pushed forward, not letting Alex pull away, firmly kissing her again over her open mouth. She should say what this meant, she should use her words, but she felt sure they would just hit Alex's ears and bounce off. This was the only way she could think to put the feeling straight inside of her, show her that she was wrong. She deserved everything, she was good, and even if she didn't have everything, she had Kara.

Alex's hand covered hers where it cupped her cheek, her body shifted forward, her lips softened, her head tipped to the side. Her other hand came up, hesitant, delicate, barely brushing against Kara's face. She was kissing Kara back. Her fingers slid into Kara's hair, tightened, her other hand left Kara's, reaching out to catch her chin, tilt her head, and Alex kissed her hard. Rough lips, Alex's body pressing against hers, a need there, a desperation.

And then Alex broke away. Tears had streaked down her cheeks and she rose, backing away from the cooler. Kara stared after her, her heart breaking. "Wait."

Alex shook her head. "You're just like that," she said, her voice hard, snapping, as she pointed to the cooler. "You make me feel better when I don't deserve it. When nothing should feel good at all."

"No. Alex."

But she fled.

#

Alex was in her bunk, blanket over her head, when Kara finally went up to the room. She'd hoped, maybe, that Alex had decided to crash with M'gann or Waylon who would talk her out of whatever tangle she'd gotten herself into. But she'd chosen to stay in the same room as Siobhan, who would just get pissed if Kara tried to talk to her and they ended up making a scene loud enough to wake her.

She didn't want to make a scene. She just wanted Alex to talk to her, or better yet listen when she told her that there was nothing-- nothing-- she could have done in her past that meant she didn't deserve good things. There were people who didn't deserve good things, but Alex, stubborn, protective, caring Alex could never be one of them, whatever mistakes she'd made.

Kara stood in the middle of the room for a moment, trying to decide. Go to bed in her own bed above Siobhan, or climb up onto Alex's bunk, cover her mouth and make her shut up when she jerked down the blanket to shout at her and tell her to go away.

She wanted to kiss her again. For a moment there, right in the middle, after the panic had fled because Alex was kissing her back and before new panic returned because Alex was crying and telling her she couldn't help, it had been so good.

It had felt right, like this was the one thing that had always been right, and she had foolishly spent all
of her life swerving toward and away from it, but Alex was her north. Couldn’t she feel it too? They had been apart for so long, how could her north be running away from her?

But that sort of thinking was childish. All of her ideas were childish and impractical. Hold her down and kiss her until she changed her mind? Shout at her? Tell her she was wrong for believing what she believed? When had shouting ever changed anyone’s mind? How did you change someone’s mind when they’d decided on the wrong thing? Kara had never been able to work that one out. A sigh escaped her. There was no immediate action she could take to fix this. She couldn’t magically make it better. But she would be there for Alex, if Alex could bear to accept her help.

That was all she could do.

In her life, Kara had had a lot of practice feeling helpless. Wallowing in it had never made a difference. So she went to bed.

#
On their day off, Alex didn't get out of bed until noon. Waylon had left after a round of hugs for Kara, M'gann and even a wry-faced Siobhan, and the mood downstairs was subdued. Kara hid behind her book, but didn't get a lot of reading done. She kept looking towards the stairs, hoping it would be Alex, ready to talk things through.

Siobhan lay on the couch opposite with a stack of Runway Magazines, and M'gann had a notebook out and seemed to be doing sums.

After the fourth time a small noise had made Kara's gaze dart to the stairwell, Siobhan put down her magazine and M'gann looked up from her sums.

"What the fuck happened last night?" Siobhan asked. "You're all twitchy, but not in the good way, like you'd be if Alex put her hand down your pants on camera."

Kara flinched.

"Kara," M'gann said. "Alex looked troubled last night. Do you know what's going on?"

Kara hesitated. "It's not my business--" But she didn't know what to do. "Lucy told her that her asshole of an ex-boss is suing her for breaking his wrist when he groped her."

"Huh," Siobhan said. "That's late."

"What?"

"He's been sitting on it for weeks." She shook her head. "It's just a nuisance suit. Slap him back with sexual harassment and wrongful termination. Maybe he thinks he can win, but that's not the point. He wants to use the bad press to get her kicked out of the competition. That's the real reason for it, vengeance, making sure she doesn't succeed after he fucked up and fired her."

"She worked for Max Lord, didn't she?" M'gann asked. "He's had so many sexual harassment cases settled out of court that I'm sure a judge would just groan and throw it out if there was a countersuit."

Kara wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't know what's going on with the lawsuit. But I don't think it's just being sued that's making her upset."

"Oh fabulous."

Kara's head jerked up. Alex was standing in the doorway, looking scowly, still in the pajama shorts and tank-top that she'd slept in.

"I love it when I come into a room and everyone's talking about me."

"What can we say, Lexie?" Siobhan drawled. "We can't help but dish about how much your fashion choices look like a throwback to the 80s dyke punk scene."

Alex flipped her off and went to get coffee.

She came back and climbed into an armchair, tucking up her feet under herself. Kara wished she wasn't so far away. Alex glowered at everyone over her coffee and flicked her fingers. "Talk about something else for ten minutes while I wake up. I'll answer questions afterwards. Apparently I'm supposed to get it off my chest and sound vulnerable or some shit, for Lucy. I'd rather be kicked off
the show. But we're already this far along, I suppose I've got to stick it out."

Kara wrapped her arms around her knees and ached. Alex leave the show? That would be the worst thing. Assuming that neither of them got cut, there were only six days left. And then what? Would Alex even want to see her again if everything was still a mess? Even if Alex didn't want her in the way she wanted Alex, she couldn't bear to lose her completely. Not again.

Alex's eyes fell on her face, and then she looked quickly away, her shoulders drooping. "I don't know how I'm supposed to be vulnerable and forgivable about this," she said softly. "If I tell you anything it will just add to the violent out-of-control alcoholic narrative."

"Well, if you want violent and out of control stories, I once burned a girl's face because she placed higher in class rankings than me," Siobhan said.

The room was silent. Even Alex looked slightly horrified.

"Seriously?" M'gann asked.

Siobhan shrugged. "She'd cheated on the final and snagged valedictorian with it, taking my spot. And then she tried to rub it in my face, so I put my cigarette out in hers."

That was both terrifying and . . . very insightful. Siobhan had merciless overachiever written all over her. Kara cringed. She'd done her best to avoid those kids in high school. The slightly stressed and mediocre were her people. Maybe she would have been more like Siobhan if her parents-- dad, she reminded herself, just her dad -- hadn't died. She'd been heading that way. But she'd slipped up those few years after the bombing and had to repeat her freshman year. School hadn't seemed to matter so much with no parents to make proud.

"I stabbed someone once," M'gann said, casually.

Kara's eyes went wide.

"He was going to start a fight in my bar. He'd broken a bottle and actually not sent glass shards into his hand--that stops most people. I'd been chopping limes. He slammed his hand down on the bar, threatening me and demanding another drink, and I put the knife through his hand."

Even Alex seemed to have forgotten about her coffee.

"Did the police come?"

M'gann snorted, "In Cathedral Park? Nah, his friends bundled his hand in a bar towel and took him to the Urgent Care."

"Badass," Siobhan said.

Kara bit her lip, then took a breath. "I broke someone's collarbone."

Now there were looks.

"I was with my new foster dad, and there was a car that backfired right by me, and I had--" She chewed on the inside of her lip. "--an episode. He tried to grab me, to keep me away from the street, and I hit him. I hit him so hard I felt the bone snap." She forced a smile. "A new family after only a week that time."

"I'm sorry," M'gann said softly.
Siobhan snorted. "Mike got off lightly then, just falling into the ice chest. Also, fuck, you're strong. It's really hot."

Alex huddled deeper into her chair and took another sip of coffee. "Now I have to talk, don't I?"
"Yup," said Siobhan. "We've bonded. Be all vulnerable. You can even cry."
"I'd really rather not."

Alex rubbed her face and sighed, and then she started to talk.

"I was kind of a drunken mess in grad school. I mean, grad school itself is enough to drive anyone up the wall, but my mom was so sure I'd be a genius at it, and that I'd do all the things my dad never got to do, while I was starting to realize that I hated it. I hated the game of pleasing your lab supervisors and jockeying for position with other students. I really hated most of my cohort, but we hung out anyways. Half of us at least were out late drinking every night and then doing a line before our lab shifts. It was just what you did. The other half went to student health counseling religiously."

Alex smiled tightly. "I've never been great at talking about my feelings."

She chugged the end of her coffee.

"Anyways," Alex sighed. "I was out one night with a couple of guys from my cohort. We were pretty deep in already and one of them, Francois, we called him, he was being a total douchebag. Like, I hated him in general, but he was talking about how his wife didn't know he was on three dating apps, and how he'd told the Chem department that one of the girls in the cohort below us was a slut so they wouldn't hire her for TA assignments. I was pissed. His wife was a sweetheart, and always brought great pastries to the department parties. And the girl in the other cohort was, well, as close to a friend as I got during grad school. I bit my tongue the whole night. Then we were walking home, and he spotted another girl coming down the street and said, 'her profile says she doesn't fuck on the first date, but she does. She does anal.' And I just--" Alex took a breath. "I shoved him. I told him to shut the fuck up, that no one believes his big ass mouth flapping because he already admitted to lying about Jess, and he shoved me back, and so I shoved him harder, and he was high as a kite so he tripped over the curb and fell."

Alex's voice had suddenly lost the edge of remembered anger. She stared down into her empty mug.

"He hit his head. The guys who were with me told the police that he'd tripped, and so it was ruled an accident. But his wife's lawyer wrote me a letter saying they were considering suing me. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any money. I wrote back, saying so, and then waited. I didn't hear anything more about it. I think her lawyer was busy trying to figure out if she would be deported since she'd been here on her husband's student visa. If I'd had money I would have given it to her. She'd deserved better than him, but she didn't deserve to lose him like that."

"Ugh," Siobhan said. "None of ours were accidents."

"No one died in any of yours!" Alex snapped back. "And whatever. Involved in a fight outside a bar where one man died. If they hadn’t-- if they hadn’t told the cops he tripped it would have been murder."

"Manslaughter," M'gann said. "Not intentional. There’s a difference."

Alex covered her face. "That doesn’t make it better. It almost makes it worse. If I’d had a good enough reason to want to kill him--" She shook her head. "I just wanted to show him how angry I was, how wrong he was, and I picked violence, like I always do. Once is an accident, twice is a
curiosity, and three times is a habit. I was arrested for assault in Gotham too. A customer was bitching out one of my busboys and followed him into the alley after his shift. I don't know if he wanted a blowjob and thought being a racist bully was the way to go or what, but I was unlucky enough to punch him when there were cops strolling by.

"You're just a violent person," Siobhan said. "It's not like most chefs aren't."

"I shouldn't have to be." Alex stared down into her hands. "I should be able to stop myself."

"Have you fought anyone since you stopped drinking?" Kara asked.

Alex looked up, her eyes were so dark and so sad. It looked like she was trying to apologize. But she had nothing to apologize to Kara for. Whatever she'd done, she'd never hurt Kara. Kara didn't really think she could. "I tried to fight Mike that one time."

"Waylon told me the sort of thing he was saying," M'gann said. "He deserved it. I wouldn't have stopped you. I would have piled on."

"I broke Max's wrist."

"What, you were supposed to gently remove his hand from your ass?" Siobhan snorted. "Douche."

"You're the kindest person I know," Kara said. Alex gave a shaky disbelieving laugh and ducked her eyes away, as if she was unable to face seeing the honesty in her gaze.

"Honey," Siobhan drawled, patting Kara on the hand. "You have got to meet more people."

#

In the evening, Alex floated on her back alone in the pool, staring up at the night sky. Kara was curled up on the hanging couch with her book. Every once in awhile she'd call out, "Still alive?" and Alex would mumble something incoherent in response.

The thing that hurt worse than anything was Kara's relentless faith in her. Kara didn't know her anymore. She didn't know anything. She didn't know what Dad dying and Mom sending Kara away had turned Alex into.

Sometimes, Alex had flashes of a life where when her dad had died, Kara had stayed, and Alex had managed to put all her confusion and grief and anger at losing him into shaping herself into Kara's guardian and protector.

Instead of discovering her sexuality at a punk concert in a filthy bathroom and also discovering the instant regret that came with sex simply to fulfill the body, maybe she would have realized that the feelings she had for Kara, the urge to be around her all the time, to always be touching her and making her smile, they came paired with a need to taste her skin and plan a life for both of them together. Maybe she would have been able to stand up to her mom and tell her that she couldn't finish her degree, rather pretending everything was fine until two weeks into the semester, then abruptly withdrawing and getting on a plane to Gotham.

She couldn't have done that, couldn't have ducked and run, not if she had to own up to Kara. And Kara always made her own up. There were so many shitty things she wouldn't have done if she'd had Kara's eyes watching, Kara's goodness to live up to.

Maybe she could have been good for Kara too. Maybe she could have been good enough for Kara.
Instead, selfishness, violence and death followed her every footstep.

And Kara had kissed her.

With a small gurgle, Alex sank under the water.

Kara had kissed her.

"Still alive?"

Alex surfaced with a splash. "Yes?"

A small laugh. "You ready to go in yet?"

She had lots of responses to that. 'You don't have to babysit me.' 'Nope, still considering drowning.' 'Only if you promise not to look at me that way you keep doing.'

"Almost."

"'Kay." A small sound made Alex look over. Kara had moved to sit on the edge of the pool, her feet dangling down into the water. She was watching Alex, a quiet hardness in her face, a tiredness in her eyes.

Alex slowly backstroked over to her and pulled herself out, sitting on the edge of the deck beside her, just far enough away to not drip on her. She ducked her head and waited, wondering if Kara would tell her what part of all this was upsetting her most, make Alex face the pain in her expression that Alex wished she hadn't put there. But she didn't.

Eventually, Alex looked over, seeing Kara's eyes lingering on the tattoos on her back and arms. She noticed Alex looking, met her eyes, and then her gaze, still sad and dark and tired, flicked down. To her lips.

Alex's stomach felt like a porcupine whose spines had all suddenly reversed, her face hot even as the evaporating water cooled it. Kara knew what she'd done and she was still thinking of their kiss.

Alex wasn't good enough for her. It would be wrong to--

She'd never let being wrong stop her before.

Alex slowly shifted, moving one arm back, opening her shoulder, pushing back the wet hair clinging to her face. She brought her chest a little closer to Kara's, extended her neck, tipped up her chin, asked . Kara's eyes went wide. Slowly, she raised a hand, as if to touch Alex, trail along her neck, cup her cheek. But it hovered inches away, waiting. Alex didn't draw back, didn't rescind the invitation. And Kara leaned in, so close she could feel her breath, staying there, still, for one long moment. Then her lips brushed against Alex's.

Oh no.

It felt like ice cold molten silk running from her mouth down through her chest and deep into her core. Kara's mouth--soft and so warm compared to Alex, chilled from the pool--moved against hers. Alex tried to remember how to kiss back when every ounce of her brain and body was absorbed in feeling this. A tightness in her chest released into a sound, probably a whimper. She pressed her open mouth against Kara's, wanting more of her, even to swallow her up. Any release was immediately followed by a rejoining. Kara tasted of woodsmoke and warmth and sweetness, and Alex didn't even think of touching her further, of tongue or teeth or hands. She just wanted to kiss her. She wanted to
kiss her forever.

Kara drew back for a moment, as if to catch her breath, and Alex couldn't bear the distance, couldn't do anything but chase her mouth. She overbalanced and fell on top of Kara, whose back hit the deck heavily, making her let out an oof.

Alex clanged jaws with her, flat on her stomach on top of Kara, still dripping wet from the pool.

Shit.

Alex struggled up, wiping her forehead, droplets of water flying from her hair. "Sorry, I'm sorry."

Kara, looking a little stunned--god, she hoped she wasn't concussed--stared up at her. "Um."

Alex's face went hot, her whole insides ached, and she couldn't deal with questions right now. She couldn't deal with how good it felt to kiss Kara. She couldn't deal with any of this.

Kara slowly sat up, still looking at Alex, like she was waiting for something, asking for clarity, for hope. But Alex had none of that to give. She rubbed her face. "I need a shower. I-- I'm going to go shower."

I love you.

She choked back the last incongruous words, and as she ran for the house she thought she'd be choking them back every time she spoke to Kara for the rest of her life.

#

Kara trekked into the bedroom, dazed and out of her body. Siobhan gave her one long look, and snorted. "Hon, that dress is kinda see through when it gets wet."

Kara looked down at herself and winced. She hadn't planned on getting wet, but then Alex had fallen on her, and there was a Rorschach print that if you were, say, Siobhan, you could probably make out as another body, briefly pressed against hers, and what just might be a handprint over her breast. She wiped a few lingering droplets from Alex's hair off her face, then sighed. "I just wish I knew--"

"Nuh-uh-uh," Siobhan interrupted holding up a hand like a stop sign. "M'gann does bartender listening, and Alex wants in your pants, so either of them are your go-tos. I am not the girl to bare your troubles to. Because I am going to tell you one thing, okay? You have one chance at winning Knives and Fire. Hear that? One. And it could be over for you tomorrow if you let this bullshit mess you up. Whereas a human disaster like the one you may or may not be fucking will continue to be a human disaster for many days to come. Deal with the immediate problem. Let Alex sort her own shit out, and then you can fix it if she's sorted it out wrong."

It sounded oddly like good advice. But Kara couldn't help but want to fix it now. She wanted Alex to stop kissing her and then running away. Well, she didn't want her to stop kissing her, it was just the running away that needed to end.

She got into her pajamas and climbed up into her bunk and waited for Alex. Finally, she emerged, damp and clean from the bathroom, switched off the lights, and climbed up into her bunk.

"Goodnight," Kara whispered softly from across the dark room.

"Goodnight," Alex whispered back, and Kara closed her eyes, trying not to think of her brothers waving goodbye, of her dad, reaching out to the angry man--a familiar one, one of her Aunt's old friends--ushering him into the next room, and then the part she never thought of, the sound and the
light and the screaming, of everything being gone, of her mom coming back, perhaps even coming to see her, watching her from a car in the street or beyond the schoolyard wall, and then leaving again, because how she felt when she saw Kara wasn't strong enough to make her stay, and even Mike, driving away in the taco truck, driving away with the taco truck.

How could she even imagine that Alex wouldn't leave her or let her go? It didn’t matter why. That was how it always went. Three times was a habit, that was what Alex said. Four times said she was meant to be alone.

#

"Major Lane."

Lucy froze, looking up from the text she'd gotten from Alura, confirming her presence for the judging of the finale, checking in to make certain she was still looking after Kara. (Texting her the morning after Lilian and Diana had taken her out drinking had been a risk and resulted in a very angry, very hungover tirade. But it had been worth it. Now the texts were collegial, businesslike, sometimes even familiar.) "Yes?"

Cat was glaring at her. "What is this?"

On the screen in front of her was the recording from the morning of break day, where Alex had finally gotten over herself and talked about the accidental death she'd been involved in when she was twenty-two. She could probably have worked it a little harder, Lucy thought, but even with the guilt that lay heavily on her, Lucy might be able to spin it as a kind of underground chivalry. Sure, Alex punched people, but mostly she just punched assholes.

"Pathos?"

"All of our contestants have violent pasts."

"Makes Alex a bit less of an outlier."

"And what is this?" She'd flipped to another cue mark, one that Lucy hadn't seen yet. Lucy watched Kara and Alex sitting on the edge of the pool, quiet, softly lit by the outdoor sodium light. And then they were kissing.

Yes! Lucy rejoiced silently. She'd been hoping this storyline would get some good footage. It was so much better than the violent criminal one.

"It's adorable, I'm revolted."

"It will be great ratings. Viewers kill to watch actual people falling in love on camera. And you don't get it happening all that often. See, as an example, the Bachelor, where it's the entire point, and has a relationship success rate of less than 20%. The sweetheart dumping her boyfriend during the show and going for the hardass lesbian, that's a story."

"People won't like it."

"But they’ll talk about it. And come on, look at this arc." Lucy hit one of her cue numbers and a short clip of Alex at the beginning came on.

I'm not here to make friends.

She cued a second.
I realize that one of the things I value most about cooking is the fact that I can feed people that I care about. And if I don't have people that I care about . . . what's the point?

She put on the third.

I feel like I've already won so much by coming on this show. I made more friends than I ever thought I would. And I just . . . I really hope I keep them.

Cat sighed. "She's so sullen though."

"It's so perfect people will think we wrote it as a script. And come on, she's an asshole most of the time, but look how pretty she is when she's sad."

Cat sniffed. "Your judgment about these things has already been shown to be highly suspect. I'm on the fence. But if we do either storyline, there needs to be a climax in the finale, and I don't mean when they're fucking in one of the bunks. If we're selling romance, we have to have something sweet to sell. If the gunner crashes and burns in this episode, the story can only be her comeuppance. Her early cockiness, breaking up a cute couple, her violent reactions, they make it easy to have her appear deserving of a dramatic failure. I like that storyline. You know how I feel about drama."

Lucy hesitated. She knew exactly where Cat wanted this to go, and she'd taken the steps to get that kind of drama before. The person with too much ego and a hot temper was always a perfect mark for one frustration after another, a missing ingredient, someone jostling their arm, mixing up their arrangement of their mise, swapping salt for sugar. And then when they ended up in the bottom, sure they deserved to be in the top: it led to shouting, fists, fury. It was what Cat wanted in a show.

Lucy hated it. And she didn’t really think it would work this time. She had watched so much tape of those two idiots, she thought she had a good sense of how they’d react. Cat thought Alex would be good for an explosion, but when she was pissed at herself, she turned her anger inward. Still, Lucy could get a good reaction out of Alex. It would be easy, if she was willing to hurt Kara to do it, to have Kara be the one who was unfairly knocked out of the competition.

Lucy reached down to touch her phone. She didn’t want to do that. Selfish reasons maybe, but she really didn’t want to do that.

Cat needed drama.

The last time Lucy had gone it alone, tried to manipulate for the result she wanted--for a good result--it had blown up in her face. If she fucked up again, she’d have no chance at her own show; she’d be lucky if she still had a job.

Take the risk or play it Cat’s way? Those were her choices. She had to get a reaction, one way or another. They needed a finale. She had to decide.

"Leave it to me," Lucy said. “I’ll handle it."
The studio looked different in the morning. All of the benches had been cleared away save for four, all put into a line facing the dais. The lights were brighter, like they were trying to replicate the natural light from outside. The grey cooking surfaces had been swapped out for cream.

Lilian and Diana emerged onto the dais, Lilian, formal as ever, in a cream-colored pantsuit, and Diana in linen pants and a loose silk blouse that Kara tried not to look too closely at, as with a brief glance, the angle of the studio lights made it clear she was wearing a matching black bra and underwear set underneath.

"I," Diana glanced over at Lilian, a small smirk on her face, "at least, would like to congratulate all of you. Welcome to the semi-finals. You have all proven yourselves to be chefs, strong in many areas of the cuisine."

That made Kara redder than seeing Diana's underwear.

"I will withhold congratulations for the time being," Lilian said. "This is still a competition, and because it is a competition, it is artificial. Until you are tested in the fire, you are still children to me. Today is the day you will prove to us if you deserve to be tested in the fire."

And now wild panic was making Kara's heart pound in her throat. Siobhan was right. None of this mattered if she was cut today. She had too much to lose. But if one of them was going home, who else could it be? Her eyes scanned quick around the room. M'gann looked firm and set. Siobhan's eyes were narrowed, calculating. Alex, though, just looked tired. A cold hand clutched at her stomach. What if Alex was the one who washed out? She needed this chance. Her ex-employer seemed set on ruining her career. If she didn't make it here, she'd go out and have nothing. But there were excuses for sending her home. She'd struggled in earlier phases of the competition. Would they want to cut her loose as punishment for getting sued, so they could keep their good press? Alex had been so upset by all of this, but she couldn't let that affect her cooking. If she was going to stay, she needed to fight.

Alex's eyes shifted to her, and Kara gave her a fierce mimed fist bump. Alex's eyebrows shot up, and she looked incredulous for a moment, then offered a small wry grin. It didn't reach her eyes. When she turned back to the dais, her shoulders were still too slumped for Kara's comfort.

"And to help us decide which of you gets out of the sauté pan and into the roasting oven--" Diana made a slight face at the line she'd clearly been given. "--is our dear friend and the famous executive chef and manager of five restaurants, J'onn J'onzz."

As if jerked by a puppet string, Alex stood up straight, looking astonished and terrified.

The man in the short-sleeved chef's coat who emerged had adorably pointed ears. He smiled, his teeth bright in his dark face. He scanned the room, meeting each of their eyes, thoughtful and considering. Kara felt a strong urge to stand up straight and show her commitment. He looked at Alex last, his gaze stern and evaluating, and Alex looked like she was about to cry.

"Chefs," he greeted them. "My friends here have told me many complimentary things about what you've done so far. But the quarterfinals is our chance to see what you would do as a head chef in your own kitchen. Instead of two challenges, today will be one long combined challenge. Each of you will design a mini menu for the restaurant that you most want to run. This should have all of the components of dinner menu as well as whatever else you intend to serve. The diner walks in,
recieves a wine-list, drinks menu, choice of hors d'oeuvres, desserts, everything they could expect, with no more than three mains. This evening you will treat all three of us to a full meal of whatever we select off your menu."

"However," Lilian added. "We're not interested in watching you milling around all day and panicking at the end, so we expect you to have three items off your menu finished at noon. They can be anything, sides, dessert, or a main. We also expect them to be items that will not need to be prepared all over again for the dinner service. Use your prep time, organize your order of preparation, no last minute flailing."

"And the best of luck," Diana finished.

With a gong, the timer began.

Alex, looking panicked, immediately picked up her menu cards and started to write. How could Alex be more upset, but also more focused than she had been a second ago? It wasn’t important. Kara shook it off. Alex was going to fight for herself, and if Kara wanted to stay, she had to do the same.

A formal dinner menu? Kara gulped. She’d never developed a formal dinner menu before. She’d never even hosted a dinner party. How did you pick a set of sides and hors d’oeuvres that would compliment each other but could also be mixed and matched? How did you even think about a drinks menu?

Kara rubbed her forehead. She felt kind of like she'd cooked everything she knew how to do well twice already on the show. Food trucks didn’t have this problem. There were no sides and mains and appetizers. You just had meals, and maybe snacks, and then a cooler of canned soda.

She snuck another peek at Alex whose mouth was tight, brow furrowed. Kara narrowed her eyes. It seemed clear she knew Chef J’onzz. Maybe she knew him well enough to know exactly what he liked to eat. That was an unfair advantage.

Kara’s stomach hurt. People might think she’d had an unfair advantage when one of the judges had been her mom. But that had definitely not been the case. All of the things 'hipster food-blogger Alura Z' had stood for were nothing like what her mom had been like before the explosion. She'd always been taking her to grimy hole in the wall restaurants, or to sit under a tent on the street corner as someone grilled meat on an open flame. If she thought back far enough, she could remember being in the kitchen with her mom and her aunt, making the small stuffed buns--the recipe that had been passed down in their family from before her grandparents had left the small, no longer extant country in Eastern Europe--her aunt wiping flour onto her nose, streaking her cheeks like cat's whiskers. Her mom had let her knead the yogurt based dough, getting it all over her hands and the floor, holding her up to stir the cheese and potato mixture. Her mom and her sister laughing with each other, easily, making their falling out that led to her aunt's arrest and imprisonment seem like a nightmare that could never come true.

Those were her roots. But they'd been cut off, they were un-findable. What did she have left?

Alex had her starter out again, murmuring softly to it. Kara shook her head. How could anyone think that someone who talked so gently to yeast could be irredeemably violent? M’gann was making noodles, Siobhan hammering butter into a rectangle. That was the important thing, start with the stuff that took the longest. Whatever she ended up making, filling dough with melty slow-cooked meat, chilis, and freshly made cheese couldn't hurt. Right, braising, dough, then figure out what could be finished for noon.

#
J'onn was here. J'onn was the third judge for the semi-finals. He stood on that stage and looked down at her and it was like her conscience had shown up outside of her body to judge her.

Alex felt like she was going to cry. Why was he always there when she was at her worst? She had only ever wanted to make him proud, to earn the respect he gave her unquestioningly. That was the worst part about him. He’d seen her at bottom, bailed her out after she’d been arrested for fighting, for being publicly drunk, taken her back to his kitchen and put her to work. And he’d never thought less of her for it. He’d warned her that she needed to take care of herself, she needed to learn how to seek out help when she needed it. But he never doubted that she could handle it, that she could figure it out eventually.

His support was unconditional in the way her mom’s wasn’t. It was how she pretended her dad’s would have been, if she’d still had him, even though she knew her mom was probably right, that her dad would have been so disappointed in her for not being the daughter he’d hoped she could become.

When Alex had sorted her shit out, had gotten her one year chip, he’d given her her starter, said he trusted her to take care of it. She’d had it with her ever since. Bringing it on the plane with her back to National City, keeping its container clean and free of mold, making sure to keep it fed and use it frequently enough so it wouldn’t over sour and turn into alcohol, it had been the responsibility that kept her focused and on task.

She knew she shouldn’t have left Gotham. Sure, she’d stayed sober and kept working, but her cooking had suffered and she’d gotten violent again. She’d let herself sink into the pit of thinking that that was who she was.

Who she was had never mattered to J’onn. All he asked was that she did the work. She just had to do the work.

#

An hour before interim judging, Lucy announced the time and from Kara’s right, she heard Alex go, "Fuck," quite distinctly. She spared one glance. Every surface of Alex’s station was covered with something. Alex made a face, then started stacking tiny circles of cake to clear off a cutting board.

At noon, Kara plated her three items and stared at them. She still hadn't finished her menu. And everything she’d made was wrapped in dough.

"Please explain your offerings," Lilian commanded.

"Um," Kara gulped, feeling J'onn's evaluating gaze even more harshly than Lilian's fierceness or Diana's sympathetic judgment. She pointed to the small cornhusk bundle the size of a half-smoked cigar. "Sweet tamales, filled with a slice of peach and blackberry jam." The next was a miniature baked yogurt-dough flatbread. "Um, that's mostly fresh cheese and potatoes and olives and . . . herb things. And mushrooms. Oh, thyme, I used thyme." She should have written out her menu. She didn't have names for this stuff yet. She was sure there was a name for these buns, but her family had just called them 'buns', and she’d adapted the filling enough so they weren’t exactly traditional Kryptonian buns anymore. The third's wrapper was a noodle, steamed in a basket. "And a soup dumpling. It's . . . just a soup dumpling really. I love soup dumplings."

J'onn regarded her gravely. "So do I."

"How do you see these fitting into your menu?" Lilian asked.
"Well, um, dessert." Kara pointed to the tamale. "Main," she pointed to the puff. "And, um, side?" Soup dumplings just were. "Appetizer?"

"Is there a thematic reason you've enclosed everything in some kind of starch?" Diana inquired.

"I just... like bite sized things. And everything is better wrapped in bread."

She heard a laugh from behind her. Alex.

"I'll be interested in seeing how the menu comes together," J'onn said.

Kara froze. There was no unity here at all. Dammit.

Alex was up next, her jaw set and stubborn.

They looked at her platings. "Two different kinds of roast vegetables and... a salad."

"Everything else needs a long time to cook." Alex made a face. "Or... further assembly."

"It looks like a bomb exploded on your station," Lilian said flatly.

"It's kind of hard to be running a whole kitchen and working three stations at once with only one oven and prep surface." Alex had her hands on her hips, very clearly Not Having It. Kara, though concerned about the tension that was obvious in her frame, hid a grin, and thought she saw J'onn doing the same.

The vegetables were sampled--a miso-glazed eggplant and a heap of lightly spiced roast beets and turnips. "I hope they're supposed to support something more interesting," Lilian said. "The salad is adequate."

Alex’s mouth went tight. It looked almost like she was going to turn to Kara, at least to look at her, but she didn’t. She went back to her station and started tidying up for the break.

Siobhan also had small bundles, hers wrapped in puff pastry, choux, and flaky biscuit dough. She was also asked about the thematic unity of her menu, but she had an answer. Something about delicacy and flavor and English tea-time. Kara grimaced. She could have come up with something. But she'd frozen.

M'gann had a dish of glass noodles that Kara could smell from the other side of the room and hungered for, crisp and oily mackerel, and a sweet egg custard. "Interesting and delicious choices." "A little more like we expect of a real restaurant." "Very well done."

They had a mandatory hour's break after judging, thrown out of the studio so the lighting crew could do some repairs and the union cameramen could eat lunch. They had to sort out a way to stop, and then find a place to relax. Kara headed to the hanging couch and lay on her face, trying not to hyperventilate. How was this menu going to come together? She wished she could talk to Alex, dammit. Even if all she said was, "You can handle it, Kara. Just get it done." Kara would feel better. But Alex wasn’t around.

#

J'onn came down to her bench as she was getting ready for her break, everything still chaos, but anything that might dry out was wrapped, and the prepped root veg were submerged in water to keep fresh. He met Alex’s eyes and tipped his head to the side, signaling that they should leave the recording area before they talked.
Sick, deep in her stomach, nails digging into her palms, Alex trailed after him. What was he going to say? What was he going to think? She knew--she thought--he wouldn’t judge her. He’d understand. But it didn’t keep her from feeling like she’d let him down.

He led her on a quiet ramble through the rattlesnake grass around the perimeter of the enclosure. He never felt the need to start conversations, and Alex sometimes wondered if he was telepathic. Whenever she did start to talk, he always seemed to understand exactly what she was concerned about. But this time, she didn’t know what she was supposed to say. How was she supposed to explain Max and her cooking and her failures, and how could she even try to broach the subject of Kara, who meant so much, who had done so much to pull her out of her rut, and now was making everything worse, by being there for her, by trying to make her feel better, by wanting her when Alex knew that the only thing she could do was bring her down.

They had cleared the small hill, the studio disappearing behind it, and J’onn turned to face her. All of a sudden, unexpectedly, she was being gathered up in his arms.

What?

J’onn gave her a three-pat hug and then pushed her away, holding her firmly by both elbows. “Well done, Alex.”

Alex stared at him. “What? For what?”

J’onn laughed, released her, and strode on ahead. Alex hurried to catch up. “Let me tell you I did not think I was going to be seeing you here when I said I’d come on the show. Lilian’s an old friend, she convinced me finally, and then, this season, she mentioned that one of the kids was someone I might remember, who worked at my Gotham restaurant for a while, and then it turned out to be you.”

Alex couldn’t quite figure out his tone. It was like . . . he was pleased.

“And you’re in the semi-finals.” He gave her a slap on the back. “I know Lilian and Diana are hard to please. So good job, Alex. I always knew you had it in you to excel.”

“I--” Alex swallowed, bewildered by his approval. “I haven’t been feeling like I’ve been excelling. Everything feels so hard.”

J’onn gave her a look, a raised eyebrow and a quirk of the lips. “You’re always harder on yourself than anyone else ever is.”

“But-- Chef Lord--”

J’onn shook his head. “If you’d called me, like you said you would, I would have warned you against working for that man. He can put on a nice front at first, but he’s a gangster with an expensive haircut.”

Alex huffed out a breath. “I figured that out pretty quick. I liked my crew though. I stuck it out for them. Until, well, it wasn’t my choice anymore.”

J’onn nodded. “And then you ended up here. Not a bad play with the hand you were dealt.”

Alex scratched the back of her head and shrugged awkwardly. “I was lucky.” She shook her head. “And I still failed at . . . controlling my temper.”

“How’s the other thing been going?”
Alex hesitated, then fished in her pocket, pulling out her chip. “I haven’t been to a meeting in a while, but I haven’t slipped. It was a close thing when I found out Max was suing me. But I didn’t. I made the choice not to. Even after--” Lying in bed after kissing Kara, after seeing the look on her face when Alex had yelled at her and stormed off, it hadn’t been easy. She’d thought of sneaking downstairs, going back to the cooler, but thinking of the cooler meant thinking of Kara sitting on it, hurt and abandoned, and that only made it worse. So she’d done nothing.

“Good,” J’onn said. Again, he put his hand lightly on her back. For someone who was a self-confessed ‘non-hugger’ he was being so kind. Alex’s eyes stung again and she tried to find some dignity remaining. “You can let yourself feel proud of that, for a bit. Sometimes it’s all right to feel good about what you’ve done.”

“Even when I’m feeling so bad about the other things?”

“If you get something on the plate for service, and it doesn’t get sent back, it doesn’t matter how many flubs you made in the kitchen.” He narrowed his eyes. “As long as you don’t cremate the loss leader.”

Alex ducked her head and laughed. Everyone fucked up. Part of working in a kitchen was being able to roll with it, to swear and catch yourself and dump it in the bin or find a way to salvage, to staunch the bleeding on your right hand and flip burgers with the left. When there was a clear goal, something you needed to make happen, she could take the punch any day. It was just in the rest of her life, where good enough and perfection slid too close together, that she couldn’t figure out how to feel good about doing okay.

“You know,” J’onn said, coming to stand at the top of the highest point in the enclosure, his form framed by sky. “I always thought you had the potential to become something great, to do great work, if you could just get past the limitations you put on yourself.”

Alex’s stomach hurt. She’d always known he respected her, pushed her to do better, but this was different. “Always getting in my own way, as usual?”

J’onn shook his head, blowing out audible wryness. “You love cooking, and you want to share that with people. But your strengths are your weaknesses. You take so much responsibility on yourself. You want to do everything right. But we don’t want what other people think is right. Share what’s in you.” J’onn tapped her in the center of the forehead. “And don’t be ashamed to ask for help. You don’t always have to go it alone.”

The plonk on her forehead made Alex laugh. He believed in her. He believed in her the way she believed in Kara. It was . . . a lot to take.

She nodded. “All right. I think I might-- I might be able to try that.”

J’onn gave her a surreptitious look and put his finger to his mouth. “Don’t let on that I’ve been giving advice. Major Lane was very strict on not being obvious about playing favorites.” His smile quirked. “She also said you might need a bit of a boost after the Lord nonsense. Not entirely sure what game she’s playing.”

Alex shook her head. She had never figured out what Lucy was trying to do, besides annoy them at various points.

“So I should expect you to be very judgemental and disapproving from now on?”

J’onn put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a serious look. Alex swallowed, the challenge he was
giving her rising like a sea wall in her churning stomach.

“I told you I think you can be excellent. I’ve yet to see if you are.”

#
Kara was red faced and stressed in the second session of the quarterfinals. Alex, looked up, from sorting through her endless piles of prep and her heavily annotated menu cards, and felt that clench in her chest, that urge to go over and make sure she was okay, that had become part of her now, like it had merged with her DNA. Maybe Kara could help her too. She’d been frantic this morning, wanting to make sure she had something J‘onn would like, that he wouldn’t be disappointed in her for making. And now, looking over the mess she’d made, she wasn’t entirely sure she’d gone in the right direction. Her plans were good. They made sense, they had vision and control and she had confidence in her execution, but were they good enough? Were they excellent like he said she could be?

She rubbed her forehead, staring at her station which still looked like it had been bombed. How were you supposed to know if something was excellent?

Unless it was something Kara had made. Then you could be confident it would hit all the marks.

Alex looked over at her again, to where Kara was staring deep into a mixing bowl, sweaty, her hair clinging to the back of her neck, a furrow deep in her forehead. She tasted the mix, added a shake of dried fish flakes, mixed, tasted again, mixed again. There was just something super-human about the way she saw flavor. Alex would say it wasn’t fair, but nothing that had happened to Kara was fair. And if this was some way the universe was trying to make up for it all, it didn’t even make a dent.

She put down her menu card, not wanting to think about whether blueberries and tomato sauce was an awful idea or genius anymore, and headed over, gently touching the back of Kara’s arm to get her attention.

Kara jerked back, then up, saw Alex and went wide eyed, then seemed to control herself and smiled. "You okay?" Alex asked, keeping her voice soft so the recording quality would be bad.

Kara nodded. "Just . . . having a hard time finding a unified vision."

Alex squeezed her arm. "Your vision is always going to be unexpected flavor. Risks that are rewarding enough to eat the whole pot."

Kara smiled. "And what's yours, do you think? Comfort food?"

Alex scrunched her nose. "It's not . . . wrong."

"You know," Kara's fingers trailed down her arm and she was biting her lip just enough to make Alex desperate to kiss her. "I'm beginning to wonder which one of us is more of a feeder. I think you cook to take care of people."

"I think--" I'm always looking for new ways to take care of you. "I think you overestimate how nice I am."

"Never."

Alex opened her mouth, wanting to ask--what do you think of tomato sauce and blueberries? Will you come over here and try all of my sauces and make them better? Would it be okay if I kissed you now? Just a little bit, I know we’re on TV.
Kara’s eyes were so blue, and she was watching Alex as if she wasn’t just anyone, but was someone worth looking at, someone so special she didn’t want to stop looking. Yesterday, that look had made her sink, want to hide away from it, knowing that she wasn’t worthy of it. But what did worthy mean anyways? J’onn had reminded her that she could do better, she could be better.

She could try. She could keep on selling the tables, getting the tickets off the rail. If she worked hard enough, she could prove she was good, prove she could change, show at least herself that maybe she wouldn’t hurt Kara by loving her.

She squeezed Kara’s arm again. “Go smash this thing.”

Kara laughed. “You too.”

#

Waiting on a table of J’onn, Diana and Lilian was one of the most surreal experiences of Alex’s life. First of all, she was not a goddamn waiter, but apparently they had to do it all. *Here is the fucking wine list. Yes I filled it with mostly Burgundies. No there aren't any fucking white wines. I'm cooking stew. Oh look, you're all asking for the house, because you want to know what I've picked to be the house. Now you all want a glass of the most expensive bottle I picked, because you're not actually paying for this. Fuck you all.*

There was a concept for hers. Everything she made was better with a hunk of fresh bread torn off its loaf. She put the stews and (gah, M’gann) casserole in individual au gratin dishes, throwing them under the broiler to brown the top or melt cheese over it, plating sides, and then finishing with four flavors of trifle. It was a risk in that it was simple and uncompromising. Straightforward things didn’t just have to be good, they had to be perfect.

The judges ate like a bite of everything, drank both bottles of wine, commented noncommittally on the food, and moved on. Alex grit her teeth and rolled her eyes.

Kara’s hands were shaking as she served her food. Everything was plated in rings of individual bundles with heaps of shaved vegetables, pickles and sautés in the center. Bowls of sauce dotted the table like it was poxed. Alex tried not to smile. She always went way too far. But it was hard to tell her to stop because everything was so good.

They ate more than a bite of everything of Kara’s. Well, they had to try all of the nineteen—or however many—sauces. She didn’t have a wine list. She flapped for a bit when asked for it, and then said, "Flavored drinks ruin it. I have, um, water, with lemon or lime. Still or sparkling?"

Lilian looked rather affronted, but also impressed.

Siobhan also had lots of mini things but more normal mains. She did have a wine list, balanced, catering to the diners preferences rather than being offensively strict in complementing the food. The judges tried her whites, which were recommended, and went through another two bottles at speed. Lilian was clearly making up for Kara’s teetotal offering, not that she showed it. Alex suspected you’d have to IV in everclear to get her to let on she’d had any alcohol at all.

M’gann didn’t have a wine list either. Instead, she had mixed drinks, each paired with a particular main. Swapping was possible, but they were designed to complement her mains. Diana was particularly delighted with this and asked to try all of them. Lilian nudged her and told her not to get drunk. Diana replied, "It takes more than these tiny pretty drinks to get a European drunk." But she was talking even more with her hands than usual and laughing. Lilian and J’onn were sharing amused glances across the table.
When they finally got up after their fourth meal, Diana wobbled on her heels and Lilian caught her and scolded her. “I told you not to get drunk.” Diana reached up and patted her on the cheek. “My hero,” she said, her accent so thick the words were hard to interpret.

Alex covered her face with a dishtowel so that she wouldn’t show exactly what she was thinking and just how red it was making her. She glanced over, Kara’s eyes were wide, her mouth open. She caught Alex’s look and made a very tiny, ‘can you believe this?’ gesture. Alex, still hiding behind her towel, shook her head no.

With Diana taking off her heels, still leaning heavily on Lilian’s shoulder, and laughing and telling J’onn about her favorite beachside cabana, Lucy stepped up onto the dais and told them all to go back to the house. They’d do the judging in the morning. She didn’t say “when the judges were less drunk,” but with her glare at the three, where Lilian was now calling her limo and Diana was planning the next three bars they would take J’onn to, the subtext was clear.

It was misty and raining slightly as the contestants headed back up to the house. They all piled into the big bedroom, M’gann taking the fourth bed, and drank tea, ate Siobhan’s eclairs and Kara’s fruit tamales, and gossiped about whether it was at all possible that Diana Prince and Lilian Luthor were sleeping together.

"But isn't she still married?" Kara asked, rubbing the center of her forehead, trying to sort out whether she’d be pleased about this development or not. "That… mogul person. And she has a daughter."

"Separated," Siobhan said. "For years now. Not sure if they’ve made it official or not, but they haven't lived in the same city in a decade. And if you protest that being married to a man means that she can't like women too--"

M’gann snorted. "I don't think you're going to get anyone who doesn't understand the term bisexuality in this room."

Siobhan made a face. "Yes. Sorry. Reflex." She narrowed her eyes at Kara. "What are you?"

Kara blinked at her. "Human?"

"Bi?"

"Oh, no. Pan." Kara wrinkled her nose. "Too much so, according to Mike. He didn't like it that I came out to everyone."

Alex choked on her tea and coughed until it cleared.

"You didn't come out to us," M’gann said, vocalizing what Alex was thinking, but not in an affronted choking event.

"Ah," Kara scratched the back of her neck. "We were kind of busy."

“Not like you were being particularly subtle about it,” Siobhan rolled her eyes and flopped onto her back. “But you never know with girls with shitty boyfriends. It’s like, if they had options, why the fuck would they settle for that?”

Kara ducked her head, going a little quiet.

Alex glared at Siobhan. “And who the fuck would date you? I have no idea how you have a girlfriend.”
Siobhan grinned. "You have to know your type. I like assholes. You have to be bitchy enough to keep up with me. My girl is that. Before her I dated a whole string of catty bi guys."

"Why am I not surprised?" said M'gann, smiling gently.

"Does that mean you'd prefer to sleep with Lilian over Diana?" Kara asked, with complete innocence on her face.

Alex choked again.

Siobhan laughed, leaning back against her pillows. "Maybe, but now that there's a sandwich option on the table, wouldn't you go with that?"

Kara blushed.

"J'onn's very handsome too," M'gann said.

"Gah," Alex flopped onto her belly on the bed. "Please don't say that. He's like-- like my dad."

"You're the only one in this room who's not attracted to men at all. You don't get a say," M'gann tossed back mildly, her eyes sparkling with humor.

The conversation meandered until it was late enough that M'gann shuffled them off to bed. They needed to be well-rested for the last day of quarterfinals.

On the way back from the bathroom, Alex passed Kara going to brush her teeth. For a moment it was awkward, and then Kara leaned in and they hugged briefly. Alex let herself breathe in the scent from the back of her neck and sink, just for a moment, into her warmth and strength.

Maybe it was all right. Maybe they could be friends.

Maybe they could be something real.

#

All Alex had done was hug her, and Kara hadn't been able to get to sleep for an hour. She could smell her, the scent lingering on her pajama top, the scent from her hair, up all day and then let down just before, releasing the clean scent of her shampoo, they made it hard to sleep.

Usually, Kara never really wanted someone. She liked people and she fell into bed with people, often because the other person wanted her, and it was nice to be wanted. Sometimes the people she liked and the people she fell into bed with were even the same people. But she wasn't used to this, to being responsive to such non-signals. Alex's eyes lingering too long, or catching sight of the swirls of tattoos on the backs of her arms, or a brief platonic embrace, sent Kara's insides into a topsy-turvy burning mess. She wanted Alex's hands on her, Alex's mouth kissing sigils of heat and satiety into her skin, Alex's body, open to her, responding to her.

She should have just not thought about it. The arousal made her skin hot, made her nipples hard, and sparked other reactions she didn't want to think too much about. She lay on her back in the bed and clutched at the bottom sheet. There was no way she was doing anything about it. She was on a top bunk above Siobhan, who if she even thought about it, would know.

But Alex had kissed her last night, she'd kissed Kara until she couldn't breathe, couldn't think. No one could blame her for lingering in a memory, right? Even if it was a memory of something she wished could go on forever. Kara shut her eyes and wished.
Soon. She’d say something soon. She had to, or one of them would be going home, the competition would be over, before anything was clear, before she could make sure that she could hold onto Alex, that it wouldn’t all just disappear, like it had before. Even if Alex was too skittish, too sad and wary to be hers yet, Kara needed some way to hold on.

She thought that Alex also might need someone to hold onto her.

#
When they reconvened in the studio, Kara felt more than a little groggy. Her psyche had treated her to four stress dreams in succession, including the horribly traditional being naked on stage in the middle of a high school theater performance. The strip tease scene in Guys and Dolls had been a little overenthusiastic, and off came her leotard. The whole front row of the audience was full of all of the judges and contestants of Knives and Fire and they were all laughing at her.

Except her mom, who looked away, disappointed.

"After that excellent entertainment you provided last night, it was rather more difficult to judge than otherwise," Lilian drawled, sounding . . . less angry than usual.

Diana was grinning and a little pink.

J'onn was also looking terribly amused, and Kara Did Not Want To Know.

"However, we felt that M'gann was the strongest all around."

"The most boozy," Siobhan muttered.

"Kara and Siobhan, both of yours felt a little scattered. Kara, you had a theme and committed to it, but you offer the diner too much choice. Focus on the experience you want them to have of that food tonight. Siobhan, yours was more straightforward, and as a meal more traditionally satisfying and focused, but in some ways, particularly the focus on bite sized finger-food, you were competing directly with Kara, and because of that, what would have been excellent did not have the edge of flavor or complexity that we had seen with hers."

Siobhan shot Kara a look like she was going to kill her.

"Alex," J'onn said. "Yours had focus and commitment. For my two companions here, they found it a solid development of how you've been progressing in these past few weeks. But for me, who knows you, it felt like you are re-finding the solid core of your cooking. What I'd like to see from you is the next step, taking your strengths and finding out how to put those fine edges on them that will make them surprising."

Alex's jaw went tight, clenching hard enough that it was quaking a little. She bent her head, accepting the criticism, but there was a bend to her back, a hollow in her chest that made Kara feel a little sick and a little tense.

She knew how much doing well on this show meant to Alex, especially after the rough start she'd had, and she could tell that Chef J'onzz was important to her. Hearing that kind of critique from someone you respected--Kara swallowed and didn't think of Perry White's face as he read her articles--it could hurt a lot.

"Today's team competition builds off of yesterdays. Two of your menus will be picked to be actual restaurant menus, and you will work in teams to prep and feed at minimum fifty patrons. We will announce whose menus are up after the break."

#
Quarterfinals Interviews:

Kara: Oh man, I hope it's not mine. I . . . kind of wung it yesterday, and my menu is *slightly* informative? I think I remember what I put in half of those things? Also, apparently it was chaotic and unfocused, so, ugh.

Alex: It would be great if it was mine. It's actually pretty straightforward, lots of prep, but plating is pretty quick. Having a sous would make it not completely exhausting.

I’d like to have a chance to refine it too. I mean-- I put everything I could into it. I made it what I wanted. I don’t know how I’d change it without making it something it’s not.

Maybe it’s just not special enough.

Siobhan: I don’t think it's going to be mine. Ugh. Kara is the bane of my existence here. I had this planned. I was not intending to go 'head to head'. Everyone knows that you don't go head to head with Kara. She does Taekwondo, has her own attack dog girlfriend, and eats birds-eye peppers raw. You have to be clever. Ending up with matching stuff to Kara was *not* clever.

M'gann: I could do mine again, sure. It would be nice to have a bartender as well as a sous. :laughs: Though maybe I won't mix the drinks quite that strong next time. The judges had already had probably a bottle of wine each. And they don't eat hardly anything when they're tasting, but they just kept drinking. And then they asked for more drinks. :she puts her hand to her face and grimaces:

But wow. Winning that challenge-- it made me feel like this is really possible. I feel like my goals are just right out there, hovering, almost in reach. I risked a lot to be on this show, but I think it's going to be worth it. I'm really starting to believe that it will be worth it.

#

Lucy, taking a wide skirt around Kara, came up beside Alex and handed her her phone. "It's your mom again. I don't know what she wants. But she's called nine times this morning already and you've got the buzzer on and it's irritating the hell out of me."

"Great," Alex took the phone and unlocked it. "Now she can irritate the hell out of me."

Her mom had left both texts and voicemails, but most of them were simply, *Alex. Call me back*.

"Mom? What is it?"

"Alex? What is going on? Why haven’t you answered my texts?"

Alex frowned. “I told you. I’m filming a show. They won’t let us have our phones.”

“So they wouldn’t let you call me to say you were being sued? I had to find out from Dr. Alvarez who heard it from his friend in the National City civil court and then spread it around. Did you not think you ought to warn me before I have to defend you in front of my entire department? You know what they’re like when it comes to gossip.”
Alex shut her eyes. Fuck. Her mom had found out. And she did know what her mom’s department was like with gossip. It was one of the reasons she didn’t regret leaving academia. "I thought it would blow over before people found out. Someone here's working on it, trying to get him to give it up."

“I just--” Her mom made a sound, confused and a little pained. “I never thought this chef plan was a good idea, but you’d settled on it, and it’s your life, Alex. But you’re being sued, you break a man’s wrist? Suddenly going on reality television seems to be the least of it.”

Alex took a deep breath. She’d thought the same way about reality tv show contestants that her mom did before. Who would ever do that? How desperate did you have to be to prostitute yourself like that on television? But Alex was the only one who was desperate. Siobhan, M'gann, even Kara, were using this as an opportunity, a step forward on the path to success. Alex had hit rock bottom and didn’t see another way out. And with the way things had been going, maybe this wasn’t a way out. She’d serve as entertainment for the nation, and get sent home with nothing.

“I’m just-- I’m trying to work it out, Mom. I have to keep trying.”

"What went wrong, Alex? You are so smart. You could have been everything your dad and I dreamed you'd be. You were never violent. I mean, you had some troubles, but you never got into a single fight until Jeremiah died."

Alex’s chest ached. She couldn’t talk about Dad, not in the middle of this, not without making it sound like she was making excuses--the poor child who never got over losing daddy--or blaming it on her mom--you stopped paying attention; you stopped being proud when I did well, you just were fed up when I messed up.

It wasn’t true anyways. She’d gotten into fights before that. “There was that time on the beach when those boys were hassling Kara--"

"Who?"

Alex froze. "Kara? The girl we were fostering? My best friend?"

"Oh," her mom sounded puzzled. "Of course. I’d forgotten. It was such a short time. And it ended so poorly. Jeremiah was the one responsible for bringing her to us. Some sort of government contact. I forgot you got into a fight then."

Alex swallowed down the lump in her throat. How could she have forgotten Kara when she’d never been far from Alex’s mind? She needed her mom to remember. She needed someone outside this insane hothouse of a tv-show film set to know that no matter how this turned out, it had been worth it, because she had found Kara.

"I . . . ran into Kara again, mom."

"Oh? That's nice."

Alex winced. Not nice, important, everything.

"Is she doing well?"

Alex's eyes sought her out, backing away from Siobhan who was vocally expressing her unhappiness about the judging results. "Yeah, she's doing great."

"She'd be . . . twenty-six now, if I'm remembering right? Is she settled into a career yet? Married?"
"No," Alex frowned. "She's figuring things out."

"Well, I suppose after the kind of trauma she had, just staying afloat is good enough."

"Mom. She's fine!" Alex snapped. "She's smart and kind and gorgeous and such a good chef, and so what if she's still figuring things out? I'm still figuring things out."

"You're getting sued for assaulting your boss. You are not the standard of comparison here."

Alex winced. "Yeah, well. By that standard, she’s doing pretty great. We’re in the quarterfinals. I think she has a chance to win the whole thing."

“And you? Do you have a chance to win the whole thing?"

Alex’s eyes sought out J’onn. He was standing with Diana and M’gann, Diana interrogating M’gann on her drink recipes. J’onn was offering his two cents and occasionally sharing a glance with M’gann, silently laughing at Diana’s enthusiasm. He glanced up, as if he’d noticed Alex watching, and gave her a fond look.

_Re-finding her solid core. The next step. Make them surprising_

Alex wasn’t sure she had it in her. Even solid, good basic cooking felt like more than she could manage these days. But if she didn’t find a way to show that she was special, she’d be the one going home. She _needed_ the chance to work on her menu, to try to figure out what it was she was missing. But she didn’t know. And wondering what was wrong, why it wasn’t good enough, made her chest compress and the breath flee from her lungs.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I hope . . . maybe. But I don’t know.”

“If you need to come home, Alex, you know you always have a place here. I’m looking for a new lab manager. If you need some time to reboot yourself, I’m here.”

Alex shut her eyes. Half of it felt like everything she wanted to hear. She wanted her mom to be there for her, to _listen_ when she needed help. But she didn’t want to go home. She wanted to make this work. But with Max and his mob cronies waiting on the outside to make anything she tried impossible, and J’onn’s gaze frowning down at her, waiting for her to transform into something better, and Kara, an unknown, the one thing she wanted to hold onto--but where would she go next? How could Alex convince her to let her follow?--maybe she should accept it. This wasn’t going to work out.

It wasn’t like she deserved it anyway.

#

When the contestants regathered in the studio, Alex stood straight, her fists clenched, her jaw set. Maybe it hadn’t been as bad as it felt. If her menu was the one picked, it might been she’d been second, just behind M’gann, not dragging at the bottom of the pack like it felt.

And if it was, she could do it. She'd been solid, he said, she didn’t know how to be ‘surprising’ or ‘exciting,’ but she could run a good restaurant. She’d run Max's for him, kept it afloat for more than a year. She’d worked hard to be like J’onn, to have his competence, his focus and control. She’d chosen to make her menu technically complex, exact, efficient, rich and satisfying. She wanted another chance to refine it and make sure it was as good as it could be, to make them like it, to make them like _her_.

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#
"The menus we would like to see are M'gann's and Kara's."

_Dammit._

She hadn’t made the cut.

"Pick your sous. M'gann?" M'gann looked over both Siobhan and Alex, noted Alex's clenched fists and Siobhan's crossed arms and wry smirk and said, "Siobhan."

"Right, Kara, you have Alex. Your restaurants open in five hours. Get to work."

_Get a grip, Alex. M'gann didn't pick you because you were a shit sous with Maggie and everyone saw it. It's not because everyone knows you're at the bottom._

She looked up, seeking out Kara's face. Her eyes were wide, her arms held in tight to her body. She looked like she was freaking out. She looked like she was an inch away from crashing and burning.

_Well fuck that._ There was no way Alex was going to let Kara fall.

Alex went to Kara. "Hey," she said softly. Kara's hand made a weak flex toward her, and Alex put her hands on her shoulders, squeezing supportively. "Okay, what's wrong?"

Kara lifted her head, the unfocused panic and horror vivid on her face. "I don't know how to make anything on my menu."

"What?"

"I just-- I wung it. I threw things together and when they tasted good I plated them and served them. I make sauces when I'm anxious. But I don't know what was in them. I just put in things until they tasted good." She squeezed Alex's forearms so hard Alex wondered if they would bruise. "I just put things in until they tasted good."

Alex took a breath and counted to ten. Right. "Breathe. We can handle this. And then we are going to write you down some recipe cards that you can take with you wherever you go. Also, we are going to cut the number of sauces you had in half. That was an insane number of sauces."

"I don't know what I'm doing."

"Well," Alex said, shrugging. "That's why you have me."

She saw the relief rise up on Kara’s face, and felt properly good for the first time in days. This was where she belonged. This was what she was supposed to be doing.

They started by setting up cards for everything written on the menu. Alex swatted Kara's hand when she started trying to write cards for things that hadn't made it onto the menu. "I don't care if you served some random side with that, if it's not on the menu we don't have to do it. If you really think we need it, we can sort it later."

They pulled together the doughs that needed to rise, parboiled potatoes, started the fresh cheese, and then began reconstructing the recipes for the fillings and sauces. Alex boiled the jam for the tamales, mixed ricotta and parmesan, sauteed mushrooms for the choux, and made crunchy honeycomb to swirl through the half-sweet lemon curd, reconstructing, adjusting, checking with Kara, who sometimes gave a thumbs up, and sometimes remembered a secret ingredient to finish it. Then she'd batch it, getting ready for the labor intensive construction part of the prep.
Meanwhile, Kara was steaming version after version of the dumplings. Each time she tasted them, she'd make a face. They weren't quite right. Finally, Alex slapped her hand away from the pan. "Stop it. It doesn't matter if they taste exactly like they did yesterday, it matters if they taste good." She ate one herself. "It needs more salt."

Kara froze. Alex added more salt to the mix, steamed another and snagged it out on the long cooking chopsticks. She waved it around to cool it and then fed it to Kara who sagged. "That fixed it."

Alex laughed. "Right, we've figured out what the real issue is, you need to relax."

Kara covered her face, hunching slightly. "I'm not good enough to be here."

Alex reached out to untuck the side of her chef's jacket that had gotten wedged into her pants. Her fingers brushed against her waist, and Kara turned a gaze on her that was both achingly sorry and achingly . . . something else. "Yes, you are. Maybe you're not ready, but you are fucking good enough." Alex poked her in the chest. "Also, I'm supposed to be your rival, I shouldn't be giving you pep talks. Let's get to work. We have three hours left and since you're the crazy person whose entire menu is some kind of dough packet, we are going to be wrapping shit until our fingers fall off."

Kara made a helpless little hiccuping laugh, and Alex couldn't help it. She cupped Kara's cheek, barely restrained herself from going in for a kiss, and instead bumped their foreheads together--oh god, this was going to be on TV--and whispered. "You can do this."

Kara's eyes, so intense, and oh no, her head tip, just a little, to catch her mouth, and Alex jerked away. Not here. Also, she didn't have time to deal with the whirlwind of feelings that getting kissed by Kara would send her into. She smacked her ass. "Get to work."

After that, everything seemed to smooth out. It was like the oyster bar again, always knowing where the other was, always being ready to pitch in or switch gears. Kara had a trick for the soup dumplings, a way of turning, pinching, folding, that made it super fast and never come undone in the steamer. Alex shooed Kara away when she was trying to tie each tamale individually, and instead looped them all closed on a single piece of string--steam as a batch, untwist, plate and serve.

There was a shitload of wrapping to do and a ton of prep for the mise. Yes, Kara made things that tasted amazing, but by the third hour before service Alex was entirely sure that J'onn and Lilian and Diana had picked her menu because it was exhausting.

If Alex had been working with anyone but Kara, she probably would have killed them. But it was Kara. She never slacked off. She made everything better, and when Alex started to shift into the drill sergeant mode that made Vasquez 'yes sir!' her rather than 'yes chef!’, she’d do something or say something that made Alex grin and shake her head, keeping her calm and relaxed.

One batch of the wonton wrapper dough had been mixed too wet. When the fifth wrapper in a row tore, Kara swore like a sailor. She peeked up at Alex with a guilty expression on her face.

Alex could do nothing but laugh and work more flour into the mix. "I've rubbed off on you."

Kara wiggled her eyebrows. "Not yet, you haven't," she shot back.

Alex almost spilled the entire flour canister.

When service started, everything was chaos. People loved Kara's stuff which meant they wanted more. They kept ordering more fucking dough packets.
Then they ran out of filling for the potstickers.

"Four sixes," Kara called, and Alex checked the tray and the bowls.

"We're out. We're out of the mix too."

"What? We have eight more tickets for them already!"

The slow-cooked pork with tamarind glaze wasn't something you could just grab some more of out of the freezer and grind it up. Kara looked sweaty and distracted. She hadn’t looked like she was going to panic since they’d sorted the dumplings. Alex didn’t want her to go back to that place now. She checked her rail. She had five minutes while things were in the steamer, and nothing labor intensive until right before she had to sell the third table. "Don't worry, I've got it."

The relief on Kara's face was palpable. She blew Alex a kiss and ducked down to grab more Old Kryptonian Buns out of the oven.

Alex snagged the recipe card and started parcelling ingredients. Not slow-cooked meant a different flavor profile, but it still needed to be sour tamarind pork dumplings. Right. Two grades of ground pork, one drenched in a sweetened tamarind syrup and caramelized under the broiler, with yuzu peel and vietnamese mint for lightness, wrapped then panfried and steamed. She popped one into Kara's mouth as she passed by. "Good enough?"

Kara bit into it, then looked startled. "Um, I like it better than the old ones." She stole another out of the pan as she passed by.

Alex shook her head. It was just something fun. But it worked with Kara’s stuff. She liked thinking about what would complement her recipes, what would make them better. It was a different kind of thinking than the brutal efficiency and pragmatism that she'd run Max's kitchen with. It was like how they’d baked back before--a little showing off, a lot of working together.

Alex always got a high from being this kind of busy, this kind of focused. But it was different with Kara, warmer, less manic. It felt sustainable, while before the buzz after service had always made her want to drink. Kara looked over her shoulder, spotted her watching, and smiled, like seeing Alex made her want to smile. And for a moment, the noise of the kitchen, the clank of dishware, the voices of the diners from the adjoining room, all seemed to fall silent.

*I could do this forever. I want to do this with you forever.*

Then Kara was running for the walk-in, and Alex was grabbing the next ticket off the rail, throwing a six of soup dumplings into the steamer and tossing four par-baked Old Kryptonian Buns into the oven to finish, and everything was noise, rhythm and momentum once more.

When they finally were allowed to close, Alex briefly scanned the torn off tickets and did some quick math in her head. They'd sold at minimum a thousand of each of Kara's insane dough packets, and at least twice that many of soup dumplings. She would probably get arthritis from today.

But they'd made it happen, taken her half-planned menu and turned it into a restaurant--with the recipe cards set up well enough that they could do it again easily, making it better each time, trying new things, new spins. There was nothing perfect or precise about it. But it was fluid and dynamic. The experience of eating it likely was too.

It was different, working with Kara. Terrifying, walking on the edge, nothing entirely under control. But she thought she might love it.
She looked up, looking for Kara, pleased that they'd done so much. She had no idea how M'gann and Siobhan had done, but if they’d been running a real restaurant, it would have been a good take for the evening. They made a good team.

She turned around and spotted Kara talking to a woman she didn't recognize. Alex realized that there were a few people milling around the kitchens that she didn't know. But Lucy was watching from the catwalk and didn't seem to be bothered, so Alex supposed they were supposed to be here.

The woman talking to Kara was young and striking in a long burberry trench and other very clear signals that she was as rich as Hades. She had a posture that was a little aggressive, leaning forward, not quite too close, but right up against Kara’s personal space. Kara was shifting around, a little awkward, but her face was pink with pleasure. Slowly, not wanting to draw attention to herself, Alex sidled close enough until she could hear the conversation.

"Honestly, I think you're the best find of all these fourteen seasons. I've come to every dine-in event, and I can always tell what's yours, and it's always my favorite. Those tamarind and mint potstickers were to die for. I would love to be able to participate in whatever you're planning to do in the future."

Kara looked stunned. "I-- oh, um, thank you?"

The woman stepped forward, putting a hand on her arm, her lashes low, a seductive set to her mouth. "So what are you planning on doing?"

Alex's face went hot, something unpleasant and many-tentacled burning in her stomach. Who was this lady?

"I don't really know. I mean, I'd planned on revamping the food truck but it's not really mine anymore, and--"

"Oh, I'm sure you could do something much bigger than a food truck."

"I don't know, I mean, I'm not a trained--"

"I see you with a 90 seat, clean modern space,—a bar, maybe a prix fixe menu that changes whenever you develop new ideas. You’re so creative. No one should rein you in. I'd make sure you have every opportunity to do what you want to do."

Siobhan came up beside her. "That's Lena Luthor, Lilian's spawn," she said. "She's one of the investors behind Sara Lance."

"She's going to steamroll Kara."

Siobhan narrowed her eyes. "You should be jealous that she's not steamrolling you."

Alex stared at the tableau, Lena Luthor sidling even closer, Kara still shaking her head, but not going defensive, her body language staying open. It was nice to be told you were special, that you deserved to be a star. It was what Alex had idly imagined at the start of this, before reality had come and smacked her in the face.

And this woman was right. Kara had that something special that could glow and shine with the right support. What kind of support would Alex be? She’d bring her baggage and her self-doubt and her mob blacklist.

She’d drag Kara down.
Lena's hand landed on Kara's bare forearm, gesturing towards M'gann's few remaining trays of mixed drinks. Kara made an awkward face, but not one of refusal. The twisty feeling in Alex's stomach tied itself into a knot.

"Jealous?" she said, not looking at Siobhan. "Yeah. I'm jealous."

“Go over there, loser, make yourself out as instrumental to her success.”

Alex shook her head. “Why would I do that? I'm not. She’s fine without me. She’ll do fine without me.”

Alex dropped her apron into the laundry pile and left the studio.

#
Kara stared after Alex as she stormed out of the studio. *She's fine without me. She'll do fine without me.* What did that mean? Why was she leaving?

"Is everything all right?" Lena's hand was soft on her arm. "It's been a long day, hasn't it? It's hard to talk business. We should have a drink."

M'gann still had mixed drinks lined up, and Lena put one in Kara's hand. Kara sipped at it, unhappily. If it hadn't tasted so strongly of alcohol it would have been nice. She drank it anyway.

"You know," Lena said, her voice a low purr. "I'm one of those people they call a flavor-sexual. I'm so attracted to people who can cook well. And you're such a beautiful girl. If you'd be interested . . ." She was leaning in, lashes lowered, shadowing her strangely pale eyes, and Kara realized that Lena was going to try to kiss her. She squeaked and dodged.

Lena stepped back, a wry curve to her lips. "Not interested in that?"

"I-- there's someone else." Kara sank. Well, there had been. But she'd been such a nuisance today, and Alex had already been skittish and unsure about kissing her. She left. Why did she leave?

"Ah, missed my chance then." Lena grinned. "No hard feelings. Everything I said about your restaurant is still on the table."

"Thanks." Kara rubbed the back of her head. "I'm still not sure about what I want to do. I've got to think about it."

"You don't have to rush. The money is there." Lena squeezed her arm. "As am I."

Kara's stomach turned, but not in a good way. Lena was beautiful, and she'd made herself very available, as if, if she took money from her it would only be a matter of time before they fell into bed. And that might be exactly what happened. Kara wasn't good at saying no to people without a reason. But none of this was what she wanted to do. And she definitely didn't want money that came with those kind of expectations.

"I'll think about it." Kara extracted herself and looked around, but everyone else had gone. Only Lucy still stood on the catwalk, watching the interaction, eyes narrow. She met Kara's eyes and gave her a nod. Kara, grateful that Lucy hadn't left them alone, nodded back and ducked out, heading back to the house.

Outside she saw the flicker of the fire. "Hey," M'gann called as she approached. "It's the last night of our awesome foursome. Come join."

"I--" She spotted a hunched shape on the hanging couch and Siobhan on the lounger. "I'll grab a shower and come back down."

Hot water running down her face, Kara could cry without noticing the tears. She'd been in this weird wobbly limbo with Alex, but she'd hoped that it was on the verge of turning into something. She'd hoped that Alex felt the same as she did. She'd thought today had been good, that Alex had felt like she had, that working together was special. Alex looked after her, protected her, supported her. But that didn't mean she loved her or trusted her or wanted her. If she could just accept that, just deal with that--
She was a burden. A burden to her mom, to Mike, to Alex. She needed to be more self contained, to not put her insecurity and incompetence and trauma on other people. Or they left. That was what always happened. Everyone left.

She'd just-- she'd thought that Alex hadn't minded. She'd thought she was the one who could accept all of her, even the broken bits.

She dressed again, pulling on a comfortable shift dress and socks, braided her wet hair, and padded down to the poolside.

Kara didn't know where to sit, as Alex didn't look up and she didn't want to claim a different chair, making it too obvious that something was wrong, so she stood between Siobhan's lounger and the hanging couch, hovering and redoing her braid.

"I didn't know if you'd show up," Siobhan said. "Thought the baby Luthor was going to whisk you off to a hotel and have her wicked way with you."

Kara blanched. "Um, no. Predatory really isn't my type."

"Still," M'gann added, "that's a big fish you caught. I had a few people talk to me. Siobhan had someone. Alex was being too busy and cross to make herself approachable or talk to anyone. Her grumpy face puts people off."

"Shut up," Alex growled from the depths of the couch.

"Yeah, well," Kara sighed. "Lena's vision sounded kind of insane for me. I mean, ninety seats? Tonight was brutal. I don't know anything about managing a kitchen or writing a menu that's actually functional."

"You pulled it off though," M'gann said. "Everyone was raving about your food."

Kara smiled tightly. "I didn't pull it off. Alex pulled it off. I was the dead weight she was dragging along with her."

"Hey," Alex scolded her from the shadows of the couch. "Don't say that. Once you got going you had it. I had to put the pedal down to keep up with you."

"Maybe you could admit that you guys make a good team," M'gann said.

Kara pinched her lips together and turned away. Alex didn't say anything either.

Siobhan snorted.

"We find out who's in the finals tomorrow," M'gann said softly.

No one said anything after that either.

#

"I don't think I'm going to sleep tonight, but I suppose I'd better try," M'gann said and got up to head up to bed. Siobhan extracted herself from her lounger also. "I'm the only one who hasn't had a shower. I am also planning on being naked in the room for at least a half an hour, so you two stay out."

Kara wasn't sure why she was planning on being naked, but didn't really want to find out. She also didn't want to be left alone with Alex-- then they'd have to talk, and she didn't want to know that no
matter what, they were going separate ways after this was over.

"Hey," Alex's voice was soft. "Are you pissed at me?"

Kara turned from where she'd finally settled on a deck chair and looked at her. Alex was peeking out into the shadows, the sleek lines of her hair all mussed and falling down around her face. "What? No."

She wasn't angry at Alex. She was disappointed, but it wasn't Alex's fault.

"Then why didn't you come sit with me?"

"I-- thought you wouldn't want me to sit with you."

Alex looked unbearably sad. "I do."

Hesitantly, Kara got up from her deck chair and padded in her socked feet across the deck to the hanging couch. She got into the opposite side of it and pulled up her feet, wrapping her arms around her knees. "I'm sorry," Kara said. "I'm sorry I put so much on you today. My menu was a disaster and I was a disaster and you did so much, but no one got to see how important you were."

“Wait, what?” Alex reached out, putting her hand on her knee. “You had a tiny wobble of confidence at the beginning, and then you were perfect. Your menu was amazing. With a ten person kitchen, totally doable. A two person kitchen doing a hundred covers of that menu was insane. But we did it." She huffed out a breath. "M'gann was right. We made a good team."

Kara's gut churned; she felt sick. "Don't say that if you don't mean it."

Alex stiffened dramatically enough to set the couch swinging. "What?"

"I can't bear it if you lie to me just to make me feel better." "I'm not--"

"You left without me! You said I'd be fine on my own. You didn't say we made a good team."

"Well you were talking to Lena Luthor!" Alex snapped. "You were getting pitched the restaurant of your dreams, along with a very blatant proposition, and-- I thought I could help you, but I’m not the only one who’s noticed that you’re a genius. Everyone loves you; everyone wants to help you. I have nothing to offer you. I love you and I want you to succeed, but it's hard to accept that you'd be better off without me."

“You think I would actually ever take her up on that? Lena didn’t offer me the restaurant of my dreams. She offered me the restaurant of your dreams. You want to work in a super high-end restaurant. You’re good enough. That's just not somewhere I belong. I don't want an expensive restaurant like the one Lena was offering me. I'm ruining things for you and taking things from you. I want you to have everything you want."

"What? No ."

“I should drop out of the competition. I don't belong here. I don't have the skill or the training. I don't want an expensive restaurant like the one Lena was offering me. I'm ruining things for you and taking things from you. I want you to have everything you want.”

"You can't give me what I want because I don't know what that is anymore!" Alex grabbed her arm
and thrust out her hand to cover her mouth, stopping her words. "Sure, it would be nice to have Lena Luthor offering to take me on as a kept chef and fuckbuddy. But I don't want that. The only thing I know that I want is--"

She fell silent. In the shadows of the hanging couch, her chest ached and her eyes burned. She took her hand away from Kara's mouth, but didn't draw it back into her body. It hovered in the air, and Kara--chest tight, breathing hard, and not just from stopping herself from crying--lifted her own hand to match. Their fingertips just brushed against each other. Electric shocks like static electricity buzzed through Kara's arm.

"I want that too." The words came out small, but Kara couldn't deny them.

"I don't-- I don't have anything I can give you."

"I don't care." Kara felt like she had wanted this for so long. “I just want you."

Alex’s lips parted, her mouth forming a hurt shape, as if hearing that struck a wound--or healed one. Her eyes were dark, but so wide that they shone. Alex wanted her, and Kara couldn't breathe with how much she wanted her back.

"Is this--" Alex put her hand on Kara's arm, her warm touch sliding up her forearm, over her elbow to cup her bicep. "Is this okay?"

Kara found herself shaking, her hands quivering and numb, her heart pounding terrifyingly fast in her ears. She tried to speak, to say yes, yes please, but it was like she’d forgotten what muscles needed to coordinate to make a sound. Her fingertips brushed against Alex's side, needy and grasping, but almost paralyzed with it.

Alex moved in, coming so close her breath tickled the hair by Kara’s ear, but hesitating, unsure, as if maybe this was all a mistake and Kara didn't actually want her to kiss her. Kara couldn't bear it anymore. She lurched forward, her hand clasping her waist and dragging her the rest of the way in. She caught the back of Alex's head and pressed their mouths together. Alex made a small sound of surprise against her lips, and then she was kissing her.

Kara had wanted to kiss her all day, every time she’d been sweet, or showed her a new trick to keep her mise fresh, or laughed at Kara’s swearing. Her mouth, hot and soft and alive, was on hers now, kissing her, and Kara wanted even more. She wanted to kiss her slowly, drawing sounds out of her, making her fingers clasp and press at her arms. She wanted to kiss Alex until she stopped hurting, until she realized how good and kind and skilled Kara thought she was, and how none of that mattered at all. Because it was Alex, and Kara-- Kara had always felt this way around Alex, a little astonished, safe, at home when nothing felt like home. Alex was always struggling to be good enough, when she didn’t have to struggle at all, because good or bad, she was enough.

Kara tipped her head back, letting her mouth roll against Alex’s, lips and tongue and teeth. She nipped lightly at Alex’s lower lip, and felt the catch in Alex’s breath, the quiet half-sob. She looped both arms around Alex, pulling her onto her, and slid awkwardly down the back of the couch. Alex followed her down, her mouth suddenly hot and close on the night-chilled skin of Kara’s neck.

Kara couldn’t help the shuddering sound that escaped her. Alex pushed up, wide eyed. “I’m sorry. Am I crushing you? I keep falling on you. Should I move?"

" No. " Kara grasped her shirt, jerking her back down. "I want you on top of me. Now."

Alex resisted for a moment, holding herself up over Kara, an expression of pleased astonishment
brightening her face. And then her fingers brushed like a butterfly's wings across Kara's cheek, and she was a warm bundle on top of Kara, her mouth sweet and rough and searing. Each touch sent lightning flickering down her nerves, through her spine, lighting up her core. Kara was so turned on she thought her heart would stop.

Too intent with the sensation of kissing Alex, Kara didn't know what her hands were doing, except clinging, until Alex moved to press a nerve-rattling kiss to her throat and Kara gasped, reaching for her face. Alex caught her hands, lacing their fingers together, and pressed them down on the couch seat by her head.

_Fuck_. Kara arched underneath her, shifting, catching one of Alex's legs between hers, needing that pressure against her core. Alex, in her sleep-boxers, froze as Kara's skirt rode up and they were skin to skin. Her thigh nestled in between her legs, Kara couldn't hide how hot she was, how wet. Still pinning her hands, Alex stared down at Kara.

"You want--"

Ashamed at how needy and desperate she was already, Kara glared up at her. "Yes. I thought we covered this. I want you. I want you to _fuck_ me."

Alex looked shaken. Her pulse against Kara's skin was fluttering wildly. Kara's eyes stung. _I want you to love me, for always, but if I can't have that, I want this._

Alex settled over her hips and slowly released her hands. Then she reached up, stroking her fingers down Kara's throat, finding a tender spot that her mouth had left red raw.

Kara gasped, her chest seizing. Alex's fingers traced along her collarbone and found the buttons on the front of Kara's shift dress. She leaned down and again sealed her lips to Kara's neck, sucking marks into her skin. Kara moaned, rolling her hips against Alex's weight.

Alex was fumbling with the buttons--mostly decorative, but they still fell open to expose her chest. Her fingers found soft bare flesh beneath. A gasp signaled when Alex realized Kara hadn't put on a bra after her shower. Her fingers tightened, pulling the dress open, and she rose up on her knees, looking at Kara, her eyes wide. _I get this? This is for me?_ And Kara slowly raised her arms, shuffling out of the dress sleeves, pushing it down her torso, and then folding her arms above her head, arching her back to push her breasts up toward Alex.

Alex's hand hovered above one, unsure, as if she was waiting for the smack, to be told to go away. But Kara couldn't wait. She grabbed Alex's hand and pushed it down, the palm pressing against her hard nipple. "_Fuck, _" Alex hissed, and then she had both breasts in her hands, and she was diving back down, pressing kisses and nips to Kara's chest.

Kara reached for her back, for her ass, and clung. What Alex was doing to her breasts was driving her crazy. She wanted to drag Alex up her body and bury her face in her heat and wetness. Alex's mouth found a nipple and sucked lines of electric heat into her core. _Fuck. _Alex.

She couldn't believe it was Alex. She couldn't believe it was _Alex_.

_Her voice, soothing her out of the arcs of panic, her arms, steady and comforting, her eyes, so sad but gentle, generous, even when she was tangled up in her own pain. And now, here, Alex staring at the offering of her body like it was some kind of miracle._

Alex's breath was fast, her shoulders heaving, her face reddening. She pushed up, hands rolling against Kara's breasts and Kara's hips rocking in response. She was looking at Kara, her eyes intent
and devouring. She shifted, moving to slide down her body, her mouth going back down, nipping at the bottoms of her breasts, sliding wetly and open against her skin, her side, pressing kisses to her belly, shuffling the dress down with her.

"I want to go down. Can I? I want to."

She was at the edge of Kara's underwear, and Kara felt like she would implode with heat if Alex's mouth wasn't on her. "Yes, yes," she managed, felt Alex's fingers hook into the waistband of her underwear, and realized that was the wrong answer. "Oh fuck. No. Not yet." Fucking Mike. She'd trusted him, and maybe he hadn't been sliding his dick around, but she couldn't be sure of that. "Dickweed boyfriend, remember."

Alex grunted against her stomach. "Oh, yeah." And then she nosed against Kara's groin. "Don't care."

She tugged down Kara's underwear and Kara grabbed her by the hair. "Oh no you don't. I care. Get back up here and kiss me."

Alex yelped as she tugged her up, pulling her hair, and then she fell back onto Kara, seeking out her mouth, sucking her bottom lip between her own, pleading with her, needing her. Her hands were still struggling with Kara's underwear, pulling them down, Shifting so she was lying alongside Kara, her hand slid in, delving, parting her. The heel of her hand rolled over Kara's clit, and Kara gasped. She threw her arms around Alex's shoulders. Alex sat up, pulling her along with her as she clung. Alex propped them up with one arm, scuffling around until Kara's back hit the back of the couch, their legs tangled together, and Alex leaned in to take her mouth again as her fingers slid inside.

Kara arched into her hand and threaded her hands into Alex's hair, kissing her as hard as she could. This was it, this was Alex, Alex inside her. And oh, fuck, it was even better than she'd hoped it could be.

#

Kara, sweaty and panting under her, her mouth open, wasn't even kissing her, just rubbing her mouth against hers. Heat and wetness enclosed Alex's fingers and clutched at them as Kara's hands gripped her hair and pulled it. Fuck, Alex liked that way too much.

She twisted her fingers, Kara bucking under her, gasping, and close, and Alex wrapped her arm tightly across Kara's back, pulling her in, keeping her steady, as she crooked her fingers and slid in again, right across the sensitive area that made Kara squirm, and Kara arched, crying out, gasping into her ear, mouth rubbing against it and smearing spit across her cheek. She came, tight around her fingers, wetness smearing across her palm.

Alex felt herself clench in response, at the sight and sound and feel of Kara coming for her, of the way she spilled back against the couch, spent and limp, chest heaving.

Her arms tightened around Alex, pulling her down, holding her, and Alex, achy and needing, lay against her, pressing her nose into Kara's neck, trying to breathe her in, trying to drown in her. It was Kara, and she didn't deserve this, she couldn't keep this, but she wanted it so much, she needed it.

"Alex. Alex." Kara was murmuring in her ear, her name strange and unfamiliar when it was said like that, said like it meant something more than pleasure and thanks.

Alex burrowed into her, her hand migrating up to her chest, curling around the curve of her breast, feeling the weight of it, still astonished that Kara did nothing but sigh into her at the touch. And then
Kara's hands closed on her, one on her waist, the other right under her ass.

"Come."

Alex felt her insides shudder at the command, and let Kara tug her up as she shuffled down her body between her legs. Kara, naked under her, Kara-- oh fuck. Kara pulling up her shirt and biting at her abs, her hands tracing down her back, stroking the skin of her shoulders. And then she slid all the way down, back hitting the couch seat, and jerking Alex's hips forward, pressing her face into her core, mouthing at her through her soft sleep shorts, smearing through Alex's wetness.

Kara's teeth dug into the cloth and tugged fiercely. "I'm gonna do this. Any complaints?"

"I-- fuck. No. None."

Kara scrabbled to get her shorts down, and Alex helped as much as she could, almost overbalancing and falling off the swinging couch as she got one foot out, and then Kara just dragged her down onto her mouth.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Kara's mouth and tongue and even her fucking nose, and Alex didn't want to grind into her face, but couldn't help it, and Kara's hands tightened on her thighs and she made a sound like a growl that vibrated through her and bucked her hips, and fuck, Alex scrabbled for something to hold onto, because she didn't think she could ride Kara's face and not collapse all over her.

She snagged the armrest, buckling over it, just as Kara's tongue snaked through her lips, and fuck. This was going to take like thirty seconds. Kara's fingers slid into her from behind, and thirty seconds had been generous. Alex felt herself come around Kara's fingers, smear release across her face, and the sound that Kara made made her want to come again immediately.

Kara did not let up for an instant, and Alex clung to the armrest and groaned as Kara added more fingers and thrust harder, pulling out and replacing it with her tongue, and then fucking her fingers in again, rough and too strong, her grip bruising on Alex's thigh, and it was everything she'd ever wanted.

She never wanted it to end.

#
Sunlight crept across the enclosure, turning grey boards white and gleaming off the still water of the pool. It turned the insides of Kara's eyelids to red-gold lanterns and she squinted, moving a little, coming awake.

She twitched as hair tickled her nose, and breathed in, sweat and frying oil and lemongrass, and Alex. She licked her lips. Alex.

She blinked against the light, squinting down at Alex, who was curled into her chest like a child. Her arm was up, covering her eyes, and she breathed steadily, still asleep.

She was still there. Kara snuggled down deeper into the hanging couch and fell back asleep.

#

Alex slept hard and didn't wake up until something hit her. It was a pair of jeans.

She jerked up, waking Kara underneath her, and sat up.

"Gah," Siobhan was on the deck, covering her eyes. "I already had to see way more than I wanted to. Don't make me look at your mostly non-existent boobs. But seriously, get the fuck up. We need to be at the studio in half an hour."

"What?"

"Call is in half an hour," Siobhan said more clearly and then strode off.

"Fuck." Alex grabbed for the jeans and skidded off the hanging couch, ass naked for the cameras, and pulled them on. Her tank top had been thrown and was barely hanging on the edge of the pool, half of it under water. She grabbed it and jerked it on over her head, grimacing as the freezing wet patch clung to her skin. Kara was sitting up now, rubbing her eyes, a confused furrow cut into her forehead, still naked save for her socks on the hanging couch.

Alex opened her mouth and then closed it again, unable to find words when faced with those breasts and the scattered red marks she'd left across her chest and neck.

She'd had her all night, and she still wanted her just as much.

She rubbed the back of her head. Her hair was a rats nest. "I-- I think we need to talk."

Kara's face locked up. She nodded. "After judging?"

"Okay." Alex bent, picking up her dress from where it had been dumped on the deck, and handed it to her. She wanted to lean in, press a kiss to her mouth, or at least to her cheek, and make sure she knew that whatever their conversation entailed there was no regret here. She wanted more of this. She wanted this every day, for always. And she was going to ask. She was going to ask her to be with her, to work with her. She just had to figure out a way to say it.

She knew that if she kissed her she was going to kiss her for an hour and probably just say it straight out in the worst way, something stupid like 'marry me' and they would not make it to filming.

But looking at Kara there, in the morning sun, shift dress held to her chest, her head bent, eyes soft--have me always, be with me in everything--it felt like the only thing she ever wanted to say.
Resisting no longer felt worth it. She leaned in and pressed a kiss to Kara’s cheek. Kara’s eyes widened, her face going soft, blinking up at her, the blue like a tether, drawing her back in. Alex staggered backwards, barely able to resist it.

"Right. I've got to change. I'll see you down there. I--" She swallowed. Maybe one of them would be going home. "Good luck."

“You-- you too.”

And Alex ran.

#

When Kara made it to the studio, M'gann put her hand to her forehead. "I can't believe you're walk of shaming today."

Kara’s face went hot. She hadn’t realized it was that obvious.

Lucy swore. "You need to be in make-up like ten minutes ago." She started prodding at Kara's neck. "Maybe ice on that one? Jesus, that girl is like a starving wolf. I wasn't supposed to have you all in chefs jackets today either, and you'd still need a fucking scarf."

"Huh, I thought you'd want her to look mauled," Siobhan said.

Lucy glared. "Her mother told me to look after her. Having her go on TV with five visible hickies is going to get me shot."

Lucy dragged Kara off to the make-up room and made dramatic hand gestures at the tech. The tech grinned at Kara. "Don't worry," she hefted her foundation spray gun. "I've got you. Have a good time?"

“Yes?” Kara sank into the chair. "She kissed me after. But she said we needed to talk."

The tech had a set of bobby pins in her mouth and only made a bemused noise in response. Kara supposed that was about right.

Lucy, hovering in the doorway, frowned, then hurried off.

When everyone was out of make-up, they were lined up in front of the dais. They’d done something weird to Alex's hair, curled it so it fluffed softly around her face rather than fell in straight fierce lines to her chin. Kara didn't like it. Alex gave her one look, looked panicked, tried to smile at her, looked more panicked, and looked away. Kara’s stomach tied itself into a knot.

"We were very impressed by the way you managed your restaurants last night. Teams of two and yet you managed over two-hundred covers. It was very professional. All of you were very professional, and we are sorry that we can't take all of you into the final."

"One team of judges tried once," Diana said cheerfully. "They were never found again."

Kara sighed. She was the only one who wasn't a professional, and she'd been a mess yesterday. If Alex hadn't put her back together, she'd have probably started to cry. It was better that she left and let Alex focus on herself and her own cooking. She deserved the chance to go after what she wanted--the exact thing Kara knew she didn't want.

Kara ducked her eyes, staring at Diana’s insanely tall strappy heeled sandals. She didn't want to
leave. She didn't want to face the outside, face after. But she'd have to eventually. It would be better to leave now than fail dramatically in the final, when they tried to make her into a real chef.

"So we are very sorry to see Siobhan go. We wish you the best and hope to eat your cooking again soon."

Kara jerked up her head. Oh no.

Siobhan tsked. "Figures. My luck to end up going head to head with the idiot savant."

She gave M'gann and Alex handshakes, then, unexpectedly, hugged Kara. Kara went "ulp." In her ear, Siobhan murmured, "They'll love me for this. Look pleased."

Kara did her best to look pleased and hugged Siobhan back.

Then Siobhan turned and, with a two-finger salute, left the set.

From up on the catwalk, Lucy announced, "There will be no break. The final competition begins now."

What? Kara glanced over to Alex and M'gann who both looked just as surprised. This was not what Lucy had told them last night.

"Judges and contestants report to the interview room."

This was all going off script. Kara frowned, trying to remember how the final challenge had worked in previous seasons. She hadn't actually watched a whole season since the first one, and it had been slightly different back then.

They were left in the hall for a moment outside the interview room as the judges got settled. "What is this?" Kara asked M'gann.

"I think they're going to give us our individual final challenges now," M'gann whispered. She looked quietly thrilled. "This is the big one. Just the money allowance we get for the challenge-- it's insane. We get to actually run our own restaurant, a real one."

Panic rushed through Kara. She thought she might be sick.

The door opened, and Lucy called M'gann inside.

And then it was just Kara and Alex.

"Hey," Alex said softly. "Congrats."

Kara forced a smile. Making the final was not a relief. She even more knotted up than she had been before.

Kara reached out and squeezed her hand. "You too." It was great that Alex made it. Alex needed people to believe in her and let her know her she really was talented.

That was probably one of the things they needed to talk about. They made a good team, but Alex belonged somewhere big and fancy where she could prove herself on the level she was ready for. Kara didn’t want that. She didn't want to charge people crazy prices for the honor of tasting her ideas. If she managed to make a living cooking, it wouldn’t be in the same place Alex was. She just hoped she could still have Alex, even if they couldn’t have that.
Alex ducked her head, seeming embarrassed. "Look," she said, balling her hands into fists, her shoulders going stiff. "I've been thinking. I know I'm not great at that when I'm stressed, but I just-- I think-- I've been making some bad decisions. Sometimes you think something is a good idea, and it just turns out not to be-- what you imagined it to be. You built it all up in your head, and it's not--"

Kara felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water out over her head. Not what you imagined. Built it all up in your head. Her? Did Alex mean her? Did she really feel that way? "What?"

Alex stopped. "What?"

"You built it all up in your head, and then-- what, I didn't live up to the hype?"

Alex stared at her, and then looked horrified. "You? No! No. I was talking about-- about being a chef."

This made even less sense. "What do you mean? You-- you're a great chef."

Alex rubbed her hand over her head, her hair sticking up in tiny mohawks, and she made a face, anxious and stressed. "I wouldn't say that. I just--" She sighed. "I'm coming out of a pretty bad time in my life. It's not the worst, but it's been hard. I've-- I've been a failure and a fuck-up, and I guess I just put all of my self-worth in the idea of being a head chef. If I had my own kitchen I could prove I was better than Max, better than everyone thought, that I could be 'exceptional,' like Chef J'onzz said. But it's probably time to face facts. I've struggled so much, trying to be that kind of chef. Maybe I'm not good enough, maybe I'm just not cut out for that kind of work."

What was she saying? Did she really think that she wasn't good enough? She'd just made the final. Chef J'onzz wouldn't be pushing her if he didn't already think she was exceptional, if he didn't think she had a chance to win it all.

“And then, being with you again. It just made me realize that maybe I've been chasing the wrong rabbit here. I keep looking for ways to prove myself, when I don't need that. I just-- I want to be with you. I want to help you. I know it's insane that we're going into the finals, and this isn't how I imagined this conversation. I thought I'd be out for sure and I'd be begging you to let me be your sous, but--"

Panic flooded Kara. She couldn't hear her words anymore. Face facts? Help her? Help her with that ninety-seat monstrosity Lena promised? Be her sous and give up on her own goals, her own dreams? That was the last thing Kara wanted. She didn't want someone to prop her up, someone to give everything for her. That was not a kind of pressure she could handle. She'd disappointed so many people; she couldn't bear disappointing Alex, not after letting her give up her dreams for her. If anything would make her leave for good, that would.

Kara pushed Alex's arm down, grabbing her attention and interrupting her speech. "Don't do me any favors."

"What?"

"Don't you dare give anything up for me!" Kara snapped. "I'm not your burden. I don't want a caretaker, okay? You live your life and I'll sort out mine and if you can respect me enough to let me fail on my own, then maybe I'll think about letting you in."

"Giving up isn't just about you!" Alex snapped. "I'm shit at this! I need to stop daydreaming about being a chef like J'onnn, or even one on the level of fucking Sara Lance. I need to stop trying to be something I'm not."
"Seriously? You think you're not cut out to be a chef? You're in the final. You can't really believe that. I don't think you do. I think you're just scared that you won't measure up, so you won't even try. You keep running away! How many times did you run from me? If you run away from this, something you are good at, something you love, something you've worked hard for, without giving it a real try, the problem isn't your cooking, it's you. You need to get over yourself and go after what you want for once. I know I have my own issues. I know I lean on people too hard. but I am going to fight them, okay? Without your help. You go sort out yours."

Alex froze, then sagged. She rubbed the back of her head. "I didn't want to give up on everything. I just-- I just thought we could do it together."

She looked . . . hurt, and Kara felt like she’d stabbed her herself. She hadn’t wanted to slap her with her insecurities, but she couldn’t-- she couldn’t let Alex think that she was a prize worth giving up everything for. She’d just be a disappointment, she was always a disappointment. It was better to hurt Alex first, before she’d invested too much, before it would hurt her more to leave.

"I'd like that," Kara said, staring at Alex's shoes, not able to look her in her eye and see the hurt on her face. "But I think-- you need to do what's right for you, and I need to do what's right for me. And if those things don't involve us, well, they just don't. You're meant for great things. Propping me up is not one of those things."

"I've never thought of taking care of you as a burden." Alex looked away. "But if you need to do it on your own, I get that." She swallowed. "You're probably right. I'm giving in too soon. Self-sabotaging. I don't want to use the way I feel about you as an excuse to fail before I try. And you deserve a chance to prove yourself on your own too."

"Yeah." Kara shut her eyes. It didn't sound like they were talking about their relationship, but it felt like they were talking about it. Maybe they were both too messed up to try to sort out being together while figuring out what to do about their careers.

Maybe the right thing to do was nothing at all.

M'gann emerged from the room looking thrilled. "You're up Alex." Alex gave Kara one last look, her eyes unbearably sad, and then ducked into the room.

"Did she pitch her idea to you?"

Kara stared at M'gann. "What?"

"She was thinking she might want to start up that bakery/sandwich place, if you'd be up for doing it with her. That was before she knew you'd both make the final, but she sounded pretty dead set on it, I figured she'd ask you either way. Lucy might say yes if you guys were cute enough."

Kara's stomach clenched. It was exactly what she'd wanted. Not the crazy fine dining restaurant. Something she thought she could handle, especially if it was something Alex wanted to do too. Alex hadn't pitched it, not properly. But she'd tried, she'd started, and Kara had shut her down.

She had turned it down.

Kara swallowed. It had been the right thing to do. If Alex was framing it as 'giving up her dreams' and Kara's response had been 'don't take me on as a burden' they weren't in the right place to do it anyway. Good sex was nothing to build a business relationship on. But not having it--knowing they both wanted it and chose not to do it--it would be hard to look at Alex and not think about what they might be doing if she’d just said yes instead.
"I turned her down," Kara said softly.

"Oh," M'gann said. "Well, probably it's good for me, not to be competing against both of you
together. You two make a dangerous team." And she walked away.

Kara's throat felt thick and her stomach ached. She thought she might have just made the worst
mistake of her life.

#

Alex felt like she was going to throw up. She'd felt like she was going to throw up since she'd looked
at herself in the mirror that morning, and seen herself, with her hair a total wreck and her lips still
bruised and a little swollen, and gone— *You. You had sex with Kara.* She wanted Kara, Kara wanted
her, and suddenly everything looked different. Different like a nighttime landscape when the sun
came up.

The weight of her mom's judgment, the weight of her own failures and crimes, they were nothing if
Kara wanted her. New thoughts were cropping up in her mind, new ideas, ways of shaping her life,
making it good, being happy, making sure Kara was in the front and center.

M'gann was sitting in make-up across from her, and when the tech groaned at Alex's hair, Alex
couldn't stop the words from spilling out. "What if I asked her? Do you think she'd-- open that
bakery with me? Do you think--"

M'gann had looked at her with one eyebrow raised. "Kara?"

Alex nodded.

"Yes." M'gann shook her head, scrunching her nose at Alex. "I mean, she said yes to having sex
with you on camera, I don't think a little business proposition is going to put her off."

Alex hesitated. "The couch is covered. I don't think the cameras can really see what's inside."

(Lucy, passing by at that moment, rolled her eyes and went to delete what was on the camera
focused inside the hanging couch before someone decided to post it on xTube.)

M'gann covered her face, shaking her head. "Not my point. But yes, I think you should ask her.
There’s a good chance she’ll say yes. Not sure they’ll let you if you both make the final, but no
reason not to ask."

Alex didn’t even contemplate them both making the final. She was going to be booted, she knew
that. But maybe, just maybe, Kara would say yes to this and pick her as her sous for the final.

The thought of asking her made her sick also. It wasn't 'marry me.' It was kind of worse than that.
But she wanted it. She wanted it more than anything.

Making the final had been a shock. But she’d made up her mind. She was asking no matter what
Lucy would say.

And then she'd asked, or tried to, and Kara had shot her down.

Kara had seemed almost insulted that Alex might think she wasn’t good enough to be a head chef.
And then ‘burden’? Where had that come from? Alex had never thought of Kara as a burden. She'd
never realized Kara thought of herself that way. She needed help, but *everyone* needed help. Kara
helped her too. Kara made her better. Kara made her not feel--
Not feel like she felt right now.

Nothing felt good anymore. Kara thought it was stupid for her to give up trying to be a real chef, and Kara needed to figure out how to make it on her own. Alex could respect that. It didn't make her feel less sick. She could handle the rejection of her proposition. But it also seemed pretty clear that Kara didn't just not want the partnership, she didn't want anything else either.

And losing everything, after she'd been so close to having so much--

Oh no, she was going to puke.

Keeping her back teeth clamped together to stop herself from being sick, Alex stepped into the interview room. Across from her, a panel of five judges had been set up in a row. Aside from Diana and Lilian and J'onn were two more: Barry what's his name who had the food truck franchise in Central City, and Ra's Al Ghul, who had his own show on the food network where he bought out and gutted failing restaurants and rebuilt them to be bleeding-edge modern and stylish.

"To remind you of the structure of the show, the first five episodes were on-site competitions, but for the finale we want you to prove that you won't just ball it all up when it gets down to the every day." Lilian's tone was flat as ever. "Therefore, you will be off-site, at your own establishment. We will judge you at your grand opening, have secret critics on other days, and finally you and your crew will come here to do a final onsite preparation for us."

Alex tried to focus. What exactly were they supposed to do in this part of the competition?

"You have to show us you how much you want this, and whether or not you can actually manage to do what you say you want to."

"Our question is, Alex," Diana said, tipping her head to the side. "What is it that you want to do?"

Alex froze.

"On your initial submission forms you said you wished to pursue a head chef position at a large and reputable establishment. But there are many ways to be a chef."

Lilian gestured, rather dismissively, to the gathered judges. "You can have a food truck, we can rent you a small café style establishment, you can take over a hotel or have a cabana on the beach. What is it you want?"

Alex swallowed hard, there were photographs of various locations piled on the table in front of her, and she shifted through them. One storefront on a busy pedestrian street with large glass windows and an awning over cast iron tables and chairs caught her eye. Her fingers hovered over it.

It would be a great place to have a bakery/café. It was exactly what she wanted, if Kara would do it with her. But alone?

She didn't think she could bear trying to do it alone.

Instead, her fingers found the picture of a large open restaurant--well lit with white table cloth and fine crystal glassware.

It was what she’d said she wanted. It was making it.

If that was what Kara wanted her to do, she’d do it.
"I want to be a head chef, here."

J'onn's mouth quirked up. "Then you're working with me."

For the first time that day, Alex felt like she'd made the right choice.

#

"Hey, Kara." Barry Allen grinned widely at her. "I hear you got here the way I did, through the food truck business."

His smile, guileless and non-threatening, made Kara able to breathe again. She smiled back. "Yeah, I worked at a taco truck for a while."

"Man, I love tacos. I made noodles and Banh Mi myself." He guarded his mouth. "Secret though, I totally paid my way through college by driving an ice cream truck."

Kara laughed, put at ease. Of course this guy had driven an ice cream truck.

"Anyways, so, we know that your partner didn't make the final and there was some bad blood at the end, so we wanted to make sure to offer you your very own truck, if that's what you want. But you also have all the other options." He gestured to the photos of locations. "You can work in a big kitchen, run your own small restaurant or café, have a fish fry stand on the boardwalk. The final is about you being as successful as you can at what you really want to do."

One of the photos had been pulled out of the stack, a glass fronted shop with an awning and tables outside. Had Alex pulled it out? Had she thought it would be a good place for the bakery/sandwich place? Kara swallowed, trying not to think about how she'd feel if Alex had decided to do it anyway, without her.

If it was still here though, she probably hadn't picked it. What if that was the right decision for her, and Kara had pushed her to pick something else?

That wasn't something she could fix right now. Right now she had to choose what was right for her. There was no way she'd want to work in a big kitchen. Even running a café without Alex was more than she thought she could handle.

No, she knew where she'd been happy last, and that was still her best chance to be happy now.

"I totally want the food truck."

#
Episode 6: Part 1

Chapter Notes

Ooops, had to do some messing around with ep 6 as we caught up to the end of my buffer. And . . . no one should be surprised that I've added 3 to the chapter count. But we are in the finale!

Leaving the enclosure felt more like leaving college after graduation than anything had since. Alex, seated in the passenger seat of J'onn's rental car, her bag at her feet, stared back at the security entrance gate and felt like she was leaving everything important behind.

But everyone else was leaving too.

Alex turned around, crossed her arms, and glared down the heavy National City traffic in front of them. Only then did she catch J'onn's amused glance in the rearview mirror. Alex scowled at him, and he laughed.

"Better pick some music. We're going all the way to El Héroe."

That was one of the newer hipster areas in East National City. Chefs were dying to open restaurants there. Surprised and pleased, Alex turned on the radio.

#

The room was empty. Kara turned in a circle in the center of it, eyes stinging. Everyone was gone.

"Hey."

Kara turned. Lucy was standing in the doorway, her clipboard gone and her usual producer's visor clutched in her hand.

"So, um, I was wondering-- Barry's happy to work with you remotely for a couple days, and I've got a deal on a new lease for you if you can wait until Monday. So, um, do you want to go up and see your mom?"

Kara stared at her. There was too much information in that sentence. "You've rented me an apartment?"

Lucy looked uncomfortable. "You're still under contract. I'm responsible for housing you until filming wraps. And I figured you weren't going to go back to living with Mike. The lease is for the rest of the month, but it's renewable."

Kara rubbed the back of her head. This was . . . not normal. Lucy was being nice to her. "You think I could see my mom?"

"A few days couldn't hurt. She texted me to ask if you would. I've booked tickets. I can drive you down the coast too."

Kara frowned. "You want to come with me to see my mom?"
Lucy looked mortified. "Business reasons. I'm just, um, straightening things out for the final."

Kara took a breath. Going to see her mom brought up a whole host of issues, but it was still better than seeing Mike. And it was time. She needed to find out who her mom was now. She'd lost too many people to just write one off.

Especially because it seemed she liked pushing people away rather than letting them in, just in case they might leave her later on.

*Let your guard down, Kara. Let her in.*

"Okay," Kara said. "I'd like to see her."

#

The rest of Alex's day had been amazing. Stepping inside, seeing the space for her restaurant, going through the kitchen, talking over her plans with J'onn, everything was so much like her daydreams--only real.

It was only when Alex got out of the cab outside her apartment that the overwhelming sadness descended again. She put her hand on the outer door and leaned on it, trying to catch her breath. Her chest hurt when she tried to take air in.

Where was Kara tonight? In some hotel? Had she wrested her stuff back from Mike? Alex had wanted to do that with her, be at her side . . . and not punch anyone. She could have stayed here, at Alex's--though the thought made Alex suddenly wonder when exactly she'd cleaned the bathroom last. But still, if Alex hadn't-- hadn't pushed too hard, hadn't asked for too much, hadn't fucked things up, she could at least have invited her to stay.

Maybe they would have made gestures to one of them sleeping on Alex's horrible couch, maybe they would have gone to bed together, found it strange to lie there with the intent to sleep. Maybe Kara would have invaded her side during the night, drawing her in, and Alex might have woken up half squashed underneath her, or held tight, Kara's arms around her--like she'd woken up this morning. Maybe . . . but it wasn't worth thinking about. Not now.

There was a bar down the street.

Alex groaned. As if she'd ever have a chance to work things out with Kara if she was a drunk again. She opened the door and trudged up the five flights of stairs.

Unexpected light shone from under the bottom of her door. Confused, Alex knocked. It was pulled open, and she was faced by a strange mutant creature, not as tall as normal humans, and oddly willowy--oh. A child.

Why was there a child in her apartment?

The child looked at her and cocked her head curiously. "You're Alex, right?"

"Um, yes?"

"Why did you knock? It's your apartment, isn't it? I thought you were the pizza."

"I . . . saw the light."

"Oh," the child said. "All right, I guess. I want pizza."
Alex, still bewildered by the presence of a child, didn't know what to say to that.

"Chef!" a familiar voice roared. "You're back!"

In two bounds, Vasquez had leapt over the back of the sofa and thrown her arms around Alex.

"What?" Alex staggered back, bouncing off the wall, her own arms going up. "Vaz? What are you doing in my apartment? And why is there a child?"

"The producers called me," Maggie said from where she sat perched up on the back of the sofa. "Thanks for picking me as your sous, by the way. Vaz has a key. We figured you'd should have a welcome home. And that's Jaime."

Ah, many mysteries were now solved.

Vaz didn't let go, crushing Alex slightly, arms around her neck. "Congratulations! You made the final!"

Maggie dropped off the sofa and scooped a can out of the ice bucket leaking on her side table. She handed Alex the can of seltzer. It was startlingly cold and wet in Alex's hand. Alex looked at her, and over at Vaz, and then over at Jaime. There was music playing. Her apartment looked bright and lived in--not the hole she'd crawled back into after shift to sleep.

"I did, didn't I?"

Maggie punched her arm. "You did, you dumbshit. Now where is that fucking pizza?"

Right then the buzzer rang, and Jaime leapt for the controls. She managed to let the pizza guy in in a brusque exchange and a single button press which Alex had never managed the entire time she lived there. And then there was pizza, and seltzer and gossip, and it was weird, because her apartment was never like this, but it felt more like home than it ever had.

#

Kara wasn't quite sure why Lucy was flying up to Big Sur with her. Lucy picked up the rental car and drove her up the canyon to her mom's place like she knew the route by heart. It was a relief to have her there at first, as a buffer, keeping things light, asking just the right questions, as they sat drinking rose iced tea on the porch. But it was still a little odd.

Lucy only stayed for a few hours, saying she had stuff to do in Monterey, but she made Kara's mom laugh a few times, and when they hugged goodbye Kara realized she needed to recalibrate her brain here.

"You're friends?"

"I like her. She knows how to admit when she's made a mistake."

Kara figured she could do that too. She'd judged her mom for the woman she'd been before the bombing. But Alura was different now. The damage had changed her. Kara got it, how it couldn't be easy being someone else, and asking to be loved and love in the same way you had been before, when you didn't know if you could, when you didn't know how.

The house was an old creaky building, drafty, but with large full wall windows and a series of porches overlooking a redwood canyon with a view of the ocean beyond.
Kara's room was up in the tower, a second story offshoot with a steep staircase that looked difficult for Alura to climb. But the bed had been made, wood laid out for her small cast iron stove, and everything prepared just right for her even so. Kara dropped her bag and fell face first onto the bed. It wasn't like she'd done very much that day, but she was worn out.

She pulled out her phone and stared at it. No reception up here. She shut her eyes. God, she just wanted all this confusion to be over. She'd had Alex back, and she'd known that trying to pursue a relationship with her had the risk of ruining everything. She just hadn't expected to ruin it so quickly. She wanted her warm eyes and her sweet comfort and she just wanted to call her and tell her that she was sorry. She hadn't meant to fight. She didn't want it to be an ultimatum, to give up on everything while they tried to sort out where they were going to work. She needed Alex.

But that was her being needy again, clinging to other people when she was supposed to be learning how to be strong on her own.

"Kara?"

A voice sounded from down the stairs. "Yes?"

"I was wondering . . ." a hesitation, too long. "Not that you'd be interested just because of the competition, and you must be tired of it, but, I thought maybe . . ."

Kara climbed off her bed. She was tired. Everything was so emotional right now. But it sounded like Alura wasn't doing terribly well with having her here either. She came over to the top of the stairs and looked down. "What is it?"

Alura ducked her head. "Would you like to cook dinner with me?"

Well, that was an easy one. "Of course."

#

Dear Kara,

You know, it feels natural, writing you with no intention to send the letter, even though I haven't done it in years. I did it right after you left, though. I wrote you so many letters, sometimes on paper, but more often, once I realized they really wouldn't give me an address for you, only in my head. I don't remember what was in them, everything, probably, because for those three months you had been there for everything, and since I knew you would never get them, I wasn't afraid of sharing all my anger and my hurt with you.

I missed my dad so much. I missed you so much. Sometimes I woke up and I couldn't remember whether you were dead and my dad had been sent away or the opposite. I don't think I ever really felt okay again after that. I don't know if I'll ever feel okay. I was so helpless. I understood how hurt you were from the loss of your parents from the outside, but feeling it from the inside, really knowing loss, it made me frantic, because I knew how you felt and I wasn't there for you. I couldn't calm you when you were upset, or distract you when you were lost in sad recollections, I couldn't hold you when you needed someone.

I couldn't hold you when I needed someone.

I guess that was why it shocked me when you said you felt like a burden. J'onn told me I need to learn to ask for help, and I've realized that the way I have been seeking comfort and letting myself be helped was by helping you. Being someone you could rely on, protecting you, telling you how I felt so you could talk through your feelings too—that mended me. It made me feel strong, when I always
feel weak, it made me feel stable and certain, when I've always felt unsure and unsteady, it let me talk about things I never talk about to anyone. I have never thought of you as a burden. If anything, I think of you as a kite. If I don't fuck up and pull you down, you can fly. And I want to see you fly.

Anyways, I'm trying to learn how to ask for help properly, and not read my various failures as signs that say 'You're a failure.' Waylon said it, right, you haven't failed until you stop going after what you want.

I'm not going to stop.

J'onn has always been the best of mentors. I hope whoever you're working with is half as good. He apparently bought a space in El Héroe, planning on opening another of his restaurants there, and never got around to it. He's letting me do whatever I want with the place. It's gorgeous--high ceilings, section walls, and carpeting to reduce the noise. The kitchen has a triple-deck brick lined pizza oven. I'm tempted to make nothing but pizza here.

I don't want to make pizza without you.

It's an up and coming hipster neighborhood, and Maggie has told me flatly, that I better have a gimmick. --Oh, yeah, I picked Maggie as my sous. Sorry. I didn't realize until afterwards that we picked sous in order. I went for her first, though I was sure M'gann would have snapped her right up. But apparently she picked Waylon, which leaves you with Siobhan. I'm really, really sorry.

But seriously, thank fuck I have Maggie. You know Max was out to get me, and apparently when Lucy got his case thrown out, he told all his mob buddies to blacklist me. So when I was ordering supplies, everyone heard my name and hung up. Finally I got one service to bring me vegetables, but the truck shows up, and everything is rotting and moldy, and I am so pissed. I am swearing at this guy, telling him that, I dunno, probably that sucking Max's cock is beneath him, or something else vulgar and likely to get me punched, and then Maggie comes out.

"What's going on here?"

The delivery guy just freezes. "Mags?"

"Tito?"

The delivery guy--Tito, apparently--waves his arms all frantic like. "What are you doing here? You're not working here, are you? With her?"

Maggie takes one look at the produce and is like, "What the ever loving fuck, Tito? This is my place. What the fuck are you fucking me around like this? Leave my sous alone. You better redo this order right now, or I'm going to tell your Mama what you're doing, and good luck at ever getting invited to one of Jaime's birthday parties again!"

The delivery guy just shrinks and hurries away, and Maggie makes a face and apologizes for making him think that she outranked me, and I was like, that is totally fine. And also, do you want to call all the suppliers and handle delivery from now on, because I need you. The moment she takes over, no trouble. She knows everyone. Guess who has more pull with the mob than Max? Yeah.

Anyways, she's been great. And Vaz-- you haven't met Vasquez, have you? Probably for the best, Vaz would never leave me alone if she knew about you. She's totally solid and reliable too. And she and Maggie are having a thing, I guess? It's a very tentative thing, and Maggie snaps at me whenever I try to ask her about it, but Vaz is a little more voluble.

They have Gone on Dates, but are Not Dating. Vaz seems to find this amusing. I am really not
asking how many of those dates ended up in the bedroom, but, for extra data: Vaz has burned herself twice when in view of Maggie fixing her hair.

I moved around the stations to prevent further accidents.

Vaz has also made best friends with Jaime. Them hanging out makes Maggie's face get all complicated. Vaz told me that Jaime made her promise to teach her how to skateboard. I immediately put my own foot down. "Not until after the Grand Opening," I told her. Because either she'd get hurt showing off for an eleven year old, or Jaime would get hurt and Maggie would kill her, and either way, she wouldn't be able to work, and I need her.

It was strange to say "I need you." But she didn't make anything out of it, just like Maggie didn’t. She just put her arm around my shoulders and squeezed, agreed to postpone the skateboarding adventure, and then bonked our heads together, which was entirely unnecessary. But she liked hearing it, and it didn't hurt me to say it, like I guess I thought it might.

So, yeah, I guess that's it. Gotta get back to work.

I miss you.

Love,
Alex

P.S. I hate waiters.

P.P.S. I made Vasquez take over hiring them for me. Sometimes saying 'I need you' can be very useful.

P.P.P.S. I . . .
Episode 6: Part 2

Alura's kitchen was wonderful. It was underneath the rest of the house, a rambling path sloping down outside to get to the door. You had to go outside to get to the kitchen, but once you were there, you didn't want to be anywhere else. She had space and supplies—a dug out pantry full of staples and the garden just outside, the orchard a little ways beyond.

For the food truck, for her own home cooking, Kara had always had to pinch every penny, rarely buying in bulk, even for the truck, because the space was too small to have anywhere to store it. She had often wanted to make jam as gifts or spend a few days canning, but she'd never been able to buy fruit in the kind of quantity to make that worth it.

But Alura had an orchard. She had bushels of fruit. She needed to make jam and can things or it would go bad and be wasted. Seeing those heaped lemons and droves of tomatoes in the root cellar felt decadent and wonderful.

"You have so many lemons!"

"I know," Alura laughed. "I brought twenty kilos to your show and I still have so many this year. And you should see the blackberry bushes right now. I'm thinking of doing lemon blackberry preserves."

Kara's eyes went wide. "Can I help?"

"Of course you can." Her mom's eyes were bright and warm, and then they narrowed, going slightly wicked. "You can pick the blackberries too. It will be nice to not be the one scratched from head to toe this year."

"Hey!"

Alura’s smile surprised Kara. For the first time since she'd gotten there, Alura really looked like her mom.

Back when she was being fostered, after Alex had fought with Eliza, she and Alex had snuck out to lie on the roof outside Alex's window and look up at the stars. Alex had asked her what her parents had been like. She’d done her best to describe them, though it had been strange to put words around something that did not exist in words. She’d stumbled over the description of her dad—tall, she'd said, reliable, brave. Braver than he should have been. But with her mom she'd stared up into the sky, as if the stars had drawn her up with her.

"Not like your mom. I never felt like she expected anything of me. But she was hard in a different way, like she was always a little angry, always a little on edge. She liked to risk things, take chances, as if someone had once told her that she couldn’t, and she was showing them up."

Alura wasn’t like that anymore. Her edges were missing. But she hadn't always been so hard and on edge. Before Aunt Astra had gone to prison and then disappeared, she'd been more relaxed, warm, but still—particularly around her sister—she'd had a wicked streak.

This Alura felt like her mom before everything had happened with Astra. Kara put her arms around her mother’s bony frame, pulling her in, letting herself wonder at how strange it was that they were the same height now. She'd grown up. Her mom had changed too, but she was still here. They were both still here.
Alura ducked her head and moved to take a large copper bottomed pot off the wall and set it on the stove. "I was planning on guilting Lucy into doing it."

Kara snorted and started hunting through the stores for onions. "Is she still feeling bad about what she did, even though you're friends now?"

"Oh yes." A short pause. "I'm grateful to her for it though. I don't think I would have ever dared to get in contact with you, and if she'd told me ahead of time, I might not have gone through with it."

The thought made Kara's chest ache. Imagining her mom just giving up like that, deciding to never seeing her again. She'd been so angry about her decision at first. Now she was just sad. She was grateful to Lucy too. "Have you told her you're grateful?"

"Of course not. I enjoy seeing her grovel."

Kara laughed. "You're so mean to her."

"I did tell her I forgave her. We don't need to go so far as gratitude."

"How many times has she been up here, anyway? She seemed to know her way around."

"Three times now."

Kara paused. "Three?" Lucy had been on the compound with them the whole time. When had she had time to fly up to Big Sur?

"Once before the show, and once before bringing you. She texted me the morning I left, asking how I was--very hungover--and we kept texting. She'd fill me in on how you were doing. And then she just showed up one afternoon. I suppose it was one of your off days. It was . . . a nice surprise."

Kara's brain had crashed. Lucy had just shown up? Why? "What did she want to see you about? What did you do?"

"Mm?" Alura put on the water to boil and turned to measure out flour for the fresh pasta. "She took me down the coast. We had fries at Nepenthe."

Kara's knife hovered above the half chopped onions. "Oh?"

"Then we sat out on the deck and drank wine and espresso. We stayed up too late talking, so she crashed on the couch and then left ungodly early to catch a flight back to NC and make your filming call time."

"Why did she come all this way?"

Alura stared down into the bowl as she worked in the egg and water. "I'm not sure, except-- late that night she found a way to tell me a little about why she left the army. I don't think it's something she speaks of often. But she managed to relate a few things that sounded hard to say--about making mistakes, and facing yourself when it turned out that what you'd done really wasn't worth it. I'm glad she felt like she could trust me."

It sounded deeply intimate. Kara's gut knotted, thinking of Alex lying out on the pool deck, answering questions about each tattoo inscribed on her back. "Yeah."

"It's been nice to have someone to talk to like that. I haven't really gone about making friends very well since . . ." She went quiet, and that hurt even more. Her mom hadn't just cut herself off from
Kara, it seemed like she'd cut herself off from everyone, making a place for herself up on this mountain, all alone.

And suddenly, the way Lucy acted around her mom was making a lot more sense too.

"Friends?" Kara asked, her voice cracking a little as she forced it into a lighter tone. "That was a date. She's trying to take you out on dates, Mom. Poor Lucy. You're so oblivious."

Alura looked startled, and then pleased--by the suggestion it was a date, or by Kara calling her 'Mom'? Maybe both.

Kara hadn't thought she was ready to call her 'Mom' again. But she hadn't thought she'd be giving her dating advice either. They couldn't go back to the relationship they'd had when Kara was a kid, but it felt like they were starting to build a weird, tenuous, adult relationship.

And Kara was grateful for it. It was so much more than the nothing she'd had while she thought she was dead.

#

J'onn's ears wiggled when Alex mentioned her plans for marinated swordfish kebabs. "Swordfish?" he asked.

Alex hesitated. "Is there something wrong with that?"

J'onn waved a hand. "It's your restaurant. I am not supposed to give advice on this part."

Alex groaned internally and went to find Vasquez. "Why can't I have swordfish?"

"Overfished," Vaz said. "It'll be too expensive soon."

"Fine." Alex crossed it off her list.

"Oh? What's that?" Maggie snagged the paper out of her hand. "Your menu? Oh hon, I said you had to have a gimmick, not that you should turn it into Medieval Times."

Alex scowled and crossed her arms. "I hate you."

Maggie handed it back. "Maybe. But you're going to take me and Vaz out for drinks tonight and we're going to fix it with you."

"No bars," Alex said.

"Your place then. I want more of those smoked sardine and goat cheese things you do. Jaime's not the only one who liked them."

"Fine." If there was anything that Alex had learned from being on Knives and Fire it was that checking with everyone else could keep her from making stupid mistakes. People were valuable.

She couldn't say she hated having company in the evenings either.

Alex paced through the restaurant again. She'd decorated, tucking small tables into alcoves and picking out long tables with hot plates recessed in the center. She'd let the design consultant do his job, and she liked the result. It looked clean. Panels of dark wood and lacquer black in various sizes and arrangements managed to be both warm and inviting while still being classy. Maggie had found miniature cast iron dutch ovens in bulk, and then Alex had figured out that the 8-inch rimmed steel
mixing bowls fit right inside, and they could keep the cast iron on the hotplates, filled with water, and use them as bain marie instead of forcing the busboys and dishwashers to carry them around all the time.

Maggie had made faces when Alex was picking linen and crystal, and Alex had glared at her and said she wasn't doing raffia matting and mason jars thank you very much. Maggie had said, there’s space between mason jars and crystal, and you and your casseroles should probably live in it.

Alex headed up to the balcony and climbed up on one particular ledge where she was hidden behind a column but could hang her feet over the bannister. There, she shut her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. She could do this; she knew she could. She just felt like she was being pulled in a thousand directions. Whenever she saw J’on she wanted clean and precise, white tablecloths, black floors, and glittering crystal. But that way lay foams and sauced steak and food she didn't care about. Maggie was pulling in a totally other way. She had an eye on the neighborhood, and she wanted to hit Alex's bread and stew theme harder, give a rustic feel with beer steins and salty appetizers to attract large groups of loud boys. It was appealing, but it felt dangerous, like it would too easily turn into something she didn’t respect--something that wouldn’t elicit respect. What did she want it to be? That was where the empty space sat.

She pulled out her recipe notebook, the one she’d been keeping for years, fat with her mom’s old index cards, computer printouts, recipes ripped out of magazines and scribbled post-it notes. She flipped through the scratch menus and recipe ideas she'd been keeping. No swordfish. What else did she have?

Her finger hovered on the page with the sardine and kale casserole. Honestly, it had been pretty good. She chewed on her lower lip and made a few notes—oil cured black olives, and something acid—Kara always said accent the sharpness too—vinaigre or lemon for this . . . kale could be good with lemon. Something fun and textured on the top-- potato chips? Freeze dried onion crisps--ha, fucking kale chips. If she did kale chips, Maggie would probably smack her.

Maggie would like the potato chip idea.

Would J’onn?

Along with a few aged index cards, a folded up paper fell out of the back of the notebook, and Alex snagged it before it fell to the floor below. It was a sheet of lined paper torn out of a school notebook, crispy with age. Two hands—one scribbly, the other in rounder letters—had written a list on it. Alex read it and started to smile.

Pizza.

*Soup in bread bowls*

*little pies*

*Tortilla de patatas*

*Quiche -- but not gross quiche*

*Samosas*

*Empanadas -- I don't understand why Mom won't get a deep fryer*

*deep fried Quiche -- WTF???
Calzones

Pizza -- you already wrote pizza/I'm being emphatic.

Curry buns

Kryptonian cheese buns

Piroshkiskis (sp?) (cabbage buns) -- ew.

Pork steamed buns

Custard buns

She had to show this to Kara. Alex breathed out and folded up the page. She stuck it back in the back of her notebook.

Some day.

#

As asked, Alex provided sardines and goat cheese on crackers. She added a dab of red onion jam between the two and Maggie swore at her for it being too good.

Then she and Vaz started rummaging through Alex’s notebook for ideas. Between the three of them, they rewrote the menu. It leaned a little bit more towards Maggie's hipster vision, but that was fine. Alex could always adjust back, but if she fell too far in the foams and caviar direction there was no recovery.

She was not going to forget that dream of becoming Max Lord any time soon.

Vaz volunteered to wash up, and Maggie climbed out of Alex's window onto her fire escape. Alex followed her out,

They settled down on the edge, feet dangling over the five story drop. Alex cradled her cup of lemon-ginger tea to her chest and stared out at the lights of the city. So many people were so nearby, but because there were so many you could go forever without finding the ones you wanted to meet. She was lucky to have some of the good ones right here.

"Hey," Maggie said, her voice soft. "I wanted to say thank you for picking me to be your sous again. I know I can be an asshole, but I do appreciate it."

Alex leaned her forehead against a bar and took a breath. "I didn't think about picking anyone else."

Maggie gave her a sharp look. "No one?"

It was all too clear who she meant. Alex shook her head. "That wasn't an option. And, seriously, I would never have been able to do this without you."

"For one, you wouldn't have any produce," Maggie said, nudging her in the side with her elbow.

Alex laughed. "Exactly."

"Well, thanks again anyways. Even if I don't get to stay on, working at a place like this will get me back in the game. It's been a rough few years, and then I couldn't even take advantage of the chance I got by getting on the show. I mean, Jaime's fine, so I'm not second-guessing anything. Wouldn't
risk that for any sort of outside success. But it would have been nice to outlast Mike.'

Alex made a small grumble of revulsion at the name. "He was lucky you had to leave. You know, he stabbed himself in the hand the next day and dragged M'gann to the bottom of the team competition. If you'd stayed one more day, he'd have been gone."

"Did Kara finally dump him?"

"Yeah." Alex sagged.

"Good for her."

Alex stared at her hands holding the mug. "Yeah."

Maggie gave her a long look and didn't ask. She just scooted closer to her on the fire escape, put down her own mug of tea, and drew Alex's head into her shoulder, squeezing her close into her warmth.

Alex leaned into her and slowly remembered how to breathe.

#

Elbow deep in sliced lemons, her arms stinging from where the blackberry brambles had caught her skin, Kara was deeply reconsidering her romantic ideas of jam making. Still, it was spending time with her mom, and she wouldn't give that up for anything. Alura was asking about her life, and Kara found herself talking more about herself than she had in awhile.

"I should have known it was going wrong when we got to National City. Mike didn't seem all that interested in, well, either me or the taco truck. He didn't even get the license, and when I did he didn't seem all that appreciative, as if he didn't want to go back to work. Then we weren't selling all that well. It wasn't surprising. It's hard to establish yourself in a new place, especially when you're making the same thing a hundred other trucks are making. So I kept coming up with new ideas, new ways to spin it, but he wasn't interested. I thought about leaving, but I didn't have enough money for a plane ticket home. And running home to my brothers? I couldn't ask them for help again."

Kara sighed. James and Winn wanted to be there for her. James had gotten her the job at the Planet, and she'd blown that. Winn was always pushing her to take these certificates in IT so he could get her a job somewhere he worked, but it didn't matter how well she knew the material, she always panicked taking tests and failed. She didn't want to need their help. She was tired of never managing to make it on her own.

"Lucy said you picked a food truck for your final too?"

"Yeah. Mike turned out to not be so special, but I loved the food truck. Barry's been a great mentor. He's already sent me a truck catalogue full of annotations and three long emails about the various qualities I should look for when I pick one out. A food truck felt like a doable project for me. I have experience there, and working with Siobhan will be . . . interesting, but it won't be like managing staff, that's for sure."

"You're working with Siobhan?"

"Yeah." Kara wondered what would have happened if Alex hadn't been on the show at all. Would she still have dumped Mike? If she hadn't, she probably would have picked him as her sous--or he would have picked her. That was the plan. That was what she'd promised him. She’d broken that promise. “I like Siobhan. We have similar styles and approaches, so I feel like she'll be a good
assistant and not push me in a different direction than I want to go."

"Your Alex made the final too then? I thought you would have picked her."

Kara froze. Your Alex. Her hands balled into fists, which opened a scratch on the back of her hand that stung in the lemon juice. "Is that another thing Lucy's been telling you? That Alex and I... work well together?"

Alura looked at her, her eyes sharp and curious. "I think that was something I saw for myself."

Kara swallowed, her hands loosening. She looked away. Alex had been there for her when her mom had been judging. She'd been her angry-sweet protective self. She'd let her sleep in her bed like she had when they were teenagers, bared her back and her soul when Kara needed to have someone understand her hurt.

"Lucy may have mentioned, however, that she wanted to bang your heads together and tell you to stop being idiots and just admit your feelings."

Kara's eyes stung. "Well, Alex tried, but I messed it up."

Her mom was quiet, and Kara felt more words welling up, unstoppable. "I love her. I love her, really, so much. But when she tried to tell me the same, I accused her of being a coward and running away from anything that challenged her. I know I did it because I was scared. The way she looked at me, after-- after we spent the night together, when she was telling me that the things she thought she wanted, she didn't want anymore, not if she could have me-- It was overwhelming. Having someone feel that way about me, care that much about me, what was I supposed to do with that? She wanted us to go into business together. I couldn't do that to her. When I fail again, when I break down, I'll bring her down with me. I lean too heavily on people. I don't want to lean on her until she breaks."

Alura started dipping empty jars into the boiling water with tongs and made a small noise of consideration. "I only know what you've told me, but it sounded to me like you're not the one who is a weight on people. You bear people up. You take care of Mike and his taco truck long after he'd given up. You look after your brothers too."

Kara shook her head. With Mike she was looking after herself. Her brothers had always helped her more than she helped them. Giving Winn a hug when he got bullied or a girl turned him down, that was just what she was supposed to do. Telling Jimmy that his pictures were amazing and that if he didn't send his portfolio to the Planet she'd do it for him, that was being a good sister. But the looks on their faces when she had to tell them that she was unemployed again, that she'd dropped out of school again--that was what she couldn't bear seeing. They'd always looked like they were the ones who failed when she did, like her messing up was them messing up, and she hated it. They hadn't let her down. She was the one who couldn't keep things together. The weight of their sympathy made her mistakes unbearable.

"That's not important. Alex is just so good at being there for me, and talking to me when I'm freaking out and holding me when I'm sad. But I don't always want to be someone she has to pick up and help keep going. What if she gets tired of doing it, tired of me? I won't beg someone to take care of me when they don't want to."

Alura was frowning, but perhaps she was simply concentrating on sterilizing the jars. "I only met Alex briefly, but it was quite clear how protective she was of you. She didn't look like she was going to get tired of helping you any time soon. In fact, she seemed quite irritable about the idea of anyone helping you besides her. Why won't you let her?"
"Because--" Alura’s words hit right in Kara’s stomach. Alex had been there for her. But how was Kara supposed to trust it? What could she give Alex to make sure she’d stay? “What if she stops?"

"Like I did?"

Oh.

Oh.

#

Dear Alex,

When I got back to the room and you were already gone, it felt like my heart rose up and choked me. I couldn't breathe properly. I couldn't think clearly. I felt like a kid again, in my new room of my new foster family, terrified and alone.

The first day at the house after yours, I had a panic attack. I felt it coming, and I looked for you. But you weren't there. I started hyperventilating, my heart racing so fast I was sure it would give out. It felt like the rope of my life that I'd managed, finally, to catch onto after the explosion, had slipped out of my hands again. I lost track of what was going on, and when I came back to myself I had crawled underneath the desk, and cut my hand open stacking the drawers up in a barricade in front of me.

I was angry at myself after that. I knew how to deal with panic attacks. My counselor had been teaching me for nearly a year, I'd been able to talk myself down or focus on controlling my breathing just fine before went to stay with you, but somehow after those three months, I'd backslid. It was your voice I wanted telling me I was safe, that it would be okay. It was your hands I wanted, stroking down my arms, helping me to relax, to breathe easily. But I didn't have them anymore.

I told myself I was angry with you. And I was, every time my new foster parents caught me trying to send you a letter or stopped me from making a call. I wanted to tell you where I was, as if, like in some stupid teen rom-com, you'd hitchhike your way across the country and climb the tree outside my window, come get me and bring me back home. I was angry with you, because even though I never got a message through, I still wanted you to come. I wanted you to care enough to just know where I was, and come for me.

I didn't think of running away and going back to you.

Or maybe I did think about it. But you'd sent me away once. What was the point? You'd just send me away again.

But when I finally met you again, you didn't try to send me away. You scared me once or twice, when I was afraid the way you felt about yourself would keep you from staying with me. But over and over again, when I was scared, you found a way to make sure I knew that you wouldn't leave. You might be hurt and complicated and dealing with so much guilt and self-doubt, but you weren't going to leave.

I'm sorry.

I am so sorry that I didn't listen to you well enough to figure out what you were really asking me, that we didn't have time to talk it all out. I don't know what Lucy was doing with making the final challenge start immediately after judging, but I asked her about it, and she looked guilty in a way that made me wish, so much, that we'd just had a little bit more time.

Because that's what you were really saying to me right then, that you weren't going to leave.
I didn't believe you.

It's funny, because right now I'm up in Big Sur at my mom's house. I was so angry when she reappeared, showing up and acting so casual, as if she hadn't let me believe she was dead for fifteen years. I don't know if I would have ever forgiven her if not for you. But you came back and you made me believe that you'd never wanted to let me go, and because of that I could believe that even though she did let me go, she hadn't wanted to. I am trying to rebuild a relationship with her. I was brave enough to do that.

I wish I had been brave enough to say yes to you.

Or even if the right answer was still no, I wish I'd said it differently. I didn't want to yell at you. I didn't want to make you think I didn't value everything you've done for me, that I wanted you to stop caring about me, or that I thought you were being cowardly. I know how determined you are, how hard you go after what you want. It must have taken so much courage to change your mind, to step away from one dream and ask me for another.

Even if I would have said no in the end anyways, I should have shown you how much it meant to me that you wanted that with me, that you believed in me enough to think we could make it together.

Most of all, I should have told you that no matter what, I want you in my life.

I need time. I need to stop being afraid that I drive people away. Because, looking back, it seems that being afraid makes me drive people away. It was easy to be with Mike, because I didn't really want Mike, so it didn't matter if he stuck around or not. But you matter, my mom matters, my brothers matter, and what do I do? Leave Metropolis the moment I need help, get furious at my Mom when she tells me that she's had a traumatic brain injury that made her not trust we could have a relationship anymore, and then yell at you and give up on a future that had been the one thing I was able to believe in when I was a kid, the thing that kept me whole, because if I leave you first, you can't leave me.

Only then, I don't have you.

Some days, I still feel like that kid, alone in her new room, with all her nerves exposed, because you're gone. And I don't ever want to be that kid again. I don't want to need you so much that I can't survive you being gone.

But I also don't want to have to survive you being gone.

I guess, I just want you to know that I love you. But I am still so scared. I'm scared I'll hurt you, even though I know I am hurting you by being so scared. I want to return your love, which feels like something pure and so good, that wraps me up and keeps me safe, with something just as good, or at least with something strong and stable.

So I'm going to ask you for a contradiction again. Please, please, don't leave me behind. And please, please, give me time to be sure I can be happy on my own. I want to be happy, so I can return your love with happiness. I want to bring good things to you as well as my damage.

Please, never think I don't want you, even though right now I want to be alone.

Please, let me not have hurt you more than you can handle.

Please, don't stop loving me for this.

Please.
When Lucy showed back up the day she had set to return to National City, Kara went up to her tower room to finish packing. She felt like she was being born again in some strange way, plunging back into a world where she had no tether, no safe space.

She glanced out the window and spotted Lucy standing awkwardly by with her mom’s cane as Alura got herself into the hammock. She rolled her eyes. In any of her distracted fantasies about getting her mom back, about seeing her parents again, she had never considered the idea that she’d have to watch her mom flirt painfully awkwardly with a woman probably only ten years older than Kara.

She peeked again, seeing them lounging in the hammock, brought her bags down to the front door, and made everyone lunch in the large, gorgeous kitchen, sinking into the scent of fresh bread and avocado and just-picked tomato and made-yesterday goat cheese.

There was a yelp from outside as the hammock, unbalanced--for reasons Kara didn't want to know--nearly flipped, and sheepish but uninjured, her mom and Lucy came in for lunch.

Kara, after saying goodbye to her mom and Albrecht--Lucy watched very suspiciously from a good distance away as Kara gave the pygmy goat kisses--settled into the passenger's seat of Lucy's car. She tried not to stare at the awkward leave-taking in the rearview mirror, looking away as Lucy pushed up on her toes to kiss her mom.

With heightened color, Lucy got into the car and drove her down the canyon. Kara waited until they were on the open highway before she turned to Lucy and said, "For the record, I am never going to call you my step-mother."

Lucy nearly drove off the cliff.

When she got off the plane in National City, Lucy gave her the keys to her new apartment and the directions to meet Barry and Siobhan at the lot where she'd pick out her truck.

"Wait," she said when Lucy handed her the pre-paid debit card. "A hundred thousand dollars? I have a budget of a hundred thousand dollars?"

Lucy looked bemused. It was probably on a piece of paper she hadn't read carefully.

"I can buy a new truck? A-- a shiny one? That won’t need to be repaired every two months?" She'd been looking carefully through Barry's recommendations, but had been translating his good natured positivity into 'dreams' and 'things I might actually be able to afford.'

"Oh, and here are all the licenses you'll need, plus a schedule of events you're already registered for."

Kara cried. Getting the permits and scheduling for a food truck was murder.

Barry embraced her enthusiastically when her cab let her out at the lot. Siobhan, in heels and a dour expression, looked thoroughly annoyed at being forced to be part of an operation that went under the designation 'mobile dining unit.' Kara hugged her too, because she felt like home. Too much had happened in those few weeks on the compound for any of the people there not to matter to her.

Shopping for a food truck was overwhelming. Kara had never had this much money to spend, and actually thinking of spending a huge chunk of it all in one go felt wrong. She didn’t deserve the perfect truck. She was supposed to struggle, not just get what exactly she wanted.
“I’m the Catholic,” Siobhan said, pursing her lips disapprovingly, when Kara had expressed her feelings. “I’m supposed to feel that way, not you. Also, it’s a bullshit way to feel. Get over it.”

Barry took her arm and guided her away from the refurbished trucks. “Let’s be systematic about this,” he said, the warm enthusiasm in his tone tugging at Kara, even deep in the fear that had made it impossible for her to think. “You sent me a list of things you need. So we are going to find the five trucks that have the most of those things, okay? And then pick one of them.”

“They’re just things I want, not really things I need--”

Siobhan swatted her arm. “If you make me learn how to install a range or repair a gas line instead of just buying a functioning truck I am quitting, and fuck my contract.”

None of the trucks had everything Kara had put down, but one of them, shiny and new, had most. There was another one, refurbished, that was only missing three things and was three thousand dollars cheaper. She hesitated between the two, unable to make up her mind.

Siobhan pulled out her phone, priced the items Kara was missing, added in labor costs, and held up her phone. At the end, the costs evened out. But still Kara hesitated.

“I’m not afraid of hard work,” Kara said. “And we don’t really need the grill attachment. We can change the menu--”

Siobhan and Barry exchanged a glance. Siobhan took the debit card from Kara’s hand and handed it over to the truck agent, indicating the new and shiny one. She took the papers he gave her back, and held them out to Kara. “Sign here.”

Barry squeezed her shoulder. “I really think this is the right decision, Kars. It’s time to be brave. Go for it.”

#

Alex's life was the restaurant. Hiring staff, working on the menu, testing recipes, figuring out logistics and breakdown. She was too busy to think, she just did, one thing and then next, blowing through list after list after list.

She didn't realize she might not be thinking enough until a few days into it, when Vaz walked into the kitchen right when a zucchini galette was coming out of the oven, and happily took Alex's offer of a sample. "This is great." She sank into the portobello, caramelized onion, ricotta and parmesan filling and sighed. "A little mesclun salad and you've got a killer lunch item. Too bad we're not doing lunch yet."

"Yeah, it's more for the bakery," Alex said, and then froze. It was like her hands were doing things without her bidding. Her mouth too.

"What bakery?" Vaz gave her a tentative look as if she was showing signs of insanity.

Alex grimaced. "No bakery. It was . . . just an idea."

"You'd be good at running a bakery. Not me though. Fuck mornings."

She didn't bring it up again, but Alex decided to be a little more careful from now on. Subconscious baking and menu design probably meant she needed to be getting more sleep.

The way Knives and Fire worked was that the first five episodes would be released while the
finalists were preparing their restaurants for the finale. The finale would be filmed and released in the final week. The short filming and release schedule kept Knives and Fire as Event TV rather than part of the relentless everyday grind.

That meant that five days after Alex left the compound, the premiere of Knives and Fire was scheduled to air.

Vasquez and Maggie and Jaime came over to her apartment that afternoon, with root beer and chips. Alex sat on the couch with her feet pulled up and dreaded watching herself on TV.

Vasquez teased both Alex and Maggie heartily for every interview and every stupid mistake they made. But Alex just stared at Kara whenever she was on screen. She looked so young in the interview chair, so scared and out of her depth and clearly unsure of her ability.

She shouldn't feel like that. It was wrong that she felt like that. But there wasn't anything Alex could do about it anymore.

Vasquez kept giving her weird looks all through the episode.

"What?" Alex finally snapped.

"First of all, babe. You fucking hate making foams. You told me a hundred times that Max's cronies had taste in food that went out in the eighties. What the fuck were you thinking?"

Alex groaned. "I know. I don't know why I did it. It was so dumb."

"Second, what the fuck is taco douchebag doing on this show?"

Maggie snorted. "That's his name all right. I think they had to take him so they could get the sweetheart over there." She pointed at Kara.

Vaz frowned, furrowing her brow at the screen. "What? Why?"

"Because they were dating?"

"Wait," Vasquez said. "The cute one is dating taco douchebag?"

Maggie and Alex looked at each other. "It isn't obvious?"

They rolled back the DVR. In no interview or line of dialogue did it make it obvious that Kara and Mike were together or ran a taco truck together.

What the fuck was Lucy trying to pull?

"Sometimes he says stuff to her that sounds like sleazy hitting on her, but it doesn't sound like they're dating," Vaz said.

Jaime pointed at the screen. "She doesn't even look at him. She's always looking at you." She narrowed her eyes at Alex. "Why is she always looking at you?"

"So," Maggie said, a little cautiously. "Did you hit that?"

Alex crossed her arms and looked away, her face feeling strangely tight. "She was probably just recognizing me. We knew each other when we were kids."

Maggie stared. "You did?" There was something about her face that made Alex sure she was
putting things together, like the pathetic way Alex had been leaning on her and Vaz ever since they’d started working on the restaurant, like the wildly unnecessary reaction shots of Kara’s appalled face when Alex was in the bottom two, like how Lucy made Kara look like a free agent, rather than someone who was going to dump her boyfriend and within a week get naked with someone else.

They’d been edited to be a love story. But why? Lucy had to know how it had ended. She couldn’t—she couldn’t think they’d make it up in some dramatic way in the final.

Alex hated herself for hoping that they would.

The episode ended with a shot of the group around the pool. Waylon was at the grill. Mike was upside down in the pool. Maggie with Jaime on her phone were congratulating M’gann on her win. Alex and Kara were on the hanging couch, heads bent together, speaking softly.

But bonds will be broken and tempers tested, Next Week, on Knives and Fire.

A single shot of Kara slapping Alex in the face with a fish.

Vasquez stared at her. "No," she said, "I'm not even going to ask. I will wait until next week like the rest of the plebes."

Alex groaned and sank into the sofa.

#

Kara stood outside the door to her apartment and counted out her breaths. This was something she had to do. Kara knew that if she asked, Lucy or Barry would have come with her. Even Siobhan (probably) wouldn’t let her go alone. But she’d made all the choices that had gotten her here. She wouldn’t ask for an escort, as if she couldn’t face her own mistakes alone.

That was what she was supposed to be proving, right? That she could handle things alone.

Siobhan would probably tell her to write it off and just buy new things. She didn’t need to be quite so protective of that balance on her debit card. But the show was already paying for her new apartment, she wasn’t going to make them pay for everything she needed to live in it. She also knew better than to waste money she might need for when everything went wrong.

She’d come in the evening. Maybe he’d be out, at the bar, or picking up a shift somewhere. Maybe he’d have a date. She knocked, then unlocked the door and peeked inside. The kitchen light was on, there was a small clink from it, then silence. Kara breathed in deeply and then walked through the living area to the kitchen entrance.

Mike was sitting on the counter in his boxers and a t-shirt, holding a bowl of cereal and a spoon. The kitchen was filthy. He looked at her, his face expressionless. He’d grown back his scruff and it made him look sloppy and unkempt.

He spoke. His voice was blandly dismissive. "I was wondering when you'd show back up."

Kara stared at him. She’d never dumped someone before Mike. All of her other exes had been short term things, a few dates here and there, some nice or mediocre sex, and then the same apologetic look— I think we should see other people; I still have feelings for my ex; I’m not ready for a serious relationship right now; Honestly, you’re sweet and all, but you’re so passive. It’s like you’re letting me date you rather than dating me. It isn’t any fun. She’d been the one left or let down easy. She’d never had to say, ‘I don’t love you anymore.’ Was that how they’d all felt when they broke up with her? Did they look at Kara and just see . . . nothing?
Mike had been a fun guy. Someone she liked hanging out with. Then he'd gotten less fun, but she'd hung on. She was good at holding onto things she didn't really want and letting go of everything important, wasn't she?

"I just want to grab my stuff."

He waved her away, as if he didn’t care. Mike had always been good at pretending things didn't hurt him. It was something that had made her care more for him, especially when he got off the phone with his mom and went into one of his manic--fix the truck, change the menu, paint the town--phases. She had a Pavlovian urge to comfort him. But she'd been the one to hurt him. There was nothing she could do to help.

He followed her into the bedroom. Her clothes were dumped in a pile on the floor.

"I needed more space," he said casually.

Right. Kara huffed out a laugh and found a bag and started packing it. "Good to know you aren't going to try to win me back."

Mike snorted. "You really shouldn't have worried about that."

"I wasn't."

Kara picked up a bra from the floor. It had three bent hooks. It hadn’t before she’d left. That was petty. The remains of her favorite glass that she’d kept by the bed glittered in the wastebasket. She sighed.

“You know,” Mike said, something hard in his voice. “I’d just like to hear it from you, just once, that you did me wrong. You’ve been on your high horse all this time, saying that I was the one who was the asshole and you had no choice but to dump me and then cuddle up with someone else. But was I an asshole for trusting you? For believing that you meant it when you said we were a team? For being pissed when you started looking around, started refusing to help me? I would never have refused to help you. But you didn’t ask me. You didn’t want anything to do with me. You didn’t even back me when I wanted us to share a room. You were a fucking two-faced bitch, and I’d like you to admit it.”

Pressure filled Kara’s chest and she found it hard to breathe. Her hands tightened on the bag and she tried to focus, tried to concentrate on her breathing.

“Oh don’t fucking go catatonic now. God, you’re fucked up, using those little freakouts you have to force everyone to walk on eggshells around you. I ask you to admit one goddamn thing—”

Kara’s eyes stung. “I’m sorry.”

“What?”

She was shivering now, her whole body racked with quakes and it made it hard to speak. “I’m sorry. I did treat you badly. I-- I should have been honest about how I was feeling.” Her jaw was shaking and she bit her tongue, though not hard enough to bleed. “Turns out I’m really good at hurting the people I’m supposed to care about.”

Mike went quiet. There was a strange tension to his voice when he finally spoke. “What, things not work out with your new piece? You fucked it up already?”

“Leave me alone, Mike.” She didn’t need him to tell her what she already knew, what was already
too much for her to face. Alex’s face when she’d told her no, told her she was a coward--

Mike laughed. “I told her this is how it would go. You always screw up. Whenever things are going well for you, you get scared and make a mess of things. I’m pretty sure we lasted as long as we did because you never felt like I was too good for you, never felt like I was something you didn’t deserve. You must have really liked her, blowing it up in less than a week. I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m not.”

“Leave me alone.” Her voice hit a high pitched scream and she lashed out, throwing the ruined bra at his head.

He batted it down. His lips curled away from his teeth. “You know what? I am too good for you. I was too fucking nice to you. I moved across the country to try to get away from you, but you were too clingy to take a hint. You’re worthless, Kara! No one wants you! I told that bitch I’d take you back and make you beg, but I wouldn’t even do that. You are dead weight and I am so glad you’re gone!”

"Fuck you!” Kara fled into the kitchen, throwing pots and baking dishes and her favorite mugs into the bag. She was leaving a lot, but right now she didn’t care. She just wanted to get away from Mike.

“You wish!”

Kara slammed the door behind her. Her bag over her shoulder, she hurried down the stairs to the road. There she stopped and gasped, trying to focus on her breathing, trying to stop the waves of panic, the urge to vomit. She thumped her back against the wall, shutting her eyes and clutching at the bag with both her hands. She fumbled in her pocket for her phone, opened a new text.

I need you.

The contacts tab was blank in the As, the Ds held a friend of Jimmy’s from the Planet. She’d never gotten Alex’s number.

Her hands started to shake, her eyes stinging. She didn't have Alex, couldn't get to Alex, Alex wasn't coming to get her.

It was her fault. Everything was her fault.

Her thumb skidded down the recent calls and found Lucy's name. "Hi," she managed when Lucy answered. "Can you come pick me up? I'm-- at my old apartment. At Mike's." Her voice broke.

"I'll be right there."

The clear concern in Lucy's voice broke down whatever resistance Kara had left, and she started to cry.

#

Alex spotted Maggie coming out of the kitchen and pinned her down right outside the doors. "What do you think?" she asked, holding out the two patches of paper she’d been agonizing over.

Maggie eyed them. "Uh . . ."

"Smell." Alex pushed them toward her nose and obediently Maggie sniffed at each one.

"Nice? Um, orange peel and . . . I think pine and sandalwood for one? Sage and er, something I
can’t identify for the other."

Alex shook her head. She hadn’t wanted an ingredients report. She knew what each one smelled like. "Which is better? They're $30 a bottle, I have to get the right one."

Maggie was giving her a puzzled frown. "$30 a bottle of what?"

"Soap. Hand soap, for the bathroom." Alex started back to the counter where a whole heap of small pieces of paper lay. "Maybe one of the others--"

"Hold it!" Maggie snagged one of the papers out of her hand, sniffed it, nodded, then handed it to Alex. "This one. The pine and sandalwood."

Alex looked down then up. "Really?"

"Yes."

Alex breathed out, relieved. Maggie patted her arm. "Now I am going to tell you a very funny joke."

"Um, okay?"

"You just freaked out over hand soap."

Alex did not laugh. "It's important. It's about the experience."

"Even funnier, $30 a bottle for hand soap."

"It's really nice. And it’s less expensive if we get a bulk order."

"I'm not saying you shouldn't get it. I'm saying you need to breathe, babe."

Why did she not understand? Alex grit her teeth. "We are opening in one week and I forgot about the bathrooms." She wasn’t focused, that was the problem. She was feeling too much and couldn’t focus. Alex shook her head and picked up her samples catalogue.

"What do you get?" Maggie called after her.

Alex paused and glanced back. "Huh?"

"What do you get if it's perfect? What do you get if you win?"

Alex slowly crossed her arms over her chest. That was a stupid question. Maggie had been in the competition. She’d read the contract. "Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, investor attention, and a cookbook deal."

Maggie’s lip twitched up as if Alex was the one being stupid. "Which one of those is so important that you want to give yourself an ulcer worrying about hand soap? What’s the thing you’re so excited about, that you want so desperately, you’re willing to kill yourself for it?"

Alex sent air out through her nose. She wasn’t killing herself for this. Honestly, even with all the stress it was still better than working for Max had been. There she’d had to manage everything, accede to his arbitrary demands, and put up with his smarmy face nearly every day. But . . . she might be acting a little insane about the hand soap. She stuck her fingers through her hair, rubbing the top of her head. "I just-- I want to do my best."

Maggie nodded, enough amusement there to make Alex bristle slightly. "Why?"
"Because I don't want to let J'onn down." *Obviously.* "Because I want to prove that I am good enough to do this. Because if I get it right, if I get this, I'll have shown her that I’m not afraid. I didn’t run away. And then maybe she’ll trust me enough to believe I won't run away from her."

Maggie regarded her, her face kind. The sympathy stung.

Alex put her face in her hands. “Fuck.”

Maggie patted her arm. "Come on. Let’s order you some hand soap."

#

Siobhan gave Kara a hard look when they met at a coffeeshop the next morning where they planned to go over the list of things that needed doing. “You look like you need sugar.”

“I’m fine. I don’t like sugar.”

Siobhan waved her away and after they got coffee she led her down the street to a kiosk in the mall. The young man behind the counter straightened up when he saw Siobhan, looking cowed and obedient. She spoke to him for five seconds and then returned to Kara with a white box. Imperiously, she led the way to the park, where they sat on a bench as the people on giant inline exercise skates rolled by, and handed over the box which contained four cupcakes. Kara rubbed her forehead and sighed. She’d spent the night on Lucy’s couch, and now Siobhan was feeding her, when everything was her fault. “I’m sorry, I just--”

Siobhan held up a hand to cut her off. “Nope. I do not care. You are just going to eat some sugar and then we are going to get to work. If you want to chat, get a therapist.”

Kara obeyed. Siobhan made things easy. She didn’t try to forgive her.

As it turned out, working with Siobhan was equal parts helpful and infuriating. The main job she took upon herself was to say, "no, that's stupid" when Kara had an idea, and keep saying it, until Kara dialed it back to something manageable. If it was too difficult or too time consuming, it was an automatic no. Kara provided the no’s for ‘too expensive.’ She’d never feel like a burden to Siobhan, because Siobhan was not about to carry her anywhere.

They fought over every single item on the menu. Kara wanted to throw it at her.

“No! The berry and ricotta tamales are good idea! They’re cheap. They aren’t particularly time consuming to make. No specialty ingredients, and we have all the equipment already. Also, I want to sell them!”

“Fine!” Siobhan snapped back. “I really like them too.”

Startled, Kara laughed. Siobhan arched an eyebrow. Was she being contrary about everything just to make Kara defend her choices? Whether it was intentional or not, Siobhan’s protests made her think through her ideas, cleaning them up and tightening them for time and labor costs as well as prices. The reasoning was becoming almost automatic.

Siobhan told her that it was stupid to do the stencil-spray-paints on the truck herself, and that the color scheme of red, blue, and yellow was appalling. But it was distinctive. People would remember if they’d been to her truck before. Kara went with her gut on that.

"If you call it 'SuperSnack!' I will walk out of here, and fuck my contract."
Kara didn't call it SuperSnack.

While Kara installed the steamer and did the other modifications on the truck, Siobhan set up the mobile apps, and ran the social media until she got into a fight with another food truck owner and Kara had to take over.

They worked their way through Kara’s lists, making contingency plans, setting up routes and designing ads. Kara was almost shocked when she crossed off the last thing on page three of her lists, turned to page four, and read, in all caps at the top:

OPEN.
#

The restaurant was almost ready to open, and everything was chaos, but like clockwork, fifteen minutes before Knives and Fire was set to air, Vasquez and Maggie and Jaime showed up on Alex's doorstep, Jaime on Vasquez's shoulders.

They brought drinks. Jaime followed Alex into the kitchen and demanded more crackers with sardines and goat cheese. They all piled on the couch to watch the second episode.

"She hit you with a fish," Vasquez said after the second commercial break.

"Mom says that means they have to get married now," Jaime said.

Alex covered her face. She hated watching herself on TV. She was so dumb and cross and self-involved and it was appalling. Watching Kara was worse, watching her win her first challenge and seeing her face when she said she didn't deserve it. Maggie in the interviews was stressed and unhappy, and Alex pulled Jaime into her lap, grateful she knew she'd be all right.

Vasquez snorted. "Oh please, as if Alex would ever act on her stupid crush."

"I didn't have a crush on her yet!"

Everyone stared. "Yet?" Vaz inquired.

Maggie snorted. "Your hearteyes can be seen from space."

"May I have some more crackers?" asked Jaime.

Vasquez shut her eyes during the next scene. "Chef, seriously? You didn't have a crush on her? Look at the normal people: M'gann and taco boy are bitching at each other and, ha, taco boy stabs himself. Killer Croc and that banshee babe bitching at each other, though no one ends up bleeding. And you and Savant Supergirl, shyly chatting and feeding each other oysters."

Alex flushed. Lucy had pointed that out at the time. But she hadn’t thought anything of it. They’d filmed it far more suggestively than it had actually gone down.

The part that made her heart stick in her throat wasn’t that though, it wasn’t even the hug at the end after they’d won the challenge. It was the way they’d worked in the bar, the easy communication, awareness of what the other was doing, the seamless shifts to pick up the slack.

We made a good team.
#

#
They were two days away from the grand opening when Kara ran into a young woman--petite like Lucy and Maggie--but all leather jackets, chunky boots, silver jewelry and overstated eye-make-up, waiting outside as she stepped out of the truck to take out the trash.

"I hear there's some pretty girls with some free food around."

Kara stared at the blonde girl with a streak of blue hair falling down over her cheek. "Um? Where did you hear that?"

"From me," Siobhan said from behind her, hanging out of the door. "I figured this freeloader would munch down our test menu no problem."

"If it's any good. I'm not picky, but I've had some of your atrocities, babe."

"Oh," Kara glanced back and forth between them, a trickle of shock running down her back. "Oh. You're the girlfriend."

Siobhan sighed. “Leslie,” she said, as an introduction.

"The girlfriend?" Leslie inquired. “You been talking about me?"

Siobhan snorted. "That would mean you're important."

She reached down and caught her girlfriend’s hand, pulling her up into the truck.

When Kara returned after getting rid of the trash, Leslie was sitting up on the counter, casually eating a basket of cream stuffed pancakes, looking around the truck and making insulting comments about tiny houses. Siobhan stood between her knees, laughing meanly when she said something particularly rude and leaning in to kiss cream off her lower lip when it went astray, Leslie baring her teeth and nipping at her nose when she was out of pancake.

Kara stood in the doorway, unnoticed, and watched. She’d imagined Siobhan’s girlfriend as someone just as ultra-fashionable, arch and put together as she was. She supposed this girl was all those things, just in a different way. They looked good together, contrasting and matching, surprising yet unexpectedly right.

The alarm beeped and Siobhan turned to pull up some of the lamb and mint empanadas out of the deep fryer. She caught sight of Kara in the doorway and scrunched up her face into annoyance, but Kara had seen the softness that had been there as she turned.

She repressed a laugh. She’d had a thought she’d never thought she’d have about Siobhan and her equally bitchy girlfriend. But it was true.

*I want that.*

#

Alex was ready when Vasquez, Jaime and Maggie showed up for Episode 3. She’d made snacks, and was ready to make ice cream when Jaime got bored.

She’d forgotten that the third episode was when Alura was the judge. No editing that Lucy could do could make Kara look happy and comfortable, and Alex saw herself and just how much of an anxious mess she’d become.

Lucy had kept in the moment Kara had fainted. She’d adjusted the context, putting it just after an
interview where Kara said she wasn't feeling well. Kara fled the studio and collapsed in the hall. Alex came after her, chasing everyone away and scooping her up in her arms. *I've got her.*

They ended the episode with Kara leaning on Alex’s shoulder, Alex’s fingers tracing through her hair, cutting before they’d moved to the deck. They didn’t show Kara’s investigation of Alex’s tattoos or the moment where Alex realized that she’d been fooling herself for too long. This wasn’t attraction, this wasn't a crush, this was something big and terrifying and necessary. But they didn't have to show that moment, because to everyone watching it must already be so clear.

Alex’s chest felt full of lumps like a pudding with too much gelatin as she tried to drag her breath through it. Losing Kara again shouldn't feel like losing her dad. It shouldn't feel like everything in her life had shattered and nothing would ever be okay again. But losing Kara would never not be linked to losing her dad. When Kara cut her open, everything all spilled back out.

She cried on the couch with Jaime in her lap.

Her mom called that night.

"I saw your show," she said.

"Did you like it?"

Her mom paused for a while. "Your dad was so proud of you for getting through to Kara through baking. Those heavy casserole dishes you keep making, they remind me of what he used to cook. He loved being in the kitchen. He would have had so much to say to you about this show." She paused. "He would be glad you're still looking after Kara."

Alex felt a sob choke her throat.

"The show seems to be telling me that you're in love with her. Are you, Alex?"

Alex swallowed hard. "Yeah," she managed.

"You should bring her over for dinner."

"It's not-- we're not--"

"Oh," her mom said. "Well, if you ever are, bring her over for dinner. Actually, bring me over for dinner. You both are far better cooks."

Alex laughed. She couldn't help it, even while she wanted to cry. This was the first time her mom had ever said she was a good cook, the first time her mom had acknowledged her sexuality without a prompt. "I'll try to make that happen."

Even if it was pointless, she’d try.

#
Kara woke up on the day of the grand opening an hour before her alarm. It was still dark, but there was no chance of getting back to sleep. Fear bloomed in her stomach and started sending tendrils out through her body and down every limb. She stretched out in her bed, hooking her fingers over each side of the mattress, reaching her feet down and out to the corners. This was what she’d wanted, right? To try to make it alone.

It was probably the interrupted sleep, but she felt like she was working through a thick fog during the whole preparation for opening. Siobhan kept snapping at her when she did something wrong or too slowly, but the words were soft against her ears as if they were stuffed with cotton balls.

The opening of a food truck was usually not an event. But that was different when Knives and Fire were involved. The location and camera crew meant that patrons were lined up around the block. Kara found herself staring out of the closed window, feeling confused. Why was everyone here? What was going on today?

The crew caught her outside the truck for an interview.

Are you ready for the grand opening?

Kara: I-- no? I mean-- :she looks at her hands, both are shaking. She looks confused, like she didn’t realize she was shaking or doesn’t understand why:

Siobhan: :from the truck: Yes! We’re ready!

Is there anything you’re particularly excited about serving?

Kara: Um . . . :her brow furrows: I can’t-- I don’t remember what we’re serving. I-- think we finished the menu. Did we finish the menu?

Siobhan: Yes! We finished the menu! Tell them about your apple curry sliders!

Kara: I-- I’m excited about the apple curry sliders?

What do you think a food truck's chances are of winning Knives and Fire?

Kara: Well, Barry won. But, that's Barry. :she stares into the camera, her lower lip quivering slightly. She says nothing else:

Siobhan: Get the fuck back up here! I'm not wrapping all these goddamn spring rolls myself!

Outside, the noise had grown into a roar. This wasn't the taco truck where people were happy to get a cheap taco. This was Knives and Fire. They were expecting something amazing. But all they were going to get was Kara.
What if they hated her? What if they decided en masse to pick up the truck and dump it on its side? This was something people in an actual building restaurant did not have to worry about. She thought she could spy Lilian towering above the crowd. Lilian could probably turn the truck over all by herself.

Her hands were shaking, and when Siobhan went out to put out the menu placard, all the eyes peering through the window were too much. She dropped down and ducked under the counter, wrapping her arms around her knees and trying to breathe. Why was she alone? Why did she say she wanted to do this alone?

Kara dug her nails into her palms and winced. She'd been biting them and their ragged edges cut into her skin. She wasn't alone. Siobhan was here, Lucy was on call, Barry would show up instantly if she needed him. The only person she didn't have was Alex, and if Alex saw her freaking out like this--

What would Alex say? Kara took in a long slow breath. She'd say "you've got this."

Her phone dinged. Kara's heart rose into her throat, she picked it up.

It was a text from her mom. Good luck! Followed by an emoji of a duck. Surprised, Kara laughed, warmth rising in her chest. Why a duck? she texted back.

Alura: In case someone starts throwing food.

Alura: Honestly, it was supposed to be a heart, but my finger slipped.

Kara grinned down at her phone. She had her mom too. She’d never expected to have her mom again.

"Hey," Siobhan said, crouching down and giving her a weird look. "It's time to open."

"All right," Kara put the phone in her pocket, rose to standing and grabbed some prep gloves. She slid open the window and let in the roar the crowd outside. "We've got this."

#

The grand opening of the DEO: Delicious and Extra-Ordinary, went well. Alex hadn't been able to sleep the night before and had shown up before dawn's light had gone from grey to yellow. She met the deliveries, made sure the walk-in was perfectly organized, loaded in everything that needed a long slow cook, and then took a nap in the changing room until Maggie showed up at ten. She woke Alex up and they played cards until Vaz rolled in with the other two members of the cooking crew at noon and started to prep mise.

The maître d' arrived along with the waiters, busboys and dishwashers around two and set up service. Alex toured the dining rooms and checked the bathrooms, making sure everything was set. They had done this every day for the previous week, getting in various groups of diners--mostly gangs of Maggie and Vasquez's friends and family--to try out the menu, drink their well liquor, and irritate their waiters. But today would be the first day they'd open to the public. With all the publicity Knives and Fire did, they were going to be slammed.

Alex had hit her budget limit just getting in food for the night. They'd better make some money, or next week's deliveries were going to be on credit. Credit she didn't have.

Half an hour before opening, the camera crew grabbed her for an interview.
Are you ready for the grand opening?

Alex: I think so. I was panicking not even yesterday, but I’ve checked everything twice, and both Maggie and Vaz have double checked things. Also, we have no more money, so we’d better open. If not now then when? Never. The answer is never.

**Is there anything you’re particularly excited about serving?**

Alex: I am really into the red cabbage, onion, and gorgonzola gratin that I developed. Also the slow cooked curried pork shoulder. And Maggie’s osso bucco is just-- kind of insane. We paired it with fresh saffron noodles--totally stole that recipe from M’gann, but I always just want to smear the marrow over my fresh bread and pile it with meat and rendered braising liquid and-- I should shut up now? Okay. Sorry.

**What do you think your chances are of winning Knives and Fire?**

Alex: Pretty good. I know my competition is excellent. But I figure you can only really judge how well you're doing by competing with yourself. If I do the best I can, I'll be satisfied.

They opened at five. Four hours into service, everything was ticking over nicely. A few disasters had been handled, but Alex was comfortable passing her station over to Maggie as the second shift came in to take over salads and grilling. Vaz shifted easily into fish and braising and Maggie settled behind Alex's six hot saucepans and stack of au gratin dishes like it was nothing.

Alex took off her apron and chef's jacket, replacing it with a clean button down over her sweat stained undershirt, let her hair out of its tiny ponytail and ran her fingers through it, straightening it into some semblance of normalcy. She stepped out into the dining room, and walked through the busy eating diners unnoticed and unrecognized. Heading upstairs to the balcony, she climbed into the small alcove she had found and let her feet dangle as she stared out at the busy restaurant.

The dutch ovens on the tables bubbled, silverware clanked against china. The glasses glittered, the bar doing good service, the waiters moving through the space efficiently, diners exclaiming happily down below. She spotted the table where Diana, Lilian, J’onn, Barry, and Ra’s still lingered, half eaten desserts on the table in front of them, the waiter bringing over a third bottle of wine.

Alex searched herself for stress or anxiety, but it wasn't there. Things were going well. She'd known she could run a restaurant, and here she was, head chef, her personal recipes on the tables, sounds of pleasure as people ate them. She saw J'onn spot her from the table. He flashed her a concealed thumbs up.

Everything was perfect. So why didn't she feel anything?

"It's pretty good, isn't it?" Maggie said when she came back into the kitchen.

"Yeah."

Maggie grinned. "I still think you should get rid of the tablecloths and sequenced wine glasses."

Alex stayed until the last plate had been through the dishwasher and the floor had been swept, then went home and collapsed. She was more exhausted than she thought she'd ever been.

It was supposed to be good exhaustion, healthy exhaustion. She wouldn't say service had been smooth, because it was never smooth, but they'd weathered the bumps, never gotten so far in the weeds that they felt like they were giving poor service or couldn't sell a table. If it had been a night at Max's restaurant, it would have been a great night. She would have said goodbye to her crew while
they headed across the street for a drink, made herself a cup of tea, and passed right out.

Tonight she sat on the couch with her tea and waited to feel satisfied. She got into bed and laid there, staring up at the ceiling, wondering if maybe she should call Vaz, but Vaz might be with Maggie and Maggie got very upset about late night phone calls interfering with her sleep. Getting a kid off to school interfered enough.

She wanted arms around her, a quiet dissection of the night, someone telling her she'd done well.

She wanted a fucking drink.

She pressed her pillow into her face and recited the methods for making the five mother sauces until the urge passed and she finally fell asleep.

#

On Friday Kara and Siobhan spent the day at a music festival in the park and did an insane amount of business. They ran out of cucumbers and beets and sriracha. Siobhan called her girlfriend to have her go pick up more and bring them by. By then they were getting bulk orders from the performers, and they needed a runner. Leslie told them "Fuck you," a number of times, but then stole some kid's skateboard and started delivering to the various stages.

At 2am, people were finally being herded out of the park, and they closed up. Leslie joined them with two sixpacks of Mike's, and after cleaning they sat on the floor of the truck, drank hard lemonade and divided the tips three ways.

It had been an exhausting day, and the cramped hot quarters of the truck didn't make it any easier. Kara leaned back against the fridge and enjoyed how hard lemonade hardly tasted like alcohol at all. "Maybe I was a little too dismissive of big restaurant kitchens," Kara mumbled toward the ceiling of the truck. She patted it vaguely on the side. "I love you, truck. But it is so fucking hot in here."

"I dunno. I think it's growing on me," Siobhan said.

"You're serious?" Leslie's tone was amused.

"Sure. If I didn't have to work with the idiot savant over there, it would be great."

"Fuck off," Kara said. The words tripped off her tongue, easily now. Alex would be proud.

Siobhan grinned. "Better. I hate it when you're nice. It's disgusting."

Leslie snorted. "You hate it when anyone's nice, babe."

"I'm not nice," Kara said. "I'm an asshole."

Both Siobhan and Leslie chortled and fell over each other, laughing.

"I am! I told my boyfriend we were a team and then dumped him two days later. I told him I wasn't into Alex, then hooked up with her two days later. I told my apologizing brain-injured mom that she didn't care about me. When Alex was trying to tell me she loved me, I told her she was a coward. I am an asshole."

"Join the club." Leslie held out her bottle and Kara clinked it.

Kara squinted at them both through her hazy head. It wasn’t fair. These two assholes found each other. And made cupcakes. "How the fuck did you two end up making cupcakes?"
Siobhan scrunched her nose. "Ugh, your story is more interesting," she prodded Leslie with her elbow. "I’d funded the entirety of my school newspaper baking cupcakes in college, so when I got fired from my job as a gossip columnist for writing an expose on someone I wasn’t supposed to touch, I figured I’d fall back on my one reliable skill."

Kara laughed. "You're like my evil twin or something. I was going to be a journalist too, but I was booted from the investigative team because I was shit at being objective or neutral. But like, when you go out there and see people being so hurt and sad, how are you supposed to be objective and neutral? I didn't realize that you do it because people listen to you when you sound like a sane person. No one wants someone frantically flapping at you, going 'Care! Care! Care!' But that realization came a bit too late."

"You would be a shit journalist," Siobhan said. "Lucky you're not a shit cook."

It was a compliment. Kara grinned. "You cooking is a win for the world. You'd have stirred all the shit as a gossip columnist, and this way we get tasty things instead."

Leslie gagged. "You two are being gross. I hate it."

"Well, what about you? I didn't realize you guys went into cupcakes separately?"

"It's how we met, actually."

Kara blinked. "Was there frosting to the face? I think there must have been frosting to the face."

Leslie and Siobhan grinned at each other. "Yeah. There was frosting to the face," Siobhan said. Then she nudged Leslie. "Go on. Tell her how you got into the biz."

Leslie stretched out her not particularly long legs and grinned, her bottle of Mike’s held over her head as she stretched her back. "Have you ever heard of Léonard Autié?"

Kara scrunched up her nose in thought. "No?"

"He was Marie Antoinette's hairdresser. He's my hero. This dude was just some servant’s son, but he read this book on the ‘art of hairdressing’ and instead of being all impressed like the author had intended, he was like, any fucktard can dress hair. So he strolls into town and lies and screws his way to being the most famous hairdresser in the world." She made finger guns. "When I got fired for punching my boss at the radio station, I watched a lot of Cupcake Wars. I was like, my man Léonard would not be impressed. Any fucktard could do this. So when I saw a flyer for a cupcake competition downtown, I entered. There was a cash prize."

"She'd never baked a thing in her life."

Leslie sniffed. "Cupcakes aren't baking. They're sugar-based aesthetics. You just have to make the cake part not completely gross, and all you get judged on is how cool they look."

"She beat me in the competition," Siobhan said. "When I heard her theory of cupcakes, I may have tried to kill her."

Kara was gaping. "I can see why."

But they were casting each other grins, and it was . . . cute? Was Kara really thinking that Siobhan was being cute? Oh no. She was.

Leslie continued. "I ran into her at a bar that night, and she continued to berate me. So I made fun of
her name a lot. We hooked up in the alley."

That was not a way Kara had ever considered getting a girl. Kara looked at Siobhan and waved a hand towards Leslie. "You-- you hooked up with that? Even though she said cupcakes are only aesthetics?"

Siobhan sighed, shaking her head. "I never said I had standards."

Leslie grabbed her and dragged her into her lap, messing up her hair. Siobhan shrieked. Kara giggled. "Anyway, after like the third time we banged, she said we should go into business together. She'd make my cupcakes edible and I'd make hers look badass. I figured why not."

"It was the sex, wasn't it?" Kara asked. "You totally said yes for the sex."

Leslie grinned and bopped Siobhan, collapsed in her lap, on the nose. "I thought you said she was a stick in the mud. But she gets it."

Siobhan snorted. "We've just gotten her drunk. I like you better drunk, K."

"Oooh, let's take her to Brad's drag show on the weekend. She'll be funny at the drag show if we get her drunk again."

Kara grinned. She might be making friends. She liked it.

She was still pretty drunk when the cab dropped her off outside her apartment at 4am. Hazily, she managed her keys and staggered over to the sink to down two glasses of water before getting into the shower. She sighed, enjoying the hot water.

It had been a good day. They were bringing in money. She was doing well at this. Why had she been so sure it would be so hard?

She closed her eyes. I knew you had this. Hands, warm on her hips, a mouth pressing at the back of her neck.

"Alex."

She stumbled forward, hand hitting the dial, and the water went cold.

"Fuck!" Kara slammed off the water and stood there, dripping in the shower. She didn't feel drunk anymore.

She just felt alone.

#

Alex recorded the fourth episode, and they watched it on Saturday morning. It was the baking episode.

During the golden hour, Alex finally figured out what it was that felt different about this season of Knives and Fire. The tone was lighter. It had the same musical cues and dramatic introductions to the competition, but the interviews were funnier, the lighting less extreme. They let the contestants be human in a way they weren't usually allowed to be. M'gann always projected an air of confidence when cooking, but the interviews let her take a shyer, more self-deprecating tone. Waylon had begun the show over-the-top and bombastic, but his supportiveness and sensitivity had come through. Even Siobhan had been given a moment at the end of the third episode to be relieved and warm after
winning the challenge, not just arrogant and over-confident. Alex had expected her to be given only one note, since she was so good at being bitchy, but this season no one was only one thing.

When Alex saw herself, it was so clear how the show had broken her. She'd gone from angry and overconfident and blind to a confused, messed up kid, who only had one goal: make sure Kara was all right. She was better than she had been. She laughed to realize it. Going on reality TV had made her a better person.

"I used to daydream about opening a bakery. It would be nice to have a lunch place, where you could order whatever was coming out of the oven at that moment. Take a loaf of bread home with you. Soup and hot sandwiches and pasties and calzones."

Kara watched her as she said it, contemplative, wistful.

"Oh," Vasquez said softly from beside her. "That bakery."

In the competition the camera lingered far too much on Alex and Kara shit talking each other and grinning. And then the zucchini incident happened. There was no camera inside the walk in, but Lucy had gotten everyone's reactions and attention toward the scuffles and sounds from inside, her soft cry of "Kara." Kara emerged first, hair disheveled. Alex came out later, red faced and shifty. It was all too clear what everyone had thought was going on in there.

Vasquez and Maggie both gave her horrified looks. "In the walk-in?"

"You've always been such a hardass about people hooking up in the walk-in!"

"We weren't doing anything!" Alex protested.

"You were totally having sex!"

"You weren't even making out?"

"No! The zucchini fell down on Kara's head!"

Both Vasquez and Maggie gave her such disbelieving looks that Alex groaned. She knew what it looked like. The whole country knew what it looked like. Including her mom.

Then there were more warm flushed shots between them. Dammit, Lucy.

It just kept coming too. Kara winning and looking for her. Alex winning and looking for Kara. Goofing off in the pool. Siobhan calling her whipped and Alex not denying it.

And then Kara leaning in, that first brush of lips, and a fade to black. None of Alex's overreaction, no: You make it feel better when it's not. When it shouldn't feel good at all.

They weren't even going to address the Max thing? She'd bared her soul on camera and they weren't going to use it?

"Crap, chef," Vaz said. "I didn't know you could do adorable."

Oh, Alex realized. They didn't have to use it. They hadn't made her the angry rival. She'd been dumb and overreaching in the first episode, but Lucy had shown her working hard, loving what she did, looking after Kara. They'd made her a good guy. They hadn't done a hatchet job on anyone.

Something weird was happening to Knives and Fire.
The episode tag startled Alex out of her thoughts.

But is there trouble in paradise? On Knives and Fire even love is a competition.

"You need to do what's right for you, and I need to do what's right for me. And if those things don't involve us, well, they just don't."

Kara's words hit like a punch to her gut. She hadn't ever wanted to hear those words again.

Her throat closed, her eyes stung. That's what she was doing, she was doing what Kara wanted her to do, letting Kara do what she wanted to do. It was the right choice. It was.

Why did it hurt so fucking much?

"Alex," Maggie said slowly. "How much of what they're showing is real?"

"What?" Alex tried to force a normal look onto her face, to keep back the anguish.

Vaz nudged her. "How serious was your thing with this girl? Or did they, like, tell you to make out for the camera?" Something must have been visible on Alex's face. "Are you okay?"

"It was nothing. I'm fine."

Maggie and Vaz exchanged a look. "It doesn't look like nothing."

"Magic of fucking TV." Alex was pressing her arms to her face. She couldn't deal with this.

"Have you even called her since you left the compound?"

"I don't have her number."

"Jesus fucking christ," said Maggie and pulled out her phone. "Lucy? Lucy. Alex is being a hopeless pathetic mushball over here. Can you give me Kara's number?"

There was a pause.

"Sure, I'll put her on."

Maggie handed the phone to Alex who tried not to whimper into it. But she hoped. If she could just talk to Kara, just had five minutes, maybe they could work this out.

"I can't give you her number," Lucy said flatly. "Against the rules. But, I can tell you that she has a food truck in Midtown."

Lucy wouldn't let her talk to Kara. The last time someone wouldn't let her talk to Kara, she had missed out on seeing Kara again for fourteen years. Anger boiled up in Alex's stomach. How dare she keep her from talking to Kara. Lucy had masterminded all of this. Everything came down to Lucy and this stupid TV show. "I know what you're doing! I know you want some sort of dramatic ending! But can you just stop fucking with us? I just want to talk to her!"

Lucy huffed. "So what, I give you her number and you hem and haw and never call because you're too much of a pussy, Danvers? She has a food truck in Midtown. Go check out your competition. Give her the chance to see you too. And stop complaining. You want me to be messing with you, because if I don't it ends like real relationships between people who can't talk about their feelings. Play the fucking scene, Danvers. Give me some good TV."
Lucy hung up.

Maggie and Vasquez looked on eagerly. "So?"

"She has a food truck in Midtown."

"Lunch!" said Jaime.

#
Alex couldn’t do it. Maggie and Jaime queued in line to get their lunch and something to bring back to Vasquez who was handling set up at the restaurant, and Alex slipped away to stand obscured by two trees and a parked car. She watched as Siobhan taking orders signaled to Kara in the back and Kara came out bursting with enthusiasm to hug Maggie and Jaime and bring them extra food.

She looked good, the sunlight making her shine, glossy hair, flushed face from the grill, sweaty tank-top revealing her defined arms, which, of course, Maggie took the opportunity to squeeze. She was fine, and that was both a miracle and a disaster.

"You're such a fucking loser," Maggie told her, bringing her a basket of what seemed to be beet fries.

"Can you take my station today?" Alex asked. "I . . . I'm going to hang around until she closes."

Maggie's lips quirked. "Sure thing. But if I see you tomorrow and you still haven't talked to the girl, I am punching you in the fucking face."

Alex sat on a parked car until the owner came and shooed her away. Then she found a bench just out of sight from the truck. She ate the fries. They came with five different aiolis and sauces. Some things never changed.

Siobhan spotted her as she was leaving. "So you've taken up stalking now?"

"I am sitting on a bench," Alex told her.

"I should have the cops pick you up for loitering." She shook her head. "Go see her. She's cleaning the grill."

Alex picked herself up and headed towards the truck. She hesitated, shuffling around the back door a few moments, listening to the clank of iron from inside. And then she knocked.

The door opened.

Alex clutched her baseball cap between her fingers, and looked up. Kara was in the door, messy, with streaks of grease on her face, her hair up off her neck and full of flyaway strands, the tank-top and apron she wore wet at her waist with greasy suds. It was probably the most beautiful sight Alex had ever seen.

"Alex."

"Hey." Alex threaded her fingers through her hair. "Lucy wouldn't give me your number, so I just showed up."
Kara's face was unreadable. She took a step back deeper into the truck. "Oh. Um, come up."

Alex stepped into the truck, looking around at the tight, well-organized space. "This is cool. I don't think I've ever been in one of these before."

Kara shifted, "I, yeah, I got it mostly prefab, but I did some custom work." She gestured around, giving the tour. "So, uh, that's the grill, and the deep fryer, and um, the steamer--I installed that--and, the- the cooler."

"I can't believe you got Siobhan to work in a food truck."

Kara laughed weakly. "She complains every day about the contract. But I think she's getting to like it."

"Well, she gets to work with you."

Kara seemed left footed by that comment. "I-- think that's the worst part for her. But it's good for me. She doesn't put up with my shit."

"You had five sauces for the beet fries."

Kara huffed and crossed her arms. "Only for Maggie. Everyone else has to pick one. Or two."

Alex laughed. This hurt too much. "I'm glad you're doing good."

Kara hesitated. "And you? You're managing?"

Alex nodded. "Maggie's my sous. She's solid. Reliable. I'm... settling into it. It's not so hard. As long as I don't get in the bad books of any more mobsters, I can do this." It felt weird to say, she almost felt guilty about saying it, but she meant it. "I'm not afraid of it anymore. I can make great food. I can succeed, even on this level."

"I always knew you could."

"Yeah, well," Alex shrugged. "I even talked to my mom the other day and she acknowledged that I was a good cook."

The smile she got was the first warm one. "That's good. That's new."

"She said my dad would have liked the things I make." Alex looked away.

There was silence, then a soft breath. "Alex."

"She asked me if I was in love with you."

Kara went motionless for a moment. "Oh," she said. "I'm not watching the show. I didn't... want to see all of that again."

Alex took a breath. This wasn't going like she wanted. Everything felt awkward and tense, and she couldn't read Kara like this. She wasn't sure if she needed a hug or wanted to be left alone. "Look. I just-- I came here to say one thing. And it's that I can do this, I can be a success and make my mom love me again or whatever garbage I'm trying to figure out, but it's not enough." She swallowed. "It's not enough without you. And if you don't want... me, that's fine. I can figure out my own shit. But I'd take anything. You were my best friend, and I have missed you for years, and if you just want to be my friend again, if you are just willing to talk to me sometimes and hang out, that would be more than I deserve. If I could cook with you again, I'd be even happier. And, well, anything else. I'd be
down for anything else too."

"You-- shouldn't be the one asking me that."

"I know." Alex rubbed her head, sagging. "You said you needed time to figure out if you could do things on your own. I just keep showing up and putting myself on you. I just--"

"No. I mean, I meant--" Kara’s hands came up and then fell again. “I'm doing fine.”

"I can see. That's great."

"I didn’t have to lean on you."

"I’m so glad. I’m so glad you don’t need me."

Kara hesitated, head cocked like she was confused.

"I want you to want me. I want to be someone who makes things better for you, not someone who just . . . makes you barely functional. I want to make you happy."

Kara's eyes started to glisten.

"Oh no," Alex stepped toward her, reaching out, but not touching her. The truck was too small. There was nowhere to run if she needed to get away. "Don't cry. I really, really don't want to make you cry."

Kara seemed to ball up, leaning forward just enough that Alex had to close her arms around her and pull her into her body. At first stiff, Kara melted into her, a rough sob shaking her chest. "I'm so sorry," Kara choked out.

"What? Why?"

"Because I’m hurting you." Kara's voice cracked as she said it. She leaned into Alex, a warm weight on her shoulder, and didn't let her go.

Alex rubbed her hand down the center of her back. "Please don’t worry about that. I want you to be okay. That's the most important thing."

“No it’s not."

Kara pressed her face once more into her neck, then swallowed, drawing back, taking herself into herself again. "It isn’t." She rubbed her arm across her eyes. “I’m not-- I’m not good enough yet. I need to do this on my own for just a little bit longer."

She looked so lost standing there, so hurt and pale and stoic, and Alex didn’t know what to do. She wanted to wrap her up, hold her until she felt better, until she smiled. But she was asking her not to. Fuck. She’d been asking her not to before, when they’d both been on the compound, and Alex had ignored it. She was supposed to let the ball stay in Kara’s court until she wanted to invite her back in. But she’d just-- she’d hoped-- Fuck.

"Of course. Of course. I shouldn't have just shown up like this. I didn't want to put pressure on you. I'm sorry. I'll go."

Alex stumbled back toward the door. This had been a mistake. She kept asking, kept wanting Kara to change her mind and say yes, but no amount of begging was going to make her suddenly think differently.
She’d been a fool to come here. She had to go.

Kara had thought Alex was a hallucination at first. She’d been wanting to see her so badly, needing her, waiting—like she’d done as a teenager—but not going out to find her herself. And then there she was, in the streetlight, all messy hair and skinny jeans, her baseball cap clutched in her hands, looking up at her like—like she was wonderful, and not like she was the girl who’d just broken her heart.

She couldn’t be real.

She heard herself talking, responding to Alex, but it was like she was cut off, in a different room, someone else was playing her—someone who knew the lines but not the character. Because all she could feel was the ache of regret. How could Alex be here, after what she’d done. How could she want her, come to see her again, when Kara had been so weak and scared and selfish? And then Alex’s words peeked through the closed screen.

“She said my dad would have liked the things I made.”

Alex, quietly earnest, saying all the things Kara had wanted to hear—she was doing well, she was putting her restaurant together. She was doing all the things Kara knew she could do. And it just made it more and more clear that it had never been about that. She’d chased Alex away because she was the one who couldn’t handle this. She was the one who was afraid.

Alex was happy, wasn’t she? She wanted Kara, but she was fine working on her own, she had what she wanted. And Kara wished, she wished so hard that she could do their conversation over again, knowing what she knew now, and saying yes. Because she wanted Alex to be confident, at peace, but she’d wanted the bakery too. She loved her food truck. She could manage there, stay on top of things, learn. But with Alex, working together, she thought she could stretch herself, do more. But she’d given that up.

Then Alex’s arms were around her, Alex’s strength supporting her, and she couldn’t bear it. It shouldn’t feel so much like home, but it did, and Kara was so weak, she’d been so weak for so long, every day she’d been afraid and confused and tired and lost, and she was broken. Her mom was alive, but she was still broken, and Alex’s hands couldn’t put her back together, not for good. She would just keep shattering over and over again, and she didn’t want to cut Alex with her shards.

She’d already hurt Alex by being too scared, too messed up to see what she was offering. And here she was, still giving more, still saying things like “I want you to be okay. That’s the most important thing.”

It wasn’t fair. She wasn’t being fair to Alex. She didn’t deserve someone to care about her this much. She wasn’t worth this.

“I’m not good enough yet.” How could she let herself be with Alex if she was just going to hurt her again? How could she just take all of this that Alex was giving her if she’d only collapse under her own fear of failure? But she was starting to stand up, starting to be confident and learn what she needed to know. She was going to be able to pull her own weight, soon. And then she could offer herself, as a partner, not a burden. She just needed a little more time. “I need to do this on my own for just a little bit longer.”

Alex, all rumpled and confused, with a wet spot on her checked button-down that Kara had put there, staggered back, as if Kara had punched her, but her face looked like she deserved the
punishment. And then she was turning, stumbling out of the truck. She was leaving.

Alex was leaving. Kara had hurt her again, and Alex was leaving and blaming herself and she didn't understand. Kara could see in her face that she didn't understand.

"No!" Kara chased her, half falling down the steps out of the truck, reaching out, grabbing for her. Her foot missed the curb, and she tripped on it. She stumbled forward, slamming into a pausing, turning Alex and knocking her across the sidewalk and into the wall of the building. Kara, falling with her, caught her head before they smacked into it, cradling it. Her knuckles hit brick and scraped against it, her body hit Alex’s, her knee slamming into brick.

Alex, eyes wide and sparkly with unshed tears, breathing roughly, gaped at her. Kara couldn't look away. She couldn’t move either. Any movement would mean being unable to feel the rhythm of Alex’s breath, mean not having to stare right into the evidence of her guilt.

"Hi," Kara said. Her voice shook. She sounded like an idiot, but it was her voice, not whatever thing had been communicating with Alex before. She needed to speak properly, not just react, and she needed to hold on, make sure Alex wouldn’t leave before she understood.

"Hi?" Alex said, clearly confused.

"Don't go yet."

"I-- okay?"

"I missed you."

Alex's face softened. "I missed you too."

“I tried to call you.”

“You did?”

Kara nodded. “I was a mess. I wanted-- I wanted you to make it better.”

Alex let her head drop back into Kara’s hands, her eyes momentarily falling shut. “I wish--”

Alex always wanted to make it better.

“Back-- back when they moved me to a new house, I tried to call you too. I couldn’t believe they’d take me away then. I knew-- I knew I couldn’t fix anything, but I wanted to be there, I wanted to help. But they wouldn’t even let me call you.”

Alex’s hand reached up, a finger twisting a loose strand of Kara’s hair around itself. “Lucy wouldn’t give me your number. I kind of flipped out at her. It felt too much like it did back then.”

“I wanted to be there.” Kara shook her head. “I wanted you to come rescue me.”

"I tried once.” Alex ducked her head, a soft laugh emerging. “But I didn't know where you were, and I got picked up by the police trying to hitchhike through Sacramento. Mom was really upset when they brought me home.”

Kara laughed, but felt like her heart was breaking. She leaned her head against Alex’s shoulder. It was always so much easier to breathe when every breath had Alex’s scent, and her warmth was like a safety blanket. "I fucked up," she said.
“Everyone does.”

“Mike said that the more I want something, the sooner I fuck it all up.”

“Mike is an asshole.”

Kara smiled into her neck. “He’s right though. I wanted you so much, and look how long I managed to hold on to that.” Alex’s hands were warm pressure on her back, on her hip, moving gently, soothing. “I get so scared. And-- I’m trying so hard to be okay, but then I hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you. I just--”

“You need time.”

“Not to decide. I don’t need to decide that I want you.”

The softness in Alex’s eyes, the way they opened up on the wounds inside, made Kara regret everything even more. “Can we just-- as soon as the show is over can we go on a date?”

Surprise crossed Alex’s face. "Yes. Sure. Let's go on a date." She hesitated. "What kind of date?"

Kara hadn’t thought this through that far. "Ice skating?"

"Ice skating?" Alex frowned as if maybe that wasn’t an easy thing in National City. Kara really didn’t know. Mike hadn’t taken her on a date in at least a year.

"Or roller skating. No food, no too big promises, no lost past and endless regrets. You and me and skates."

"Okay." Alex frowned. "Pickup roller hockey?"

"You play hockey?" Kara had only started to play after she’d ended up on the east coast. She hadn’t done it in a while.

"Sometimes."

"Yeah, that sounds great." Kara swallowed hard, trying not to cry. The tears still bright in Alex’s eyes made her want to, and if Alex actually started, she wouldn’t have a chance of not crying, so she had to do whatever she could to keep this light. Everything with Alex had gotten too intense too fast, and she needed time to make things up to her. But she was not going to hurt her anymore by being dishonest or reacting out of fear.

Alex seemed almost comfortable, settled against the wall, watching her, her face gentle and quiet. Kara liked that look, wanted to make her keep it, to have her feel safe.

Kara let her hands drop, she searched in the folds and layers of Alex’s jeans.

Alex yelped. "Oh! Hi there. What are you doing?"

Kara snagged Alex's phone out of her back pocket, crumpled papers falling out as she removed it. “I don’t know what’s coming after the show’s over. But I know one thing.”

“We have a date.”

Kara grinned at the kind of stunned look on Alex’s face. “Yes. We have a date. And whatever else happens, I just want you to know that if you need me you can have me.”
Alex’s eyes went a tiny bit wide. Kara put the phone in her face. “Unlock this.”

Alex obediently unlocked the phone. Kara opened Alex’s contacts lists and put her number in. She texted her own phone, then handed it back to Alex. "There."

Alex looked down at her phone then up again. “You gave me your number?”

“I never want to not be able to call you again. And I really, really just want to be able to call you when I miss you.”

Alex held the phone close to her chest. "Me too."

"I’m still-- I’m not really okay. I don’t know if I ever will be. I don’t know if I’ll ever have something big and good that I can bring to you, if I’ll ever be the sort of person you deserve.” Alex opened her mouth, her face ripe with protest. Kara cupped it between both her hands. “Even if you think I am. Even if you’d be glad to take me even if I’m not. But I don’t have to decide that I want to keep you around. I hope-- I hope you don’t have to decide whether you want that either.”

Alex's head tipped forward just enough so her hair fell forward, casting her face in soft shadows. "I don't."

"Thank you."

"I don't-- don't thank me for not being able to let you go."

"Shut up, I'll thank you every day for that." Kara found her hands in Alex's hair, curling into the warmth behind her ears, pushing it back so she could see her pretty eyes. She tipped her head up, and leaned in. Alex's breath was warm against her mouth, her eyes falling shut.

Kara closed the last microspan of distance and kissed her.

#

When Alex had gone, Kara noticed the two pieces of paper that had fallen out of Alex’s pocket when she’d removed her phone. She picked them up. They might be important. She’d have to return them soon. Under the yellow glow of the streetlight, she unfolded them.

Then she read them.

Then she went back into the truck and finished up the cleaning. She headed back to her apartment after that, showered and got into bed.

Then she read them again and cried.

#
"Hey, Chef." Vaz sidled up behind Alex and surprised her.

Alex hurriedly tried to hide her phone, but Vaz had snagged it out of her hand and started scrolling back up through the messages.

"Um, these are all since last night?"

"Don't look at them!" Alex tried to get her phone back.

"If you didn't want me to look at them you should have used Snapchat." Vaz kept scrolling and grinning. "You have a girlfriend."

"Give it back."

"Maggie!" Vaz yelled, flagging her down. "Chef has a girlfriend!"

"Vaz!"

But it was too late. Maggie was taking the phone and scrolling back through the very embarrassing series of texts. "Aww, honey," Maggie cooed. "I don't have to punch you."

Alex rubbed her face. "She's not my girlfriend."

"She sent you a Good Morning text with four emoji, including a duck. If I got a Good Morning text at 8am from anyone who wasn't going to put out soon, I would kill them."

"We haven't decided anything yet." But they had a date. They’d scheduled a date. There was no way Alex would tell either of these idiots about that. She knew what their response would be.

"You just made out?" Vaz asked, then pinched Alex's cheek. "You look like someone who hooked up, not like someone freaking out about the fact that J'onn stopped by last night when you were flaking out to go make things up with your girl."

"What!"

"It was fine, we handled service just fine without you."

Alex made a face. That might not actually be a good thing.

"I want details about your girl, Chef. And pics!"

"You've seen her," Alex protested, and then realized she hadn’t denied the 'your girl'. Her face went hot. "She's on the show. And you had her food yesterday."

Alex's phone chimed with an incoming text.
"Ooh!" Vaz snagged it back from Maggie and opened the text. "Yes! A pic!"

"Give it back!" Alex fought Vaz for her phone, and got it back. It was a selfie, from the inside of the truck, of Kara grinning brightly with her arm around Siobhan who had been caught chopping carrots and glared death at the camera.

Alex couldn’t stop the stupid smile from taking over her face. They hadn’t resolved anything really, but she had Kara’s number, and Kara had hers, and that was more than she’d let herself hope for going in.

"Oh my God, Alex," Maggie said, laughing at her. "You're really not doing a good job faking that you're cool anymore."

"Fuck off," Alex said. It came out too good-natured. She gave up and gathered both Maggie and Vaz into the frame so she could get a pic of them and the kitchen and send one back.

Vaz stole my phone and read all the texts. She really wants to meet you now. She's insufferable.

Tell her I really want to meet her too. And that I'm going to totally give her the shovel talk Re: Maggie, so Be Scared!

Alex couldn’t help but laugh.

#

Kara had texted first. She’d wanted to do it from the moment she finished reading, but hesitated. She’d lain there, the papers folded up and pressed to her chest, and she’d slowly puzzled out whether she should text or not. Which was brave, and which was cowardly? It was hard to know what to do when you thought that maybe the thing you wanted more than anything . . . was brave. Or at least kind. But wanting it so much, surely that meant it was wrong.

She did it anyway.

Home safe?

I am. You?

Kara sent a shot of her studio apartment, still mostly empty. She was camping more than anything. But that was what happened when you essentially lived in your food truck.

Cute

Lucy found it for me

There was a long pause filled with many floating dots, as if Alex was trying to figure out something to say about Lucy and kept censoring herself. Kara interjected.

I think she’s dating my mom

WHAT?

It was followed by a series of exploding emoji and Kara laughed and laughed.

I know!

How did that happen!
It's a mystery. How did Maggie and Vaz happen?

Huh. I . . . never actually asked.

Seriously? Alexxxxxxxx. You need to get better at the gossip! I'm relying on you! I must have the dirt!

The texts came throughout the day, lots of pics of Alex's kitchen and her restaurant. A series of selfies of Vasquez, posing for the camera in various over the top cool ways. This was followed by more shots of Maggie cooking and ordering people about than Alex ever would have taken, and Kara knew she liked Vasquez. Eventually Alex got her phone back and sent texts of complaint as well as posed photos of her chef’s knife surrounded by various stages of mise preparation.

What do you think about a special of sea-bass stuffed with pine nuts and basil and goat cheese?

Kara wrote back:

Yum. Caramelized red onion, balsamic and tomato coulis?

Fucking genius. :P

Kara felt warm and pleased with every text she got.

"You know," Siobhan said. "I thought you'd be worse now that you're talking to Alex again. But you're like . . . chilled out, or something."

Kara grinned. She was happy. Being happy made her calm, rather than manic.

She still felt guilty for what she'd done to Alex, what she was still doing to Alex, dragging her along, making her wait, but she was going to have a chance to make it up to her. She didn't have to panic about never getting the chance to make things up, never get a chance to win her back. "I'm fine. Things are fine."

Siobhan narrowed her eyes. "If I offer to take you underwear shopping, it doesn't mean we're friends."

#

The drag show Leslie had threatened to drag Kara to materialized that Friday evening. They took the Metro to the station near NCU’s West Campus and emerged on well-lit streets among crowds of students heading out for parties.

As they walked down the sidewalk, Kara noticed a boarded up corner store. The large windows had cardboard backing them, and there was a small crumbling patio on the side. It had a For Sale or Rent sign on the inside of the cardboard. Kara kept looking at it, and after they’d passed, kept thinking about it--how near it was to the campus, what else was in the neighborhood. They had left it behind by three or four blocks when Leslie startled her out of her thoughts by pointing down the street and saying, “There it is!”

This neighborhood was different from right around campus, a little more run down and a bit more neon lit. There were still students about, but they looked less whitebread, going around in packs with interesting facial hair and open shirts revealing shaved chests or snapbacks and combat boots. A taqueria on the corner was doing good business, the drag show was advertised in bills pasted everywhere, both in English and Spanish, and across the street there were two sex shops, one on either side of what looked like a bar/restaurant. The bar windows were dark, and a sign on the front
Leslie grabbed Kara by the collar and dragged her into the performance space. Then it was only bright lights, loud music, sweet drinks where Kara could hardly taste the alcohol, and laughter.

She was drunk when they emerged, but happy. And when she spotted the bar across the street again she recognized it properly. “I know that place! Look, look. Two sex shops, a latin drag show, and a taqueria called Mariposa. We’re in Cathedral Park!”

Siobhan and Leslie both laughed at her for not knowing National City at all, because of course they were in Cathedral Park. Kara hurried across the street and started banging on the door of the closed bar. “I know this place. I know this bar.”

“Sure,” Leslie said. “It’s one of my favorites. Sucks that it’s closed tonight.”

“Why is it closed?” Kara complained. That made her unhappy. Very unhappy. In a dramatic way, that wasn’t the same as it would be if she were sober. “It should be open by now. It’s M’gann’s bar.”

Siobhan looked startled. “It is?”

“It has to be. Come on. Look, there’s a light on in the back. Help me find a way in!”

The fact that all three of them were drunk meant that when they found a back alley that led to a window a tiny bit of the way open, Leslie offered her pocket knife to help pop out the screen and Siobhan let Kara climb up on her shoulders to wrench the window up and crawl inside.

She did not make the landing and fell in a heap on the floor. “Oof.”

A scrape of a chair, a startled sound, and Kara found herself looking up at a M’gann with a baseball bat in hand, readied to swing. Kara realized she might not have thought this through. “Ah,” she said. “Hi?”

M’gann lowered the bat. “Kara?” she asked, incredulous.

“That’s me. Is this your bar? You wanted to turn it into a bar-restaurant, right?” Kara sat up and looked around the space. It seemed that the renovations were still ongoing. The kitchen looked mostly finished, but an oven sat out on the counters, wiring still exposed. The dishwasher pipes connected to nothing. What she could see of the dining room was mostly a hole, flooring piled on packing crates along one wall, boxes that might contain disassembled tables and chairs leaning against the other.

“It was,” M’gann said, something lost and tired in her voice.

“Why isn’t it finished? Weren’t you supposed to have already had your grand opening?”

“Yeah, well. We ran out of money. So I guess I’m out of the competition.”

Kara froze. “What?”

M’gann sank down into a chair and let the bat drop to the floor. “Ra’s kept suggesting all these new ideas, and I went with them. He was the one who knew what he was doing, right? We had plenty of money, and even with his additions, I thought we were fine. But then, he called me into the kitchen and told me that a check had bounced. I don’t know what happened. I was working with the wrong estimates, maybe? So the contractors packed up and left, and now I don’t even have my bar anymore.”
Any lack of sobriety was completely gone now. “Seriously?” Kara asked, a slow burn of anger bubbling up through her chest. “He messed you around and then told you there was no money left? What the *fuck*?”

M’gann shook her head. “It was my mistake.”

Kara didn’t believe that for a second. “You don’t make that kind of mistake! I’ve seen you doing sums in a notebook for hours to make sure you don’t make that kind of mistake.” Kara fished for her phone. “No way. There’s something fishy about this. I’m calling Lucy.”

“What?”

“This has to be wrong. This has to be their fault, and they’d better fix it!”

“Kara!” M’gann tried to grab her hand. “Have you even watched the show? If they did this, they did it on purpose, because they want the drama. They won’t fix it.”

“You can’t be out like this. It isn’t fair! They can’t *take your bar away.*”

Her call went through, she heard Lucy’s sleepy voice saying, “What? Kara? Are you okay?”

“No!” Kara snapped into the phone. “I am not okay. How the *fuck* could you let this happen?”

“What?”

It took a while for Lucy to wake up fully enough to understand what Kara was furious about. But when she did there was a long quiet pause as Lucy put it all together.

“Oh, fuck,” Lucy said. “She didn’t trust me.”

“What? Who?”

“Cat. I told her that I’d have something for the finale. I *told* her. And then she said, so sweetly, that since I was busy producing you and Alex, she’d take M’gann. And I, like an idiot, let her. She never produces any of the contestants anymore. I knew she hated what I was doing with the show. But she didn’t want to argue, she just wanted me to fail and have to watch her swoop in to save the day. Goddammit. I hate these fucking power plays.”

“Does that mean you can’t do anything?”

Lucy puffed out a breath of air. “If you mean put more money into it . . . she has to approve all of those forms. If she thinks this is a good idea, she won’t approve them. I could try though. I could give her a piece of my goddamned mind.”

Kara was moving around the restaurant as she spoke to Lucy, counting packing crates and peeking into boxes. M’gann watched her with concern written on her face. “No, no. Don’t confront her. I think I have a better idea. I still have a little left on my debit card, since we’ve been taking in enough to cover operating costs. Are there any restrictions about what I can do with it?”

“That’s yours for the duration. You can do what you like.”

“Okay,” Kara said. “Can you send a camera crew down here tomorrow morning, say, 7:00.”

“You got it.” Kara could hear a curious smile in Lucy’s voice, as if she had some inkling of what her plan was.
“And schedule the grand opening for Tuesday, all right? Can you get the advertising together, or do we need to pay more for that?”

“It should be fine. We’ve got an open account with the agency.”

“Good.” Kara looked around M’gann’s bar and felt right and certain about this. This wasn’t fair, and she had to try to fix it. She had to. “I think I can get you some good TV. Maybe not what Cat wants, but . . .”

“She always hated you,” Lucy said, warmth in her voice. “You’re a defuser. Let me know if there’s any more I can do to help. Any time.”

M’gann was looking panicked when Kara hung up the phone.

“What are you doing? I can’t open on Tuesday. Look at this place! There’s no money.”

“I know,” Kara said. “But it looks like most of the stuff you need is here. All we have to find is labor.”

“I can’t pay labor.”

“Lucky then, that you have friends.”

M’gann went stiff. “I don’t-- I don’t like asking for help.”

“You helped me.” Kara rubbed her hand through her hair. “I never felt like I belonged on the show, but you told me I didn’t have to be a trained chef. You picked Mike as your assistant so I wouldn’t have to deal with him. You told me that it mattered more what I did than what I was. Everyone helped me, so much, and I never understood why. I didn’t deserve it. But it didn’t matter if I deserved it or not, not to you. I want to help, because I want to be more like you.”

M’gann shook her head, hiding her face. “You don’t know who I really am or what I’ve done.”

“I don’t care.” Kara didn’t care, because whatever M’gann was running from, whatever past she kept close to her chest, she couldn’t hide how good of a person she was now. If she’d chosen to be as good as she was, it was like Alex choosing to ask for help, it was like Kara, choosing to try for what she wanted even when she was sure she’d fail. It was so much harder than it looked on the outside.

Kara sent out a tweet on her business account. Closed tomorrow--a friend needs us. Back with more beet fries soon!

“We’re going to fix this,” she said. M’gann’s shoulders started to quake. Kara stepped in and opened her arms for her. M’gann hesitated, and then moved into her clasp. Kara pulled M’gann into her chest and tucked her chin against her shoulder. “It’s okay,” she said, realizing it was something she probably should have listened to when other people said it to her. “It’s okay to lean on me right now. You’re always bearing people up.”

After sending M’gann to bed and explaining the situation to Siobhan and Leslie, who were a little confused, but eventually got the plan, Kara headed back to her apartment. When inside, she took out her phone and found the texts from Alex.

She took the words right from the letter she’d found, and began it simply.

I need you.
Vasquez and Maggie were not enthused about the prospect of getting up at 6:30 on a Saturday morning, but when Alex explained what it was for, Maggie had everyone up, and arrived at Alex's apartment only 10 minutes late--NC traffic--to pick her up in her green Subaru, with Vaz and Jaime passed out in the backseat.

Maggie gestured her to the coffee in the cupholder and gives her a lazy grin. "Ready to see your girl again?"

Alex stuck out her tongue. "Which one? You left too soon, you don't know how me and M'gann hit it off."

"Whatever, you know M'gann liked me best."

Alex held her phone closely. The text thread with Kara, explaining the situation with M'gann, Alex's response, *I'll be there*, a few logistics, a confirmation, and then, from Kara, a duck. What the duck was supposed to mean, Alex had no idea, but it was personal, as the texts hadn't been since the first line of the first one. *I need you."

*I need you too.*

When they pulled up outside M'gann's bar, Alex and Vaz and Jaime got out, sending Maggie off in the endless hunt for NC parking. Kara was waiting outside the door. She had jeans and work boots on, a blue flannel shirt over a white undershirt, her glasses perched slightly askew on her nose. She looked up, the early morning light catching her eyes, and smiled at the sight of them, and Alex felt like she was on a ship in a hurricane that had finally hit level seas. "Hey."

In two steps, Kara was right in front of her, and her arms were around her, pulling her into a tight hug. "Thank you for coming."

"You needed me. What else was I going to do?"

Kara's eyes flickered down to her mouth, and Alex--who after kissing her under the lamppost outside the food truck had told herself very seriously that they shouldn't make out any more until they’d actually gone on a date--started to close the distance.

"Chef! Introduce me to your girlfriend."

Interrupted, Alex jerked back and scowled at Vaz. "I told you--" *not my girlfriend yet."

"Sure, sure," Vaz said, grinning at Kara. "I'm Vasquez." She held out her hand.

Kara laughed, her cheeks a little pink, and took her hand. "Kara."

Maggie strolled up the street, keys swinging, and Kara yelped happily at the sight of her and squished her as if she hadn’t just seen her a week ago. Another car pulled up, letting out Siobhan and Leslie and Waylon. Two dogs barked from a crate in the back, and the woman driving--dressed for work--waved, and pulled away. Alex turned to Waylon and as he came over, met him with a big hug.

Then the door to the bar opened, and M'gann stepped out, still a little sleepy looking, and glanced around, her eyes going wide and astonished. "You all came?"

"Of course," said Alex. Why on earth would she think they wouldn’t?
Waylon scooped her up in his massive arms and squeezed her. “Why didn’t you tell me what those assholes were trying to do?”

#

The camera crew showed up as they were sorting out jobs. Lucy came with them, in jeans and boots, with work gloves sticking out of her pocket, and instructed the cameras to not focus on her if she pitched in. M’gann was shooed into her apartment kitchen so she could work on her menu. Leslie and Waylon and Vasquez immediately settled in to organize the flooring. Maggie and Jaime and Siobhan started spackling and painting. Kara headed into the kitchen to finish installing the ovens, Alex was roped into being the muscle for the job. The camera people roamed around and got in everyone's way. Lucy asked interview questions and made all the strangers introduce themselves to the camera.

M'gann came down every hour or so, with plates of delicious food for people to try, and provided guidance about how she wanted the rooms to look. Every time she came down, she seemed more and more astonished. The flooring was down, the room swept and the lower walls washed. Kara and Alex finished the kitchen installations and started to work on the bar.

For lunch, they ordered tacos from Mariposa and M'gann tapped a keg of beer. By then, she was laughing and telling the story of how a drunk Kara had climbed through her window late last night and put all of this in motion.

Kara, drinking seltzer, blushed and laughed, and leaned into Alex. Alex, having spent the morning holding very heavy things in place, watching Kara frown at complicated wiring and roll in and out from underneath the ovens, looking mussed and technical, couldn't help putting a hand gently on her waist. Kara rested her head on her shoulder.

This was what she wanted. Kara, confident and happy, leading the way with Alex backing her up. Kara, leaning on her when she needed to. They worked well together. They made each other better. Alex had daydreamed about it being their bakery, their space. But this was enough. Even if she never had more of Kara than this, this was enough.

#

After lunch, M'gann set up shop in her new kitchen. Kara popped in and out, making sure everything was working right and didn't need adjustment.

"How did you learn how to do this?" M'gann asked her.

Kara waved the question away. "Everything is always breaking in a food truck."

She’d always been the person to call when something needed fixing though. Jimmy had been the most upset when she left for National City because he couldn’t call her to come fix his toilet or his wiring.

Kara had forgotten how good it felt to help someone like this. She’d done this kind of thing for Mike, but he just expected it of her. When something went wrong, he’d just groan and flop onto his back on the sofa and give up. Then, when she sorted it out, it was as if there had never been a problem in the first place. It wasn’t as if she needed to be appreciated, but it was a good reminder. It was so hard to believe that what she was was worth something. But here, with M'gann looking at her like she was working miracles, and Alex watching her with undeniable pride, the self doubt felt self indulgent.
She glanced over and caught sight of Lucy taking a picture with her phone. She met Kara’s gaze, looking a little sheepish, and Kara narrowed her eyes at her. “Are you texting my mom?”

Lucy made a face. “She’s proud of you.”

Kara laughed.

At about two thirty, the painting was underway and the’d begun to put together tables. It was starting to look like a real restaurant.

Then Alex called her over to the space behind the bar, and showed her the notebook where she had started an inventory list.

“I think we have a problem.”

Kara bit her lip. About two thirds of the items on the list were checked off, but there were a third or so still unchecked. Alex had put in tentative prices, and the sum was looking ugly.

“M’gann said they were ordered, but they never got delivered.”

Kara put her debit card down on the page. "I've still got maybe four thousand dollars."

"That would be fine if we could get delivery, but I don't think we have time. And the restaurant supply outposts are a little more expensive," Alex said.

Kara nodded. “Right, then we triage.”

Shoulder to shoulder, they went through the list, prioritizing and coming up with ways around spending more money--getting Siobhan to write out the menu in her stupidly nice handwriting and running off copies in half-page folded cards, thrifting for lamps, asking some of Alex’s waiters if they wanted to pull an extra shift.

Kara liked Alex’s serious face. She’d always been intractable when faced with a problem. She’d work at it until she solved it, and just any solution wouldn’t do. It had to be solved right. She could watch it all day.

They looped in M’gann on the discussion, and then Maggie who took one look at the list and crossed off three things. “Don’t worry, I’ve got that.”

Waylon offered to take Siobhan and go on a thrifting mission. Maggie put in a call to her cousin and got M’gann’s first food order on credit. Leslie headed down to the hardware store a few blocks away and came back with ten cans of spray paint. She started putting a mural on the freshly painted wall.

“I’m sorry,” Kara whispered to M’gann. “I’ve unleashed all this crazy on your restaurant.”

M’gann put her arm around Kara’s waist and squeezed. “I never thought I’d have a restaurant at all. When I imagined it, I kept thinking small, kept the possibilities constrained. But with everyone’s help, it’s become so much more than I thought it could be.”

Kara looked around the space, seeing it as a whole. It was a restaurant, big and beautiful, eclectic and a little punk rock. It was filled with people who’d helped Kara, and made her better, smarter, more competent. She was more than she’d ever thought she could be.

“I know what you mean,” she said.

#
When it was time for them to get the DEO ready to open. Alex didn't want to leave yet, and sent Maggie and Vaz back to manage prep, offering to keep Jaime there until her babysitter came to pick her up. Half an hour later, Vaz pulled up in Maggie's Subaru and called her out to come unload boxes of dinnerware.

"Is Maggie giving away my table settings?" Alex asked, recognizing the contents.

"Only half," Vaz said cheerily. "All your tablecloths though. And your second set of wine glasses. And lending. Though, I think she still wants to replace them with less boring stuff."

"She can do whatever she wants when it's her restaurant." It was true, Alex had gone a little crazy with buying wine glasses. And fine, tablecloths were stupid with the recessed hotplates, and a fire hazard, so getting rid of them would be for the best.

"You don't have to do this," M'gann said. "You've already all done far more than I deserved."

Alex handed her a heavy box of flatware along with a glare. "Nope. We haven't."

Kara was grinning at her from inside.

"What?" Alex mouthed at her.

Kara blew her a kiss.

#

When Alex finally made it back to the DEO, service had started. The only noticeable change was the lack of tablecloths, and they weren't a loss. Without them the space was darker and warmer. The bread had been moved into baskets instead of being served on plates, also an improvement. Alex was starting to see what Maggie meant about her table settings and choice of glassware. They were cold, when the space was warm. Maybe she should reorder everything and pass the whole service on to M'gann. Ha, as if she could afford to do that.

J'onn was waiting in the kitchen when she came in, leaning against the wall. From the chef’s station, Maggie was all wide eyes, making little gestures as if to say, I texted you.

"Alex. Can I talk to you?"

Alex froze. Oh fuck.

It was five days out from the grand opening and she'd entirely missed service once and was late today. She was a flake, wasn't she?

Full of trepidation, Alex followed J'onn into the change room and waited for her beratement.

“Have you fed your starter lately?"

Alex blinked. She was baking nearly every day, she was always feeding her starter. “Um, not today yet,” she said. She usually fed it after the end of service, getting the levains ready so she could throw them in the mixer in the mornings. But it wouldn’t hurt to do it now. “Do you want to help me?"

J’onn grinned and rolled up his sleeves. They headed into the repurposed closet, and Alex pointed him to the bowls set out under flour measurements taped to the wall. He started weighing flour and she started weighing starter and mixing it with water.

“You know why I gave you that starter?”
Alex smiled down at it and shook her head. “Because I needed something to look after?”

J’onn laughed softly. “You had enough to look after just with yourself and your work. You needed something to care about. But, to be honest, I gave it to you so I could have a way to check on you.”

“Hmm?”

“If you were looking after your starter, I knew you were looking after yourself.”

“What? Did you have a secret camera planted on my counter to check the state of the bubbles?”

J’onn grinned and shook his head. “Fine, it wasn’t my most effective spying mission. But I wanted you to be happy, and I know it’s not easy to be happy in this life. You have to love it enough to handle the sacrifice. But you also have to love yourself. You can’t devote more of yourself than you have to give.”

Alex nodded. Sometimes, it felt like she was coming alive when she came to work. The rest of the time, in her apartment, she was dead. But it hadn’t felt like that lately, not with Maggie and Vaz and Jaime invading all the time. Not with Kara on the other end of the phone. Not with the hard labor they’d been doing at M’gann’s all morning. She had something that she hadn’t had before. And rather than taking away her energy, her fingers with itching with the desire to cook, to invent new recipes and knead dough. She felt creative and energized in a way she hadn’t been for a long time.

"I've been looking at your receipts."

"I made Maggie promise we wouldn't launder money for the mob."

J’onn stopped.

Alex cringed. She’d meant it as a joke, though she had in fact told Maggie that. Her mouth had taken to just spitting out all the things she really really did not want to say.

"Um, good?" He shook his head. "That is good to know, because I was going to say that you're doing well. These are the sort of receipts I like to see in a starting restaurant in this kind of area. I wanted to ask you about how you'd feel about staying on here, after the show ends."

Alex went still. "What?"

"I need a head chef. I don't see the need to put in a new one, when this one is working out."

"I thought-- I thought you were going to berate me for being lazy."

J’onn frowned. "Have you been lazy?"

Alex shook her head. "I just-- I've had other things on my mind. I'm not . . . giving the restaurant my all."

"It seems to be working out anyways."

Alex nodded. "Yeah, Maggie and Vaz always pick up the reins when I drop them."

"Is there something else you'd rather be doing?"

Alex stared down at her hands. She wanted J’onn to be proud of her. But he thought she was working out, she wanted to please him, to keep working out. Today, though, having Kara at her side, working for a common purpose, it had felt right in a way the last few weeks hadn't. But dreaming
about the bakery again, that was a dream that had already been shot down.

"No," she said, looking up and meeting his eyes. "No. I'd love to stay on as the chef at the DEO."

#

Lucy arranged the files she held, all paper. She didn’t want an electronic record for this. She took a deep breath and then knocked.

The door opened and she was let into the penthouse suite that Lilian always rented while in National City for filming. It was early in the morning. Diana was sprawled out on the sofa, half dressed in what looked like sleepwear. Lilian was fully dressed, impeccable as always. After letting her in, she went over to the drinks cart and offered Lucy an irish coffee. Lucy accepted.

“So,” Diana said from her position on the couch, her eyes suddenly going intent and serious, not a trace of sleep left in them. “I hear you have a little bit of information for us.”

Lucy took a sip of the coffee and felt the whiskey burn through it. Then she opened her file and laid out the main summary graphs and tables on the coffee table.

“Yes,” she said. “I think I do.”

#
The Finale

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for coming on this ride with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The grand opening at M'gann's went perfectly well. Kara knew this for a fact, because she'd ducked out of the truck early, leaving Siobhan with Leslie as backup, put on waiter blacks, and waited tables for her. M'gann and Waylon were working hard in the kitchen, M'gann's young employee Rafe was behind the bar, and Kara, plus two of the DEO's off-shift waiters and a busboy who were willing to do another few hours for the same rates as at the DEO, ran the front. Maggie had poached a dishwasher from somewhere a friend worked, so they had the bare bones. And if anything, the weeks competing in Knives and Fire had been good practice in covering every single station with only two people.

When Kara showed up at the table with Lilian, Diana, J'onn, Barry and Ra's it was only the fact that she really, really should not have gotten that table that stopped her from punching Ra's in the face. Even if Cat was the one who had instigated it, how dare he just abandon M'gann like that?

Diana smiled at her when she showed up. "You look familiar, hmmm, haven't we seen you around before? Selling street food?"

Kara forced a grin of her own. "You know how it is, gotta pick up a little extra cash here and there."

"Oh no," Barry said. "Did the truck break down already?"

"No, it's fine. Siobhan's managing tonight. Evenings are slow anyway until the bars close. Now, what can I offer you to drink?"

At the end of the night, Kara was sweaty and exhausted, but not as much as M'gann and Waylon. But they'd done it. The grand opening had been a success.

Kara: Are you still awake?

Alex: Yep, just got home, making tea. How'd it go?

Kara's finger hovered over the call button, and then she pressed it.

"Hey," Alex's warm voice was soothing. Kara lay down, settling into her pillows.

"It went good. I had to wait on the judges table though."

"Oh no!"

They laughed, talking late into the night, until Alex fell asleep, her soft rhythmic breathing audible through the phone. Kara listened to it, staring up at the shadowed ceiling.

She knew what she wanted now. Alex's letter had made that clear.
It was hard to need people, hard to put her weight on people when she thought she ought to be holding it up herself. But she didn't have to put it all on one person. She could spread it out, ask for help and give help in return. She could share the burden, and everyone’s was lighter for it.

Arriving back at the compound was one of the strangest experiences Alex had ever had. She did not want to give up her phone, but Kara had texted her earlier that morning, *Heading over now, can't wait to see you,* plus an emoji of a duck.

Alex had laughed at it. It had only been a week and a half since they'd helped M'gann open her restaurant, and Kara had called nearly every night since. But honestly, she couldn't wait to see her either.

The moment Alex stepped into the studio, Kara looked up, as if she recognized the sound of her steps or her heartbeat, and bolted across the way to her and scooped her up in a hug that dragged Alex's feet off the ground. "Hey!"

"Hey." Kara grinned at her. "I have something for you. After the competition."

"Awesome." Alex kind of had something for her too. It was . . . dumb, maybe. Kara hadn't even come over to her place yet. But she wanted her to know, be certain, that she always had a safe place to go if she needed it. Kara pressed a kiss to her cheek, and Alex felt herself go red.

It was so weird to be back in the studio. Cameras were everywhere, producers running up and down the aisles. The make-up made her face feel all stiff and itchy. Alex found her station and checked it over, wondering at the tiny oven and two-burner range. How had she ever cooked anything there? M'gann came in, looking calm and together, like she always had before the disaster at her restaurant, and Alex hugged her also.

"I really didn't need all of your table settings," M'gann murmured in her ear.

"I made Maggie pick out the ones she'd wanted in the first place. Sometimes I can admit when I've been a dumbshit. I just wish I'd do it in an original way sometimes."

M'gann squeezed her arm. "I have no doubt you will continue to find new ways to be an idiot. On the other hand, I think Kara might be right. You could very well be the kindest person she's ever met."

Alex cringed. "Is this going to be about my obsession with casserole again?"

M'gann laughed and headed to her station.

When the judges for the final came on stage, Diana, Lilian, J'onn and Barry were all there, but instead of Ra's, a familiar blonde girl showed up. Hadn't Alex seen her in the restaurant with another woman, darker and more imposing? She'd noticed her then, wondering why she looked familiar. *Oh.* This time Alex recognized her. It was Sara Lance.

She was late and hurried onto the stage straight out of make-up, apologizing to Lilian with the cringing attitude of a former contestant. She gave a smirky two-finger salute to Diana, nodded to J'onn, and hugged Barry hello.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered. It was audible throughout the studio.

"Last minute pinch hit," Sara said. "I was only supposed to do the secret dining, but it looks like
Demon-in-Law got himself made persona non-grata here."

Alex glanced over at M'gann and Kara. M'gann looked as surprised as she was. Kara's eyes were narrowed and she looked satisfied.

When the young judges finally settled, Lilian and Diana stepped up to the front of the podium. "Welcome," Lilian said. "To the finale of the fifteenth season of Knives and Fire."

Alex lifted her chin and met the gazes of the cameras with serious determination. Behind this oven seemed to be every person she'd ever been, the angry, overly cocky and confused kid, the suddenly lost and lonely teenager, who was realizing that she needed to reach out and look out for other people, the almost competent adolescent, starting to figure out what she loved and who she wanted, the striving adult, suddenly swimming in a sea that was far deeper than she'd expected. But she'd weathered that sea. She'd lost the one thing she would have given up everything for, but she might be getting it back, this time with a little more perspective than she'd had before.

And right now, all she had to do was cook. She knew how to do that part.

#

Kara waited for the announcement of the challenge, a smile, a little tight and a little cruel maybe, at Ra's no longer being on the show. That was some justice, at least. M'gann was here, calmly confident, and Alex was here, relaxed and ready. Kara felt confident and relaxed as well. This was probably the first time she'd ever been in front of this station without panic rising up through her chest and choking her. But maybe, finally, all the people telling her she was good enough had finally gotten through. She'd worked as hard as she could, and her truck was doing just fine. She'd even had a review in the Tribune that had had nice things to say about the hipster spin she was putting on ordinary street food. M'gann had given her the best advice right at the beginning: cooking professionally was cooking professionally, and it turned out that it was something she could actually do.

"Your final challenge--" Barry said, looking both excited and terrified at speaking from the judge end of the stage. "--is to develop a special entree for your restaurant--or other type of dining establishment--that is in line with the feel and style of your restaurant as a while, but is also distinctive, original, and creative."

"This entree must feature as its main ingredient," Sara continued. "This."

She pulled off the cloth to reveal a small pink lump sitting on a bed of ice.

It was a boneless skinless chicken breast.

From her right, Kara heard M'gann start to laugh, and Alex go, "Are you fucking kidding me."

"You have thirty minutes."

The trick with running a food truck was equipment reduction. Kara had cut her needs down to a grill, a deep fryer and a steamer. That meant to have it actually work as a special, that was all she had to work with.

If this was her truck she'd have been brining the chicken for hours, but she didn't have any time to do it. She mixed up a quick marinade, pineapple to make it work faster, thick enough to coat the outside--sweet soy-sauce and cayenne and lemon juice--then flour, egg, flour, and bread. Crispy crunchy light pickled vegetables, fresh cucumber, a quick roti put together, a sauce.
She glanced up at the sound of sizzling oil and saw Alex frying strips of breaded chicken in a saucepan. Alex caught her eye and grinned at her, and Kara beamed back. She'd missed this, being in the kitchen near Alex.

Kara's chicken was just draining on the rack when the one minute mark was called. She plated her roti, coating it in aioli and filling it with vegetables and grilled pineapple chunks and sauce and chicken strips, and then placed it on the presentation table.

Alex thunked down a miniature dutch oven on her side. M'gann placed a plate piled with a swirl of noodles and vegetables and a butterflied chicken breast on top. Kara stepped back and reached out and touched Alex's hand. Alex tangled their fingers together and cast her a shy grin.

"Please explain your dishes, how they relate to your restaurant menu, and who you expect to order them."

Kara stepped forward when directed and explained. Pineapple fried chicken roti--it was just the sort of street food that she made in the truck, tasty, a little decadent, precisely cooked. The judges passed it around, looking pleased.

Alex's was breaded chicken in a thick, gravy-like tomato based sauce with fresh noodles and a layer of cheese and breadcrumbs crisped over the top. It smelled amazing when they cracked into it, and Sara swore a little and then apologized, making a face at Lucy, when she had some.

M'gann had quickly marinated her butterflied chicken in lemon and oil, then seared it hot on a grill pan, and layered it over a bed of rice noodles tossed in fresh ginger and garlic, only cooked by a splash of hot oil searing over the top, with crisp fresh daikon and sweet-vinegar braised carrots with cilantro and sesame seeds.

"If someone wants chicken breast," M'gann said, "they want to come away feeling satisfied but also like they haven't spoiled their diet. Freshness and light flavors were what I was trying to go after here."

Kara was super jealous of the judges for getting to eat it.

"Please, our three finalists, come up to the judging circle."

Kara tucked her hand into M'gann's and M'gann reached for Alex, who looked startled, but then gripped her hand firmly. They headed to the judging circle and stood there in the blinding lights and waited.

"This season of Knives and Fire has been very special," Diana said. "It is the first one where we truly felt that the contestants cared for each other as much as for their own success. We are proud of how you faced adversity and overcame it. It feels almost unfair to choose a winner, when you have shown how strong a team can be, and also have shown very different and interesting styles and approaches. However, this is Knives and Fire, and although we have made strides towards become one of those pleasant, country-minded shows, there can only be one."

Lilian, who had been laughing silently at Diana's speech, stepped forward. "And in the terms set out by Knives and Fire, we judge you on style, creativity, skill and leadership. For the final, we examined how well you ran your kitchens, handled the stress of opening night, and maintained your kitchen during the week. This final here, one last check of your on-your-toes creativity, only verified what we already knew, that you are all excellent chefs.

"Over the course of the competition we have watched you grow and change, confidence, leadership,
you have all made great strides in these areas. But, save for a moment of despair when everything seemed to be stacked against her, one of you has reliably shone as both an excellent chef and a competent, clear-headed leader. And that contestant is--"

Kara was already flushed with the panic of what it would mean to hear her own name, and what it would mean to not hear it also.

"M'gann."

The silence that fell in the studio after the statement would probably be filled by a cheer or an artificial swell of music, but right now there was only quiet, and the shock on M'gann's face. "But I--"

A wash of not exactly relief and not exactly resignation, but a sense of, oh, that was how it was, and that was completely right filled her. Kara threw her arms around M'gann, squashing her, and Alex wrapped her up too, not needing the encouragement she'd had the day M'gann had taken one for the team and picked Mike as her sous.

"You're the best," Kara said.

Alex agreed. "You really are the best."

Kara winked, and Alex laughed, and as one, they both kissed one of M'gann's cheeks. Kara spotted Lucy doubled over laughing on the catwalk. Yeah, that would definitely make it in.

#

When they were ushered out of the studio, a crush of judges and producers and camera people surrounding the contestants, they were led up to the house where near the pool giant screens were showing the inside of the studio. A crowd had gathered there, among the food and tents and decorations, and they were watching the screens with baited breath. The final challenge was playing on the screens, on a five minute delay.

Then M'gann was announced the winner, and there it was--the cheer, the roar. Lucy climbed up on the platform beside the screens with a megaphone and announced to the crowd, "Everyone, welcome the winner of Knives and Fire, M'gann M'orzz, and the two runner-ups!"

Alex laughed, suddenly relieved. Runner up in Knives and Fire was not too bad at all, and her fingers were still linked with Kara's. She felt like she'd won regardless.

As the crowd enveloped them, Alex recognized Alura, hanging back a bit, while two boys rushed toward Kara, scooping her up and carrying her away as she yelled happily. And then her own mom was in front of her, wrapping her up, and Alex breathed in the scent of her hair and hung on.

"You did so well. You're amazing, honey."

And this-- Alex had never expected this out of her experiment in reality television at all.

"You did." There was J'onn, delivering a crushing and unexpected hug.

"I wasn't exceptional though, not in that group."

J'onn clasped both her shoulders and leaned down to give her a firm look in the eye. "Everything you do is exceptional, because you're the one doing it."
Off near the place where the grill had always been, Alex spotted Maggie and Vaz and Waylon all congratulating M’gann, who looked both hugely embarrassed and terrified. It was a good sight to see.

And then there was Kara, back again, a manila envelope clutched to her chest. The two boys who had carried her off were at her shoulders. Then Kara was buried in Alex’s arms, her nose right at her neck. "I agree with J’onn," she said, and Alex hugged her as hard as she could, trying not to cry, because there were still cameras everywhere and she’d just hugged her mom, and fine, her cred was already ruined by this show so she might as well cry, but still.

"These are my brothers.”

Alex still half wrapped up by Kara shook hands awkwardly with the boys introduced as, "My baby brother Winn," and "My big brother Jimmy-- James, I'm sorry. I know I'll never think of you as anything but Jimmy."

"You're Alex," James had said, giving her a very suspicious look.

Winn nudged him firmly with his elbow, then stepped in front of him and followed up the awkward handshake with a grin. "We've been watching the show. We like you. Jimmy is just trying to be intimidating because he thinks it's proper brotherly behavior."

Alex rubbed her head awkwardly. "The show doesn't say everything."

James seemed to relax. "Well, Kara's rambling phone calls about you don't hurt either."

Alex knew she was turning red, but well, at least she wasn't crying. She turned Kara toward her mom. "Hey, mom. Well, you've already met Kara."

It was Kara's eyes who went wide then. "Mrs. Danvers."

"It's been too long, baby, come here." And then Kara had flown into her mother for a hug.

"I'm so sorry about Mr. Danvers and that I couldn't help-- "

"Shh, I'm so glad you grew up safe and so talented and beautiful. I'm sorry I couldn't help more with that."

Alex stepped back and found J’onn's arm around her shoulders.

"You know my offer stands," he said. "If you want to stay on as head chef at the DEO, you can."

"Oh." The soft sound was from Kara, and Alex looked up, suddenly concerned.

"What is it?"

Kara shook her head. "Nothing. Nothing. Just--" She took a deep breath and handed over the manila envelope. "Please don't feel like you have to pick this. I want you to have what you want, everything you want, but this is just-- an option. And-- and picking this doesn't mean picking me. Because--" Kara smiled and shrugged. "I want you no matter what. I'm yours."

"What?" This was all a little hard to process. Alex looked down at the envelope in her hands and then up at Kara again.

Kara stepped forward and cupped her cheek. "I'm not going anywhere without you again. I'm a grown-up now, and I get to choose where I want to be and who I want to be with. And I choose to be with you, for as long as you want me around. But just-- look at that, and think about it. Carefully.
Be smart, because I know you're super smart." Kara leaned in and pressed a kiss to her mouth, pulling away before Alex could respond. "I love you."

And then, she grabbed her brothers and dragged them away. "Come on, there's my mom. You have to meet her."

"Well," Alex's mom said. "What is it?"

Alex opened the envelope. Inside was a lease. She stared at it, confused, set terms, renewal rent raises were controlled--due to intentions of leasee to install marked improvements on the property without requiring landlord's monetary outlay. The first three months plus all deposits were marked 'paid'. She flipped to the photos where a run down property with a nice patio was pictured. Behind that were some forms guaranteeing a certain amount of capital for investment, signed by both Diana Prince and Lilian Luthor. Alex's name was on the lease, under Kara's, a blank space for her signature.

In the very back was the sheet of notebook paper they'd written their bakery menu on as teenagers. She'd thought she'd lost it before she could give it to Kara, but here it was instead.

"What is it?" Eliza asked.

"Can I take it that you've had a better offer?" J'onn asked.

Alex stared down at the pages, quickly doing math in her head. She took a breath and puffed the air out between her lips. "I wouldn't say better. Riskier, and different." She looked up, meeting his eyes. "But it's what I want. I love the DEO, but this is what I want."

"Then it's what you should do." He grinned. "And if you're looking for some further investment, we can talk." Then he narrowed his eyes. "But not until we talk about that entirely new order of table settings that just showed up, and the mysterious disappearance of the other ones."

Alex cringed. "Ask Maggie. She was the one who finalized it." Then she hesitated. "And if you're still looking for a head chef, honestly, she has a really strong vision for the place. I'd look at her."

J'onn gave a considering look and nodded seriously. "I'd had that in mind as a possibility, but your recommendation is valued."

Alex nodded. She was passing on the DEO. She couldn't help keeping looking down at the lease though. A lease, for their bakery, like it was real. It was really going to be real. She looked up, and she caught sight of Kara, staring over at her, half surrounded by other contestants, her mom, and Lucy--for some reason. She looked so anxious. No, there was no way Alex was going to let her stay anxious for a second longer. She ran.

She ran towards her.

Stumbling, and excusing herself and getting around the moving people, Alex finally burst out right in front of her, panting, heart racing. Kara was wide eyed, looking panicked. "I'm sorry, I know-- I mean I told you to not push me too hard, and now I'm pushing you, and I've already made so many mistakes, and hurt you, and if you don't want to, I really, really--"

"Shut up," Alex cupped a hand over her mouth. "Of course I want this. How could you even think the answer could be no."

"But I--"
"It's yes. I'm saying yes." And, as if it meant something, really meant something, Kara's eyes changed, shifting away from panic into something a lot more like hope.

Alex kissed her. Kara's hands laced into her hair and Kara kissed her back.

#

The party went on late into the evening, but Kara hardly noticed it go by. She and Alex had claimed the hanging couch--not difficult, as somehow Siobhan had found the time to make a sign that said "Alex and Kara's couch: do not sit: they def banged here." Her mom had made some inquiring faces at that, and Kara had very certainly not revealed anything, but Lucy had snorted and pulled her down to whisper in her ear, so Kara was pretty sure she had no secrets left.

Kara was curled up with Alex, keeping Alex in the compass of her arms, tucked into her shoulder and planting occasional kisses on her ear and in her hair. Alex was calm and pliant against her, gently rubbing her head into Kara's.

Then she paused, and went a little tense. "Oh. I have something for you. It's not-- it's not a lease ."

Alex ducked her head. "It's not like everything I ever wanted or any garbage like that, but here."

She fished around in her pocket and the planted the key she'd rescued from it into Kara’s palm. It was warm from her body and otherwise plain and ordinary. Kara looked at her.

"It's a key," Alex said, unhelpfully. "To my apartment."

Suddenly, and frustratingly, Kara felt like she was going to cry. She hadn't cried all day today and she'd been very proud of herself for it.

"I just want you to know that you always have a place to go, if you need one.” Alex ducked her head and shrugged shyly. "You can always come to me."

So many young Karas would have given everything to hear those words. So many times she hadn’t had anywhere to go. She started to sniffle, and Alex’s eyes went wide. "Oh no, nonono, don’t cry. You don’t have to take it--"

Kara immediately stuffed it in her pocket. "No way. It's mine now."

Alex grinned. The threat of tears was gone.

“So,” Alex patted the lease which she hadn’t put down since she’d signed it, using Winn’s back as a desk. “How in hell did you get Lilian and Diana to finance this?”

Kara took the change of subject as the out it was, and it was something she was pretty proud of too. "Well, that was a lucky break. But it turned out that calling Lucy about what they did to M'gann was the right move. Lucy looked into what happened, and it turned out Cat had actually taken money out of M'gann's account. There was other proof of embezzling, so Lilian and Diana had leverage to force her out, which is what they'd wanted to do for years."

"Wait, Cat Grant is gone?"

"Lucy's going to be producing Knives and Fire now. Lilian and Diana figured they owed me. They said they'd back me, so I went and got the lease. It's a place I saw between Cathedral Park and the UCNC East Campus. It looked like it got a lot of foot traffic, students and such, and the inside is a lot less beaten up than it seems. The inspection was fine. I went with the guy and asked a lot of questions. It's mostly cosmetic work."
"That sounds great."

"It might be; it might completely bomb," Kara grinned. She put on her best imitation of Waylon’s accent. "But you never fail until you quit trying, right? So we might as well start."

"I . . . might have been working on recipes for it, when I was supposed to be working on the DEO," Alex shook her head. "I never felt creative coming up with things for the DEO, but thinking about the bakery, everything flowed. It's what I want to do."

Kara nodded. "I love the food truck, but I feel like I can do more, work on a bigger canvas. It was good to train myself like that, but I can let myself try a little more, I think."

Alex narrowed her eyes. “I’m restricting you to two new sauces a week.”

Kara laughed.

Maggie staggered over and sank down onto the couch with them. "J'onn just asked me to take over at the DEO."

"Yeah?" Alex grinned. "What are you going to do first? Replace all my sequenced glassware with beer steins?"

Maggie looked startled, and then glared. "Exactly. And redo your appetizers which are all fancy-ass and terrible."

Alex grabbed her and wrestled her down onto the couch, Kara laughed as they fought. Then she found Siobhan crawling on the other side next to her. "Hey. Um, weren't you not okay with sitting here?"

Siobhan waved her away. "If I didn't sit where other people had fucked I'd never leave my house. Anyways, I'm thinking about buying the food truck from the show." She narrowed her eyes. “You don't have dibs."

"I-- no, I'm doing something else."

"Right. I'm taking your franchise name too, okay?" She circled her fingers. "I need the bump from the opening."

Kara laughed. "Sure. I don't mind. I mean, it was thanks to you that I didn't call it SuperSnack!"

Siobhan groaned.

M'gann dropped onto the hanging couch between them. "I won," she said, still sounding disbelieving and dreamy.

"Of course you did," Siobhan said. "You were obviously the best from the beginning, and shockingly, didn't have nineteen crises during the show. Just the one at the end. You deserved it. Entirely."

As it was never worth it to argue with Siobhan, everyone agreed.

#

"I still can’t believe your mom is dating Lucy."

Alex, riding in the middle seat, after their Uber had let off Maggie and Vaz, leaned back in the seat,
content to feel Kara's shoulder against hers.  

"Please don't ask me how that happened, but it did." Kara leaned her head against Alex's. "I'm glad it did. Mom has an excuse to spend more time in National City now, and M'gann said she was talking to her about community development and sponsoring local garden allotments."

"It was so weird to run into Sara Lance and have her remember me from CIA. Also weird that she's married." Her wife was super hot, but this was Sara Lance, commitment-phobe extraordinaire.

Kara nosed into her hair. "Not that weird. People get married sometimes."

"True enough." The conversation was getting a little dangerous for Alex. A lease was enough for tonight. The Uber pulled up in front of her building. "Want to come up for a bit?"

"Yes," Kara got out of the car and then leaned in the window to thank the driver. "I get to try out my key."

Alex laughed. "And see whether or not I'm so much of a slob you never want to set foot inside again."

Kara gave her a sly grin and laced their fingers together, leading her toward the door.

Alex stood back, watching Kara take off her shoes, looking around the apartment, as if meeting someone she knew would become a friend.

"Do you want tea?"

"All right?" Kara took a slow loop of the living room, peering into the other doors--bathroom, closet, bedroom, before joining her in the kitchen. She lifted a cloth off a bowl on the counter. "Looks like your starter's hungry."

"Want to feed her?"

Kara mock gasped. "You'd let me feed your starter?"

Alex made a face, "You make tea. I'll feed her."

Kara laughed and started rummaging through her tea cupboard. "It's good to have boundaries."

While Alex was weighing out flour and water, the kettle boiled, and Kara poured out two mugs, setting one on the countertop by Alex's elbow. As a warm presence, Kara moved in behind her, and stood peeking over her shoulder, watching her hands. Kara's hands closed around her waist, sliding gently up, tweaking away her rumpled A-shirt, and settling cool against her skin.

Alex quaked under her touch.

"Hey," Kara murmured, planting a wet kiss on the back of her neck.

Alex whisked in the last few lumps of flour and tapped off the whisk, setting it into the sink. She leaned back into Kara's arms, nosing into her neck and kissing her under her jaw. "Hey yourself."

Kara sighed softly, resting her head on Alex’s shoulder. And Alex closed her eyes, letting herself feel what it was like to be held. She probably should have known from the second day that this girl with the amazing salsa and shithead boyfriend would be the unmaking of her. Kara had put her arms around her and held her when she was fucking up, and she’d made everything better.
“Have you ever made challah with your starter?” Kara murmured into her shoulder.

“I--” Alex turned a little, spotting Kara looking down at the bowl. “Uh, I’ve never done any enriched dough with it, really.”

The excited, half-mischievous expression that spread across Kara’s face was infectious. Alex wasn’t sure if she should kiss her or grab her computer. She did both, pushing a rough brief kiss on Kara’s lips, and then dug her computer out from behind the couch. “You have a recipe you were thinking of?”

Kara made a small squeak of pleasure, and leaned over her shoulder. “Um, no, but I really like this one website for things to do with sourdough . . .”

The challah only needed two hours for the first prove, so there was no point in going to sleep. Kara rummaged through the fridge, and Alex sat on the counter with her notebook, and they threw ideas back and forth for the bakery.

“That would be a crazy idea, wouldn’t it, to put times on the menu? Like, having a sequence of things coming out of the oven throughout the day, so that people know when something is just hot and finished. I mean, we could par bake and finish on command, but if they know what’s going to be out at different times-- it’s crazy.”

“No way,” Kara said. “That sounds awesome. You show up because you know there’s going to be something hot and ready right away. You don’t want waits at lunch. I run a food truck, I should know.”

Alex laughed, then bit her lip. “It just sounded-- not like what people do.”

Kara stepped between her legs, putting her hands on Alex’s knees. “Isn’t that a plus?” She bumped her forehead against Alex’s.

“Yeah.”

The timer rang, and they checked the challah, Kara going for a high-five when it looked smooth and slightly puffed. They punched it down and argued over how many strands to do the braid with. When it was braided and all settled in for a five hour rise, Alex glanced out the window and winced to see the dawn.

“Oops.”

Kara put her face in her hand. “It’s five am.”

“Maybe bedtime?”

Kara took off her glasses and cleaned off the flour. She smiled at Alex the whole time. “Probably.”

Alex thanked her past self for being overly anxious about the competition and what might happen after it, who had stripped her sheets and made her bed that morning. She gave Kara a t-shirt and they brushed their teeth at the single sink, knocking elbows on accident and bumping shoulders on purpose.

Then they curled up under the covers, Kara burying her nose into Alex’s neck, Alex warm and sleepy with Kara’s body heat.

“Never tell Vaz that we worked on the menu instead of having sex tonight. Or Maggie,” Alex
murmured, every part of her relaxed, and feeling at peace in a way she didn’t think she had for nearly her entire life.

“‘S all right,” Kara murmured, pressing a lazily sly smile into her skin. “We can make up for it in the morning.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Season Sixteen of Knives and Fire is coming to a city near you.

Go to www.knivesandfire.com to apply!

(Stay tuned for potential epilogue material.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!